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The "Rediscovery" of Herbert Hoover

by

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In 1981 Ellis Hawley surveyed the reputation of Herbert Hoover and his presidency in the accounts of professional historians. His essay was characteristically thorough, patient, and, it seemed to me, frustrating. After documenting carefully the remarkable revolution that had taken place in the way research historians looked on the Hoover presidency, he concluded that the traditional treatment of Hoover "had proved strongly resistant to the new evidence and insights to be found in the scholarly works, and outside of scholarly circles the older images still enjoyed
widespread credence.¹ This essay, published by the Hoover Library, was a revision of an earlier version that appeared in a Senate Document put together by Mark Hatfield in celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of Hoover's inauguration as president. I mention the circumstances of publication only to suggest that neither version was going to reach a large audience. To be honest about it, some of the new scholarship on Herbert Hoover wasn't even destined to reach a small audience, as those of us who took part in the Centennial conferences that celebrated Hoover's hundredth birthday had learned when the academic press that had begun publication of the series threw in the towel, or whatever university presses throw in when they learn that subsidized hot cakes don't sell any better than real ones to consumers who don't care for hot cakes. So when I decided to make the rediscovery of Hoover the topic for my paper for this meeting, it was not to re-invent the wheel Hawley had already perfected, but rather to ask some questions about wheels. Not to belabor an old metaphor, but some wheels are apparently rounder than others. Some even seem inherently flat. Others are on vehicles no one wants to ride or go to places no one even wants to visit. There are obviously wheels and wheels, and one that is not going to go anywhere might just as well not have been invented in the first place.

Let me put my title in a different way, one that would not have made much sense without my introduction: why do we not want to rediscover Herbert Hoover? While I'm not sure that I can answer the question, or that I would even if I thought I could, it does raise some issues that are interesting, in part because they touch larger questions of historical insight and some of the things Ellis Hawley as a historian has contributed to our generation's historical writing. Some of

¹Ellis Hawley, "Herbert Hoover and Modern History: Sixty Years After," in Herbert Hoover and the Historians, Herbert Hoover Presidential Library Association, West Branch, Iowa, 1989.
those questions have to do with our understanding of the American presidency and its relation to
our history, the nature of American political history today, and the role of political ideas in
history. Hoover is important to us not only because his political career is ideally suited to the
exploration of all of them but also because our apparent refusal to acknowledge his importance
may tell us as much about his role in American history as it does about our problems in
understanding our history.

Herbert Hoover has held a unique place in the historiography of the American Presidency.
Few presidents have occupied both extremes of the critical spectrum in the eyes of supporters and
critics in and out of the historical profession. Even when one accepts the periodic revival fevers
that seem now part of our search for new insights in parts of the past we once thought we
understood, the re-examination of Hoover may stand by itself. His long life and the range of his
own contributions to published public commentary that began as soon as he left office and
continued for two decades afterward helped sustain him as a presence. So did the significance of
his presidency in the understanding of one of the most traumatic eras in modern domestic history,
the Great Depression.

The same significance is clear in his role in modern research into the history of the
presidency. Despite what we are inclined to emphasize as his rather extraordinary delay in
opening his papers for research, he was the first president to authorize the systematic editing and
publication of documents from his presidency in the years immediately after he left office, and the
first to produce an extensive memoir. Even by then, however, in the decade immediately
following his presidency, Hoover became an emblem, his name attached to depression era symbols
of seemingly sudden crashes into personal poverty, his face and manner the sign of government
indifference to citizen need as though he himself had somehow caused the history of his times. He had already been tagged as a special kind of villain, one who refused to solve problems he ought to have been able to solve. He was not incompetent. He refused to exercise the competence he had.

Even within his own party, he came to be perceived as a political liability by practical partisans who might well have agreed with his understanding of the nation's political problems but feared the political persona he had come to embody. Decades later when his party began to celebrate him at its earliest televised convention, it was as an elderly Samson, safely shorn by age, who could no longer bring the temple down, though there were surely those who glanced cautiously at the roof. No one seemed able to spell out what he should have done that he didn't do. Like Oedipus at Colonnus, he had become a lens that focussed all of the disasters of his times.

Efforts on the part of the more enlightened writers of those widely used textbooks where political history still receives grudging coverage, dealt with the new and improved Hoover through references to Taylorism and other equally lovable industrial ideologies. Part of the problem lay in the fact that even those most committed to recovering his stature have not been able to humanize him. The magazine literature on him produced in the years before and during his presidency had disappeared, and it was a sizeable literature that even a public relations expert like Theodore Roosevelt might have envied.

