

Herbert Hoover: Progressive “Conservative”?

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In February 2009, Barack Obama put a \$787 billion economic stimulus plan into action to combat a growing economic decline. In late 1929, the beginning of a similarly massive crisis struck the United States of America. As this Great Depression came about, Herbert Hoover, the newly elected President of the United States, stepped up to the plate in an attempt to deal with the problem using, amongst other policies, public works. Unfortunately for him, his solution was not without flaws, and the Depression continued relentlessly, causing the new president's popularity to drop drastically. In the following decades, many, such as Hoover's contemporaries Franklin Delano Roosevelt and William Randolph Hearst and historians such as Elliot Rosen and Thomas Cochran, have accused Hoover of letting Republican *laissez-faire* principles inherited from his predecessors prevent him from taking the kind of action needed to resolve the crisis.

However, I believe that Hoover was acting based on principles derived from his past experiences and progressive lines of thought rather than the general views of the Republican Party. The President believed that his rather progressive model, based on public works and volunteerism, would be the most likely to succeed in solving the crisis, instead of upholding a no-intervention policy based on the lofty principles of the “New Era.” Following the economic models that would seem to make the most impact instead of the ones that were the most in line with Republican principles, Hoover began increasing the government’s use of public works to cope with the national crisis in an attempt to increase purchasing power and stabilize the economy. He was therefore using recent experience and modern doctrines as opposed to outdated conventional wisdom to elaborate his programs during the Depression, and even beat the path for most of his successor’s New Deal policies. Yet there was one principle that Hoover would not abandon: that of

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balancing the budget. Wanting only facts, he did not accept that this element of his philosophy was dysfunctional because he had seen no proof supporting this claim. This in turn severely limited the scale and efficiency of his public works program and caused his critics to label him a reactionary politician, even though Roosevelt, one of his most ardent critics, had much the same doubts.

“Last of the Old?”¹

As the crisis that would soon become known as the Great Depression worsened, the public began to lose faith in Hoover’s policies. Senator George W. Norris of Nebraska in 1932 claimed Hoover believed “that if we make the very wealthy prosperous, the common individual would benefit from that prosperity.”² Norris, like the majority of Americans after four years of economic decline with no end in sight, was eager to find the culprit. In such dark years, many wondered why the government wasn’t solving the crisis. Accusations began to fly and Herbert Hoover, a timid man unaccustomed to politics, was portrayed as an aloof aristocrat who did not care for the masses. The newspaper magnate William Randolph Hearst announced that Hoover had abandoned his public works program, the much-ballyhooed harbinger of prosperity, in the interest of international bankers.³ Roosevelt, on the other hand, said that no matter how many public works were instituted, it would “not give employment to the 7,000,000 or 10,000,000 people who are out of work” and that it was merely a “stop-gap measure” amounting to a mere “treatment of external symptoms.”⁴ Because it seemed to be doing so little, disapproval of Hoover’s public works program was widespread: it was either doing too little or was entirely useless, and Hoover was irrevocably cast as a conservative.

As the decades passed, most historians abandoned the cartoonish idea that Hoover was working in the interest of the rich or that he did not care for the masses, but many continued to endorse this idea that his public works program was limited by a kind of blind adherence to Republican *laissez-faire* principles. “Herbert Hoover was no progressive,” bluntly asserted Elliott Rosen, adding that “he elaborated a set of doctrines... which in reality proved stultifying. ...[S]uch views were anchored in

nineteenth-century strictures.⁵ According to this train of thought, Hoover's failure could mainly be attributed to Republican conservative theories that he upheld and that undercut all his policies. More specifically, as Thomas Cochran has propounded, Hoover "was opposed in principle to the degree of federal aid that would be necessary. ... Hoover could not sanction the massive expenditures on public works that would have been necessary to make up for the decline in state and local expenditures in construction."⁶ Although a few scholars agreed that Hoover's public works program was a step in the right direction, most were convinced that his *laissez-faire* views, out of date even at that time, constrained him from using them to a larger and perhaps more effective extent. The specific principles that caused such a hindrance, however, were debated. Joseph Davis claimed that Hoover "encouraged the continuance of the booms in 1928-1929 and came to accept the inevitability of a bust," implying that the President believed nothing could be done to solve the crisis.⁷ A slightly more progressive view of Hoover put forth by William Klingaman argued that the President was only willing to rely on the private sector to promote construction, limiting the government to a cheerleading role.⁸

