THE LIFE OF HERBERT HOOVER

Imperfect Visionary

1918–1928

ALSO BY KENDRICK A. CLEMENTS

Woodrow Wilson (with Eric A. Cheezum)

Hoover, Conservation, and Consumerism: Engineering the Good Life

The Presidency of Woodrow Wilson

Woodrow Wilson: World Statesman

William Jennings Bryan, Missionary Isolationist

Editor, *James F. Byrnes and the Origins of the Cold War*

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HERBERT
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IMPERFECT VISIONARY

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KENDRICK A. CLEMENTS

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For Ryland Alden Clements

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Preface

This fourth volume of *The Life of Herbert Hoover* begins where George Nash's third volume, *Master of Emergencies, 1917–1918* (1996) ended, with the armistice at the end of World War I in November 1918. It carries the story forward to his election to the presidency, in November 1928. I urge readers who would like to know more about Hoover's youth and career prior to 1918 to read Nash's splendid volumes, but I have tried to make this volume sufficiently self-contained so that it can be read separately from Nash's earlier works.

Hoover faced an unprecedented situation in November 1918. The war that had just ended had swept away the imperial trappings of the "long nineteenth century," leaving even the victors more weakened than they initially realized and destroying the Russian, Ottoman, and Austro-Hungarian empires that had dominated Eastern and Central Europe. The Bolshevik Revolution in Russia had unleashed civil war and transformed one of the most backward nations into a laboratory for radical political experimentation. Only the United States had emerged from the war vastly strengthened, economically and militarily.

President Woodrow Wilson welcomed self-determination for the subject peoples of the old empires and proposed to create a new order of democratic states cooperating to keep the peace through a League of Nations. In an unprecedented step, he planned to attend the peace conference in Paris to ensure that the peace treaty really embodied his vision. His task, in the face of the war's devastation, the Allied desires for vengeance on the Germans and Austrians, and the defeated nations' bitterness, would be monumental.

To deal with some of the war's legacies and to create a firm foundation for his new political order, Wilson asked the head of the American Food Administration, forty-four-year-old Herbert Hoover, to expand his wartime relief program for Belgium into a continent-wide relief and rehabilitation plan. The challenge, as Wilson and Hoover saw it, involved not only feeding the hungry but also, especially in Central Europe, where new states had been carved out of the old Russian, Ottoman, and Austro-Hungarian empires, helping to

build or rebuild administrative structures, restore agricultural and industrial production, and reconstruct distribution systems interrupted by war and new national boundaries. Hoover thus faced a task no less Herculean than Wilson's, and his success in it would lead to his being identified, ever after, as "the great humanitarian." It would also bring him further relief assignments, in Russia in 1921 to 1923 and in the Mississippi River Valley and New England in 1927.

Following Hoover's return to the United States in September 1919, President Wilson turned to him again, this time to serve in a national conference to seek remedies for the industrial conflicts tearing the economy apart. His work in that role, as well as his humanitarian endeavors, marked him as a potential presidential candidate in 1920, a role that he eventually accepted, albeit reluctantly and halfheartedly. Eliminated as a candidate before the Republican convention, he tried and failed to persuade Warren Harding to support ratification of the Treaty of Versailles. When Harding won the election, he asked Hoover to join his administration as secretary of commerce. Some people wondered at his acceptance of a department whose duties had traditionally been only to "put the fishes to bed and [light] the lamps on the coast," but Hoover asked for and received authority to range widely, well beyond the usual limits of the Commerce Department's authority. Republican conservatives suspected, correctly, that he would push his authority as far as he could. The easygoing Harding did not mind, but Hoover would clash with some of his cabinet colleagues as he poached on their territory and with President Coolidge.¹

The gusto with which Hoover embraced his new assignment led to him being referred to in Washington as "secretary of commerce and undersecretary of everything else." In addition to reorganizing and expanding the activities of the Commerce Department, he also pushed aggressively to control agricultural marketing, both in the United States and abroad, ventured onto State Department turf by urging the appointment of Commerce Department attachés overseas and by demanding authority to evaluate proposed foreign loans, and trespassed on Treasury Department territory by offering policy recommendations on the repayment of Allied war loans, German reparations, and the Federal Reserve's rediscount rates. He also reached out to bring regulation of radio and aviation under the control of the Commerce Department, and he accepted the chairmanship of an interstate commission to apportion the water of the Colorado River and another to do the same for the Rio Grande, as well as continuing work with the American Relief Administration, the chairmanship of a committee to investigate construction of a waterway from the Great Lakes to the Atlantic, and a number of other official or semiofficial committees. Although he failed to solve some of the problems he tackled and moved to the White House in 1929 with other initiatives still incomplete, he believed that he had improved life for most Americans. Years later, he looked back on the Commerce period as "happy years of constructive work."²