He was a hero in the years before his election in 1928, a major philanthropic manager on an international scale developed by the Rockefellers, but with one significant difference. The Rockefellers depended on their own resources. Hoover organized and administered the funds of
others in ways few in his generation even considered. His control of resources employed techniques he perfected even further in his years as Secretary of Commerce and that he believed would be of inestimable help to him in the White House. During the war years he sought people whose insights he respected and brought them together with wealthy contributors looking for ways of aiding the victims of the European struggle. The Rockefellers hired Ivy Lee to do what Hoover did much more effectively for himself. Unlike the Rockefellers, his business career had taken place out of the public's line of vision. Not until late in his presidency would he be associated with the financial and industrial villains on whom The Crash was blamed. He left the presidency with a justifiable sense that he had been victimized by the very economic leaders he had been trying to help.

Even in his popular years the sources of his financial success were unclear, like those of a character in a novel by Henry James and they made as little difference to a public eager to accept him in his own terms as a philanthropist and public servant. His experience in mining engineering was publicly reflected initially not in major statements on the industrial uses of natural resources but in the translation he and his wife made of a classic Latin text on metallurgy. His humble beginnings, his capacity for hard work, his benevolence demonstrated during the war years first as provider to the war victims of Europe and then in the management of the food supply of his wartime countrymen, all pointed in the direction of that special greatness that characterized the duality of the Alger hero: both rags and riches supporting an oddly singular ideal: to turn his personal success into a national gift to the society that had made him. Nonetheless, for the three decades that followed his presidency, Hoover's reputation rested on such texts as the books on the Twenties by Frederick Lewis Allen and Samuel Hopkins Adams. To be sure, the immediate post-
presidency appraisal by William Allen White supported anyone genuinely interested in raising more serious questions, but White's essay, which Hoover actually extended and re-wrote for him according to White's own account, appeared in the *Saturday Evening Post* and did not make it into a more sustainable public literature.²

Hoover himself contributed to the problems of judgement. He controlled the very limited access to his papers he even allowed by sending relevant documents to selected individuals who requested them, refusing to permit quotation in writing when he did not consider an account proper, and referring scholarly inquirers to page numbers in the published documents and accounts he had authorized, including his memoirs. We tend to forget that in the years before Watergate, freedom of information and its attendant transformations of our access to presidential papers, presidents owned their own documents and controlled their use by others, as well as their publication. Hoover apparently resented even the relatively sympathetic accounts by E.E. Robinson as much as he did the partisan one by Arthur Schlesinger Jr. and the somewhat more neutral one by Frank Freidel. He was dead by the time historians were able to document their re-evaluations of him from the remarkable materials they found in his papers, and by then it was too late. The image of Hoover had been set in the previous forty years in his historiographic shadowland.

While it may be possible to add the persistence of that image to the many things for which he is blamed, even that may be wrong. His revival coincided with a decline in interest in political history in the field of history itself, its replacement by conceptual frameworks resting on generalizations driven by social and economic theory. In political science a relatively brief period

²Get reference from my conference piece.
of interest in leadership and decision-making brought forth a problem-solving literature that might have made John Dewey blush; but Hoover had already failed all of the tests of an effective leader. Indeed, James David Barber and others just as committed to analyzing and evaluating presidential personality were inclined to use Hoover as a model of how not to do it. In some accounts he had been emotionally crippled by being an orphan, despite the fact that losing one or both of one's parents was considerably more commonplace in the last quarter of the nineteenth century than it was a century later. Lady Bracknell's famous excursion on the subject was funny to audiences who first heard it and who could appreciate its delicious irony precisely because it spoke to a condition everyone understood, not to a rare horror that destroyed personal stability.

The fact that the revival began with William Appleman Williams' interest in Hoover's internationalism was filled with insight that even Williams was not the first to suggest. John Maynard Keynes had pointed out that side of what he considered Hoover's special intellect in 1919 in his perceptive book on Versailles and the new role of the United States in world politics.

Once again, Hoover's arguments on the eve of World War II and during the war gave the issue a puzzling side: the internationalist turned isolationist being revealed as a closet internationalist. Wesley Clair Mitchell had written Hoover shortly after the appearance in 1934 of the *Challenge to Liberty* to ask why he was so critical of the New Deal for espousing ideas Mitchell had respected Hoover for having pioneered. Hoover's reply did not really explain. He simply reiterated his ideological critique of what he called "regimentation." 

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³Williams' first account appeared in 1954 in *Science and Society*, "The Legend of Isolationism in the 1920's" Winter 1954, and more extensively five years later in *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*.