"Or the Beginning of the New?"⁹

When Hoover announced his program to resolve the crisis many received it positively, but this changed as the Depression wore on. Most were enthused and talked about how Hoover was applying his past experience on a grander scale, and predicted a brilliant success. A 1929 article in the *New York Times* praised Hoover for his effectiveness in dealing with the crisis and suggested that he was making good use of his experience as Secretary of Commerce from 1921 to 1928.¹⁰ Thus the theories behind many of Hoover's policies, such as that of getting the private sector to cooperate with labor in maintaining wages and preventing strikes, known as volunteerism, had yet to be shown to be dysfunctional, and all prior indications suggested that they would work. Most believed that their leader had the economic situation well in hand.¹¹ Hoover himself sincerely thought so in 1929-1930, and called for an increase in public works nationwide: "A special effort shall be made to expand construction work...I am convinced that

through these measures we have reestablished confidence.”¹² There was no question that the crisis would be over shortly: Hoover was using methods that were thought to have been proven to work and everything was under control.



Figure 1: Darling, Jay N. “Priming the Old Pump.”
In New York Tribune, 1930.

This new reliance on public works, far from being a conservative measure as Hoover's critics have depicted it, was in fact a departure from previous Republican doctrine. "No one in his place could have done more; very few of his predecessors could have done as much," proclaimed a *New York Times* article in 1929.¹³ This view is shared by some revisionist historians who have rejected the traditional depiction of Hoover: "The national response set in motion by President Hoover to overcome the economic crisis marked a dramatic, unprecedented exercise of executive initiative, in sharp contrast to the passive acquiescence of previous depression presidents," noted William Myers.¹⁴ Thus, unlike previous Republican presidents who had relied on big business to solve crises, Hoover was quick to respond to the Depression through direct government measures, and in doing so sharply broke from conservative *laissez-faire* principles. Hoover also involved the federal government in the creation of a public works program on an entirely new scale. After extracting pledges of cooperation from 29 state governors by early 1930, his administration "had planned, cumulatively, \$1.3 billion worth of public-works construction, far more than during the previous years."¹⁵ Not contenting himself with cheerleading, Hoover placed some of these public works projects under direct federal control.¹⁶ He used the federal government to coordinate and create public works nationwide at a time when such large-scale government action was virtually unheard of.

Yet merely doing something differently from your conservative predecessors does not make it progressive. To demonstrate that Hoover's public works program actually was progressive, we must consider the argument that it was Hoover who set the trend of using public works for the progressives who succeeded him. Writing in the midst of the New Deal, Walter Lippmann commented, "In all essential matters of policy...there has been no break in principle, and the Roosevelt measures are a continuous evolution of the Hoover measures."¹⁷ Even if these claims may be a bit far-fetched in some cases, they actually apply quite well in terms of public works. Both presidents drastically increased the amount of money spent on public works: Hoover tripled such spending in the first two years of the Depression, and Roosevelt raised them from \$1 billion to \$5 billion in nine years.¹⁸

Since it was Hoover who pioneered the heavy use of public works to counter the crisis, and this was exactly what Roosevelt, the archetypical progressive, did in the following years, we can safely qualify Hoover's public works program as a progressive measure.

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The Crusader Who Killed Hoover

Although Hoover's use of public works can therefore be qualified as progressive, he exhibited a crusader aspect in his actions that greatly reduced his effectiveness in curing the Depression. Like most people of his time and even for a while after, he was firmly determined to balance the federal budget, and this prevented him from increasing his experiments to a size where they could be effective. After the initial increase in public works, Hoover responded to further proposals to expand them with statements such as the following: "The proposal to build non-productive 'public works'...necessitates making increased appropriations by the Congress. ...Whatever the method employed, they are inescapably a burden upon the taxpayer,"¹⁹ or, "Any study of many of these public works provisions will indicate plainly their pork barrel characteristics."²⁰ The President saw any federal policies that went beyond the budget and that were not self-liquidating as weakening the economy because the government needed to raise taxes to finance them; having a deficit was anathema to Hoover and to most commentators at the time. Thus, the size of his public works programs, no matter how effective they were, remained insufficient to make up for the decline of the spending of state and local governments.²¹

