II

Herbert Hoover and American Exceptionalism

GEORGE H. NASH

During his very long life Herbert Hoover developed a political and social philosophy that he believed could explain the greatness of the country he loved. To understand his vision of American exceptionalism, we need to understand the exceptional shape of his career before he entered American public life.

Hoover was born in 1874 in the little Quaker community of West Branch, Iowa, a son of the village blacksmith. Before he was ten, both of his parents had died. From Iowa, in 1885, he was sent to live with the family of an uncle in Oregon, where he stayed for nearly six years. In 1891 he entered Stanford University as a member of its Pioneer Class. At Stanford he flourished, graduating in 1895 with a degree in geology and an ambition to become a mining engineer.

From then on, his rise in his chosen profession was rapid. In 1897 his San Francisco employer recommended him for a position in Western Australia with an eminent British firm of mining engineers. Hoover's journey from California to Australia via New York, London, France,

Italy, and the Suez Canal, was a tremendously stimulating experience for a young man of twenty-two. Years later he remarked significantly: "History became a reality and America a contrast."[1]

Upon arriving in Western Australia, Hoover headed for the goldfields in the desolate outback, where he would live for the next year and a half. After one arduous trip far into the bush, he wrote to a cousin: "Am on my way back to Coolgardie. Am glad to get back within the borders of civilization. Coolgardie is three yards inside of it; Perth is about a mile, and of course San Francisco is the center. Anybody who envies me my salary can just take my next trip with me, and he will then be contented to be a bank clerk at $3 a week for the rest of his life, just to live in the United States. Stanford is the best place in the world."[2]

Not surprisingly, Hoover acquired a nickname in Australia. H. C. were the initials of his first and middle names: H. C. Hoover. His friends said that H. C. stood for "Hail Columbia."

Hoover's success in the land down under was immediate. Before he was twenty-four he was made superintendent of what became one of the greatest gold mines in Australian history. Then, late in 1898, his British employer offered him an even better job in China. Before going there, he returned to California and married his sweetheart, Lou Henry (Stanford, class of 1898). The very next day they boarded a ship for China, where they lived for more than two years and survived a harrowing brush with death in the Boxer Rebellion. Once again Hoover, a go-getting American still in his twenties, found himself living among strangers and encountering a foreign civilization.

In late 1901, Hoover left China for England and a partnership in the firm of mining engineers that had hired him less than five years before. Until World War I, London, the mining and financial capital of the world, was his base of operations while he traveled continually, inspecting, financing, and developing mines from Burma to Australia, from South Africa to Siberia. By 1914 he had traveled around the world five times and had mining interests on every continent except Antarctica.

For some Americans with similar careers and lifestyles, the temptation might have been irresistible to become an expatriate. For Hoover the very opposite was true. In London, his pro-American sentiments were so pronounced that he was known to some as the "star-spangled Hoover." Throughout these "years of adventure," as he called them, his thoughts often turned back to his native land, where he planned eventually to resettle.

And all the while, in England and on his many business journeys, he was observing and evaluating the social systems of the Old World and the New. On one of his ocean voyages, a British lady asked him what his profession was. An engineer, he replied. "Why," she exclaimed, "I thought you were a gentleman!" This anecdote, which Hoover later recounted in his memoirs, epitomized his deep distaste for the class consciousness and social rigidities of Europe.[3] From all of this he turned.

In 1914, World War I enveloped Europe and utterly changed the course of Hoover's life. While giant European armies bogged down in the trenches, Hoover, working without pay, founded and directed the Commission for Relief in Belgium (CRB), a neutral organization that procured and distributed food to the entire civilian population of Belgium caught between a German army of occupation and a British naval blockade. It was an unprecedented undertaking that eventually brought food to more than nine million people a day and catapulted Hoover to worldwide fame as a humanitarian.

When the United States entered the war in 1917, Hoover left day-to-day administration of the CRB to neutral subordinates and returned home to America, where he became head of the United States Food Administration, a special wartime agency of the federal government. At the end of the conflict in November 1918, President Woodrow Wilson sent him back across the Atlantic, this time to feed starving Europe and facilitate its economic reconstruction, while Wilson and Allied leaders struggled to draft a peace treaty in Paris. As director general of the American Relief Administration, Hoover organized the supply of food

to suffering people in more than twenty nations, in the process helping to check the advance of Communist revolution from the east. Tens of millions of people owed their lives to his exertions. It was later said of him that he was responsible for saving more lives than any other person in history.

On September 13, 1919, the international humanitarian hero returned at last to America's shores. Despite his phenomenal accomplishments in the preceding ten months, he was not a contented man. Every day at the peace conference in Paris, he had witnessed a depressing display of national rivalries, vengefulness, and greed. He had seen, as well, the sometimes violent attempts by Communists and other radicals to construct a new social order in Europe on the principles of Marxist socialism. And increasingly he had viewed America in contrast.