In the years after his presidency Hoover ran a broken track some of us still have difficulty following. One peruses the successive volumes of post-presidential addresses as prescient collections of commentary on the state of contemporary American political life one has from no other former president, even the articulate Mr. Nixon. His appreciation of Woodrow Wilson drew him into a history no one associated him with any longer, despite his right to be there. Always conscious of the etiquette he felt his successor had denied him, he wrote Eleanor Roosevelt a letter of condolence that reflected the friendship they had shared in the Washington of World War I when the two young couples were friends. And when Harry Truman invited him to the White House, his first invitation since March of 1933, reporters noticed tears in eyes, suggesting a capacity for emotions their predecessors in the field of presidential journalism were convinced he couldn't feel.

From the perspective of the 1920's Hawley's Hoover puts him in the context of what once seemed a lost intellectualism of a decade of political and economic ideas Guy Alchon has done much to illuminate. That there is still a reluctance to tie those ideas to Veblen's economics as tightly as Mitchell, a Veblen student, was willing to imply, is part of another set of problems with which we still can cope. One needs to see Mitchell's Veblen in order to understand Mitchell's Hoover as well as Veblen's conception of business. Both Mitchell and Veblen shared Hoover's belief in the capacity of business leadership to be responsible political leadership, at the same time that all three knew well that such responsibility was not innate, any more than it was inherent in the making of money. A commitment to ethics was essential to democratic public policy but it did not arise naturally out of effective economic behavior. Our tendency to refuse to see businessmen

*The correspondence is quoted in Lucy Sprague Mitchell, Two Lives, New York, 1954*
as intellectually committed is paralleled by our insistence on seeing those presidents we consider
great leaders as major minds filled with abstract metaphysical insight. Neither businessmen nor
presidents tend to articulate their methods in ways that speak to intellectuals in search of
explanation.

Where the complex issues of political ideas are concerned, one of Hawley's chief
contributions to the historiography of his generation was clear in his first major work, The New
Deal and the Problem of Monopoly: in which he provided a new method of considering the role of
ideas in American political history. Rather than relying on the fuzzy use of "pragmatism"
historians were accustomed to applying to New Deal politics, and avoiding the traps inherent in
our attempts to characterize historical eras as driven by single-minded intellectual paradigms,
Hawley gave us a demonstration of the confluence of different intellectual schemes when complex
economic programs meet in the arena of political debate. Even the word "compromise" fails to
describe the result, although it is the term most frequently used. Ideas have consequences, his
analysis shows us, but not in the intellectual form in which they first appear, or indeed in any form
acceptable to systematic thinkers in the academic disciplines that produced the ideas and continue
to subject them to analysis. Programs presented by presidents are reshaped by Congress over time
and hammered together by the courts in their turn, as well as by administrators looking to see how
far they can turn programs into what they really wanted in the first place. Such interpretive
adjustments may produce policies quite different from those originally conceived by their creators,
but successive presidents will celebrate them if they choose to as though they had been intended,
while critics will claim that what they perceived as serious errors were there by original design or
by a failure to stick to the promise.
As I have now come to formulate my understanding of the special insight of that book, ideas produce political results that are new forms we now try to call "programs" or "policies," but without recognizing as much as we should their essential difference from what we are accustomed to thinking of as ideas. Programmatic ideas are justifications for action, not road maps for action, and they are transformed by actions they do not direct. Hawley's problem of monopoly is a remarkable way of describing the process of relating ideas to that real world of politics. To borrow from the complex diagrams today's theorists of chaos find in real world descriptions of motion, ideas enter politics surrounded by forms of turbulence that strictly limit our ability to predict outcomes. What they produce is their own form of regularity, just as intellectual in its way as the programmatic plans we might have preferred, and much more characteristic of real politics.

It may be important to point out that Hawley's introduction of new methods for dealing with the influence of ideas on politics preceded the opening of the Hoover papers. While it was certainly applicable to working with the ideological agendas supposedly inherent in the New Deal, its application to the decade preceding the New Deal was just as important, given the tradition of treating those years as an era of excess for which the Crash was a just punishment. Arthur Link's essay on Progressivism in the 1920's had already suggested the need for a search for intelligent political life in an era presumably devoid of it. Hawley discovered particulars, but not necessarily in the specialized areas Link had been investigating. The generation of business leaders Hawley found and the technicians those leaders looked to for advice provided new and expanded

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resources for examination and at the center of what had been the heartland of national conservatism: the business community itself. The identification of that conservatism with a rejection of intellectual structure in the years before the emergence of modern American conservatism made it easier to substitute some kind of selfish ignorance for rational belief.

Hawley has been cautious in his management of his discoveries, more so, I must confess, than I have always been in my use of them. He provides us with what seem to me extraordinarily useful pieces for a theory or collection of theories he then steps back from, or avoids altogether. If Hoover and his generation were so smart and so closely in touch with the basic truths of associational theory, for example, why weren't they able to make use of them let alone to articulate them? Were their theories simply wrong? Did they use them improperly? Was the timing all off? Was Roosevelt wrong, or was he committed to stealing Hoover's ideas and passing them off as his own?