Yet this desire to balance the budget was hardly unique to Hoover. Even Progressives such as Roosevelt wanted to balance the budget. In terms of public works "neither [Hoover], nor for that matter Franklin D. Roosevelt, was ever able to see clearly that economizing in terms of government expenditures increased unemployment."²² Both presidents were opposed in principle to deficit spending, even though both occasionally indulged in it.²³ Roosevelt himself, upon seeing that the economy was improving in 1937, sought to decrease federal spending

to balance the budget. The same notion of balancing the budget that had limited the effectiveness of Hoover's program was upheld by the New Dealers who followed him. While in office, Hoover was as progressive as any other progressive of the time, and the element of his policy that caused his woes was in turn adopted by the progressive Democrats of the New Deal, even though they sharply criticized him for exactly the same tendency.

Finally, the myth that Hoover had been a conservative who worshipped *laissez-faire* was created by his Democratic opponents. This is shown clearly by the "pork-barrel" legislation that Democrats in Congress tried to pass during Hoover's presidency, such as the Wagner and the Garner Acts. Knowing that Hoover believed in balancing the budget, as the Democrats themselves did, the latter forced the President to veto such legislation and then portrayed him as a man uninterested in taking action.²⁴ This was successful partly due to the help of sensationalist press coverage by the likes of William Randolph Hearst. They called for the appropriation of \$5 billion in public works, convincing the public that the President was a heartless man. Hoover's popularity sank drastically as a result.²⁵ A natural introvert, Hoover was unwilling to rebut such accusations from Congress and the press, essentially granting the Democrats "carte blanche to oppose the president inside and outside of Congress."²⁶ Thus, even after Hoover retired from the presidency, the lingering presence of the Depression and his highly publicized rejection of further increases in public works fixed him in the minds of Americans as a conservative man and the last believer in an obsolete classical liberalism.

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Herbert Hoover was something of a mystery to me when I embarked on this project. I first chose him because I was told to narrow down my book-sized research question on the causes of the Depression and thought that covering a controversial president would allow for healthy debate. But after having done all this work, I feel quite knowledgeable (at least for a high school student) about him. Studying his various actions during the Depression, I began to form an impression of him,

and by the time I had finished my research, I truly admired the man for his innovative thinking in such a time of crisis. I definitely do not regret centering my project on this man.

However, it is interesting to note that the opinion maintained by the public of a president often does not rely on fact, or is only loosely tied to the facts. When I observed the Democrats' conservative portrayal of Hoover, and that this belief has remained ingrained in popular culture and the work of at least some academic historians, it shocked me a bit. Being new to the field of academic research, I may have mistaken normal historiographical debate as the willful misinterpretation or ignorance of facts. Or it is possible that every historian feels the same way about the position he is holding, and if it were otherwise, no debate would be possible since no one would believe in his or her position.

Historical research, as I have discovered through this project, is not easy. To avoid becoming lost in the sea of information available to me, and to cope with the constant addition of arguments that did or did not fit into my thesis, I needed to constantly adapt my paper by reconsidering my own analysis and incorporating new points of view. While it was sometimes hard to admit to myself that this was needed, failure to do so would have weakened my case. I would even venture that my argument was formulated more through the combined views of all the sources I have read than anything else. ●

Notes

1. Elliot A. Rosen, *Hoover, Roosevelt, and the Brains Trust: From Depression to New Deal* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1977), 39.
2. George Norris to Bertrand V. Tibbett, Dec. 27, 1932, *Excerpt of Letter from Nebraska Senator George Norris to Bertrand V. Tibbet*, http://www.ecommcode.com/hoover/hooveronline/hoover_and_the_depression/philosophy/display_image.cfm?imgID=957 (accessed February 26, 2009).