Hoover returned to his native land with two dominant convictions. The first was that the ideology of socialism, as tested before his very eyes in Europe, was a catastrophic failure, unable to motivate men and women to produce sufficient goods for the needs of society. Hoover's second conviction was also firmly held. More than ever before, he sensed the "enormous distance" that America had drifted from Europe in its 150 years of nationhood, a distance reflected, he said, in "our outlook on life, our relations toward our neighbors and our social and political ideals."[4] Coming back to the United States from Europe, Hoover sensed that his own country was vulnerable to the afflictions he had witnessed abroad. He implored his fellow citizens not to turn their country into "a laboratory for experiment in foreign social diseases."[5]

In numerous speeches and articles Hoover began to define the American alternative. The foundation of the distinctive American social philosophy, he asserted, was the principle of *equality of opportunity*—the idea that no one should be "handicapped in securing that particular niche in the community to which his abilities and character entitle him." Unlike Europe, where oppressive class barriers had generated misery and revolutionary discontent, the American social system was

based, in his words, upon the "negation of class."[6] To Hoover the principle of equality of opportunity was quite simply "our most precious social ideal."[7] As he put it some years later, "This idea of a fluid classless society was unique in the world. It was the point at which our social structure departed from all others."[8]

In the 1920s and later, Hoover continued to ask himself: Why is America so different? Why is it unique? One result of his inquiry into this issue was a little volume called *American Individualism,* which he published in 1922. In it, he articulated America's bedrock social philosophy of cooperative individualism, in contrast to the pernicious collectivistic competitors that were bubbling up overseas.

Another result of his ruminations was a book of political philosophy titled *The Challenge to Liberty,* which appeared in 1934, after he left the White House. It was a powerful defense of what he now called "Historic Liberalism" against the ascendant statist ideologies of Europe, including fascism, Nazism, and communism—and against the American variant of statism, which he called "Regimentation," his term for Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal.

In 1919 and 1920, Hoover's vexation with Europe had not been so deep as to preclude his advocacy of American involvement in European affairs. But as the years passed, his estrangement from Europe gradually intensified. The New World, he came to believe, was remote from the fanatic ideologies, ethnic animosities, dictatorships, power politics, imperialism, and class stratification of Europe. What he had witnessed in 1919, he concluded, was something far more profound than "the intrigues of diplomacy or the foibles of European statesmen." It was "the collision of civilizations that had grown three hundred years apart."[9]

These outspoken sentiments undergirded Hoover's opposition between 1939 and 1941 to American entry into World War II before Pearl Harbor. They also colored his attitude toward US foreign aid to Europe in the late 1940s and toward American military strategy during the Cold War. His knowledge of European history and social injustices

made him leery of American interventionism abroad. It was America's "national mission," he said in 1938, "to keep alight the lamp of true liberalism." And, he added, it was "in the United States that we must keep it alight."[10]

It is unusual for American presidents to venture self-consciously into the realm of political philosophy; Herbert Hoover did. Unlike most American men of affairs, who have been content to act on the public stage but not to meditate much about it, he endeavored to explain the essence of the American regime he cherished.

Why? The fundamental reason, I believe, is this: more than any other man who has held the office of the presidency, Hoover was profoundly acquainted over an extended period with the ruling elites and social systems of the Old World. "I have seen the squalor of Asia, the frozen class barriers of Europe. And I was not a tourist," he said on one occasion.[11] He had seen the haughty oligarchies of the Right, the bloody tyrannies of the Left, and the hatreds, injustices, and miseries they engendered. He had seen the terrible consequences of imperialism, war, and revolution as few Americans ever had.

"My every frequent homecoming," he declared in 1948, "has been a reaffirmation of the glory of America. Each time my soul was washed by the relief from grinding poverty of other nations, by the greater kindliness and frankness which comes from the acceptance of equality and a belief in wide-open opportunity to all who want a chance. It is more than that. It is a land of self-respect born alone of free men and women."[12]

This perception of contrast between the Old World and the New was the experiential core of Hoover's social and political philosophy. It gave him a lifelong understanding of America as an exceptionally free, humane, and classless society that had come closer to implementing its ideals than any other nation on earth. It gave him a fervent sense of American uniqueness, a conviction that the United States was, in his words, "one of the last few strongholds of human freedom." It impelled

him to undertake, in his postpresidential years, what he called a "crusade against collectivism": a crusade to preserve the American system of liberty from enemies both foreign and domestic.

Hoover labeled his core value system "American Individualism" and, later on, "Historic Liberalism." For us today, a comparable term would be "American exceptionalism." But whatever the label, Hoover taught us something we might well ponder: that in an epoch of wars and revolutions it is political philosophy, however perverted, that moves men and women for good or ill.

From a lifetime of comparative social analysis, Hoover derived this lesson: that in the lives and destinies of nations, ideas—and ideals—have mattered. And I think he would say they still do.

Notes

1. Herbert Hoover, *Years of Adventure, 1874–1920,* vol. 1 of *The Memoirs of Herbert Hoover* (New York: Macmillan, 1951), 30.

2. Herbert Hoover to Harriette Miles, August 5, 1897, extracted in "Mining—Australia, Herbert Hoover's Account of Western Australia," Pre-Commerce Papers, Herbert Hoover Papers, Herbert Hoover Presidential Library, West Branch, Iowa.

3. Hoover, *Years of Adventure,* 132.

4. Herbert Hoover, "The Safety of New-born Democracies," *Forum* 62 (December 1919): 551.

5. Ibid., 561.

6. Herbert Hoover, inaugural address (American Institute of Mining and Metallurgical Engineers [AIMME], February 17, 1920), Public Statements File, Herbert Hoover Papers, Herbert Hoover Presidential Library, West Branch, Iowa.

7. Herbert Hoover, commencement address (William Penn College, Oskaloosa, Iowa, June 12, 1925), printed in *Penn College Bulletin,* n.s., 19 (July 1925).

8. Herbert Hoover, *Further Addresses upon the American Road, 1938–1940* (New York: Scribner's, 1940), 221.

9. Hoover, *Years of Adventure,* 479.

10. Herbert Hoover, *Addresses upon the American Road, 1933–1938* (New York: Scribner's, 1938), 322.

11. Herbert Hoover, *Addresses upon the American Road, 1945–1948* (New York: Scribner's, 1949), 77.

12. Ibid.