I myself prefer a more metaphysical course that I suspect Hawley would find unacceptable, if not horrifying, so I will state it for him to attack since this party is in his honor. I may not be the worthiest target, but I am here. Let me put it in two stages, the first having to do with Hoover, his presidency, and his rediscovery, the second with the problem of what I will call the history of political ideology and the questions of legitimacy its practice poses for American historians.

The rediscovery of Hoover was an intellectual historian's dream come true. Here was a president who was a giant by comparison with his two predecessors overpowered by a successor who quite obviously had nowhere near his systematic intellect, and, what's more, knew it. Roosevelt was uneasy when he learned that Hoover's 1934 book was in press and asked political
scientist Charles Merriam to look at it for him. Both were surprised that Hoover had chosen an ideological attack on the New Deal rather than centering on the administrative mess Roosevelt and his advisers knew they were creating. Hoover was capable of being their most acute administrative critic and they feared what he might do with his well known talents. After all, Hoover had become the leading advocate of the implications of economy and efficiency for the running of government, and the New Deal reflected the breakdown of both in the crisis of the Depression. One can ask why Hoover took the tack he took. My best answer so far is that Hoover's prescience got the better of him, as it often did. The world of 1934 was growing much more conscious of the threats of fascism. Fascination with efficiency was destined to end, and abruptly. But Roosevelt was not yet the prime representative of those new threats, not in an American world still inhabited by Huey Long. The target Hoover was aiming at had not yet been put in place by the Roosevelt presidency and its relation to world history.

The new Twenties took shape and Hawley and his students have been its chief architects. It is a major rethinking of the era. It places it in a context that makes it continuous with its neighboring eras and makes it possible for there still to be the kind of exciting investigation that makes the writing of history more than the filling in of blanks. In its way, it provides the paradigmatic change historians like Thomas Kuhn talk about. But what about the new Hoover?

Hoover remains at the end of it all a figure no one seems to understand. More important, perhaps, no one but his biographers seem to want to, and even they have difficulty bringing him to life. He's not alone. Reviving presidents long given the Lenin treatment by historians not willing to think of them as living beings isn't easy. Lazarus was a miracle it has been difficult to replicate. The Eisenhower revival has been in the air for quite a while now, and though it hasn't crashed,
neither has it taken off. Herb Block’s brilliant insistence on putting him in Hoover’s shirt collars
has kept him confined if not suitably embalmed. We still tend to wait for someone to shoot
McKinley so that Theodore Roosevelt can start the politics of the Progressive Era despite the fact
that TR hasn’t a prayer of getting to the White House unless someone shoots McKinley.
One recent historian has suggested that McKinley might be considered the originator of
Eisenhower’s “hidden hand” method, but I haven’t seen anyone lining up to start a revival.

Is there some message in all of this that we aren’t listening to as well as we should?
While I’ve never dared to look for company in our profession, I am one of those historians
who never fills out those requests that I join my colleagues in that sweepstakes that
appears from time to time in our mail. Someone has put money into picking out the great
presidents and ordering the others on some kind of scale. I throw it in the wastebasket
after I have finished gnashing my teeth and composing nasty letters I never send. I can’t
help wondering if some surge of maturity will someday rid us of a practice that does a
great deal of damage to our understanding of political reality. For presidents are human
beings facing human problems, not gods subject to Old Testament images of burning
bushes and flaming chariots. Their feet are neither precious metal or clay; they’re flesh
and blood and they hurt like everyone else’s.

The question of whether we ever write real political history about real people is
clearly related to the question of how we adapt our capacity to understand the relation
between the theory of politics and its practice. Here it seems to me Hawley’s work
suggests a direction we might explore more, perhaps, than he himself has. Ideas in
politics take on a life that is different from the intellectual structures we are able to build in our tenured reveries. Like the monks and rabbinical scholars who preceded us, we are paid to think, not to act, although we, too, can be tempted out of our cells and on to political platforms. Like our predecessors, we tend to believe that our thoughts can influence actions, and that may be where we get into interesting quagmires. The questions, it seems to me, are these: what happens when our thoughts become action, that is, when some benighted political leader decides to take our advice and act on it. Are the actions the direct products of thought, do the thoughts remain the same once they have become action, or are they transformed into something else? When the programs fail, or turn into something quite different from what we had hoped, whom do we blame, or why do we blame anyone at all? Are political ideas different from other ideas and should we be trying to figure out how?

Hawley's political history may suggest something quite different from what we are accustomed to thinking of as political history and it's possible we ought to start looking at it. The question may not be why we have such difficulty reviving former presidents, but why we kill them in the first place. Herbert Hoover may never rest in peace. Our need to have him to kick around may be too essential to our sense of political history.