3. "5 Billion Fund to Supply Jobs Asked by Hearst," *New York Herald Tribune*, June 3, 1931, http://www.ecommcode.com/hoover/hooveronline/hoover_and_the_depression/philosophy/group_index.cfm?GroupID=27 (accessed February 26, 2009). True to his doctrine of sensation without fact, Hearst blamed Hoover of working with 'evil bankers' interested only in money and foreigners. Nearly no one has reiterated this claim since.
4. "Roosevelt Charges Federal Neglect of 'Little Fellow,'" *New York Times*, April 8, 1932, <http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?index=0&did=100823425&SrchMode=1&sid=3&Fmt=10&VInst=PROD&VType=PQD&RQT=309&VName=HNP&TS=1231378919&clientId=28198> (accessed Jan 7, 2009).
5. Rosen, *Hoover, Roosevelt, and the Brains Trust: From Depression to New Deal*, 40-41.
6. Thomas Childs Cochran, *The Great Depression and World War II, 1929-1945*, Scott Foresman American History Series (Glenview, Il: Scott, 1968), 12.
7. Joseph S. Davis, "Herbert Hoover, 1874-1964: Another Appraisal," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 68, no. 3 (1969): 313.
8. William K. Klingaman, 1929: *The Year of the Great Crash*, 1st ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1989), 306-07.
9. Albert U. Romasco, "Herbert Hoover's Policies for Dealing with the Great Depression: The End of the Old Order or the Beginning of the New?," in *The Hoover Presidency; a Reappraisal*, ed. Martin L. Fausold and George T. Mazuzan (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1974).
10. "What Mr. Hoover Has Done," *New York Times*, December 1, 1929, <http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?index=1&did=98301527&SrchMode=1&sid=5&Fmt=10&VInst=PROD&VType=PQD&RQT=309&VName=HNP&TS=1231379142&clientId=28198> (accessed Jan 7, 2009).

11. Martin L. Fausold, *The Presidency of Herbert C. Hoover*, American Presidency Series (Lawrence, Kan.: University Press of Kansas, 1985), 96.
12. Herbert Hoover, *First Annual Message to Congress*, Dec 3, 1929, reprinted in Arnold S. Rice, ed. *Herbert Hoover, 1874-1964; Chronology-Documents-Bibliographical Aids* (Dobbs Ferry, NY: Oceana Publications, 1971).
13. "What Mr. Hoover Has Done."
14. Myers, William Starr, and Walter Hughes Newton, *The Hoover Administration; a Documented Narrative* (New York, New York: C. Scribner's Sons, Ltd., 1936), 3, quoted in Romasco, "Herbert Hoover's Policies for Dealing with the Great Depression: The End of the Old Order or the Beginning of the New?", 72.
15. Fausold, *The Presidency of Herbert C. Hoover*, 97.
16. Edgar Eugene Robinson and Vaughn Davis Bornet, *Herbert Hoover, President of the United States* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University, Hoover Institution Press, 1975), 132.
17. Walter Lippmann, "The Permanent New Deal," *The Yale Review* 224, no. 4 (1935): 661.
18. David Burner, *Herbert Hoover, a Public Life*, 1st ed. (New York: Knopf, 1979), 253.
19. Hoover, Herbert, *State Papers*, vol. 2, 187, quoted in Ray Lyman Wilbur and Arthur Mastick Hyde, *The Hoover Policies* (New York,: C. Scribner's sons, 1937), 395.
20. Herbert Hoover, Presidential News Conference on Unemployment Relief, http://www.ecommcode.com/hoover/hooveronline/hoover_and_the_depression/admin_programs/group_index.cfm?GroupID=10 (accessed January 7, 2009).

21. Cochran, *The Great Depression and World War II, 1929-1945*, 12-13.
22. Ibid., 13.
23. Lippmann, “The Permanent New Deal,” 659.
24. Wilbur and Hyde, *The Hoover Policies*, 393. Talk about ‘Where you stand depends on where you sit.’ This highly positive account of Hoover was written by none other than his Secretary of the Interior!
25. “5 Billion Fund to Supply Jobs Asked by Hearst.”
26. Fausold, *The Presidency of Herbert C. Hoover*, 101.

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