Hoover identified his primary goal in the Commerce Department as increasing “material welfare and standards of living for the American people.” That meant distributing the fruits of the consumer economy as widely as possible, to elevate Americans’ daily lives not only materially but also intellectually and spiritually. To do that, he strove to show labor and management that they shared a common interest in increasing production and making it more efficient. If the costs of production could be reduced and its volume increased, he argued, prices could be cut without reducing profits, and workers’ wages would go further in purchasing both necessities and new products to make life easier and more pleasant. Trade associations, responsible labor unions, and shop councils could all foster such cooperation. The government, in Hoover’s vision, would encourage and exercise general supervision over the process but would rely primarily on business to govern its own affairs.³

In practice, Hoover’s dream of economic self-government proved elusive. In some troubled areas of the economy, such as agriculture, coal, and the railroads, little progress was made. In other areas, Commerce Department leadership became more heavy-handed than Hoover originally intended. Philosophically, he believed in limited government and voluntarism, but temperamentally, he inclined to governmental activism and strong leadership. He could never reconcile the two approaches fully.

A comparable ambivalence marked his approach to foreign relations. As Commerce Secretary, he made the expansion of trade and the search for foreign investment opportunities a major part of the department’s mission. He not only cultivated new markets and investment opportunities in Asia and Latin America, but he also recognized that improving the economic and political health of America’s major trading partners in Europe would make them better customers for American companies. His European relief work aimed not only to alleviate suffering but also to create political and economic stability that would serve American self-interest in the future. The importance of that objective led him to support ratification of the Treaty of Versailles and American membership in the League of Nations and the World Court, despite his belief that the treaty contained injustices that could exacerbate the very instability it tried to prevent. American membership in the World Court, he said in 1923, would not guarantee peace, but would “build . . . a little of the road to peace.” As an even more practical step toward that ultimate goal, he also supported sharp reductions in European war debts to the United States, cuts in interest rates, and lengthy extensions in payment periods.⁴

Yet at the same time, he found excuses to support Harding in the 1920 presidential election and rejected outright cancellation of the debts. As secretary of commerce, he endorsed the protective tariff that curtailed the sales of European finished products in the United States while he favored keeping duties low on the raw materials that American companies needed. He warned American companies that they faced cutthroat competition from European firms and urged them to do everything in their power to undersell foreign

products. He constantly warned his colleagues in the administration that the European nations sought a closed European economic system that excluded American trade and investments. Foreign monopoly control over raw materials critical to American businesses, such as rubber, loomed in his mind as a dangerous threat. In short, at the same time that he pushed international economic interdependence and political cooperation, Hoover pursued an economic nationalism that saw the United States as struggling to compete rather than as the world's dominant trader and investor.

Contemporary observers often noted that Hoover, although a talented executive and administrator, had none of the skills of a politician. Painfully shy, exceptionally sensitive to attacks, and a poor public speaker, he relied on logic backed by reams of statistics to gain support for his ideas. Some members of Congress, listening to him testify on problems facing the government, felt that he was talking down to them. His range of interests and substantial knowledge about a dazzling number of subjects could make him intimidating to those who knew him casually. Bowled over by the force of his arguments, people sometimes found themselves agreeing to take actions with which they did not fully agree and later regretted. His family and those who knew him well or worked closely with him, however, found him charming and warm. On camping and fishing trips, he relaxed and told fascinating stories about his experiences around the world. Above all, his friends and co-workers found his dedication to public service inspiring. Those who worked with him in the Belgian relief program or the Food Administration remained admirers all his life and happily came to his call whenever he asked.

As an orphan raised on the frontier by his aunt and uncle, Hoover climbed from poverty to wealth and power largely through his own hard work and intelligence. Like many people in such circumstances, he regarded his personal values as the explanation for his success and thought that if individuals and nations followed his path, they too would succeed. Engineering's rational analysis of the world, he believed, showed the way people could control their own destinies and plan their routes to happiness and prosperity. In a decade when the promise of technology seemed unlimited, wealth excited general admiration, and most people looked forward to increasing prosperity, Hoover exemplified success and hence seemed to many people an ideal leader for the times.

From his Quaker background and wartime experience, Hoover drew the lesson that the American people would respond generously to appeals for voluntary commitment to a common cause. If leaders analyzed problems rationally, he became convinced, and presented them to the public as challenges requiring cooperative action, Americans would answer their call. Lacking the habit of introspection and moving rapidly from issue to issue, he rarely looked back to assess which programs had actually succeeded and which failed. President Coolidge, who viewed his endless ideas and recommendations for government action with skepticism, referred to him derisively as "wonder boy."

Yet whatever his limitations, Hoover did enormous good during his public career. His relief work alone saved many millions of lives. "Few men who have ever lived," wrote the journalist Bruce Bliven, "had so good a claim on the world's gratitude." Moreover, as secretary of commerce, Hoover did much to build the transportation, power, communications, and credit networks upon which the consumer economy depended. Amid racial, ethnic, religious, and cultural divisions at home and international instability, he worked hard to help Americans make the transition from nineteenth-century rural isolation to urban-industrial world power. His colleagues' limitations, as well as his own background and experience, shaped and sometimes restricted his ideas, but his extraordinary energy, intelligence, and capacity for hard work made him an outstanding leader during the decade.⁵

Neither Hoover nor his colleagues foresaw the coming economic catastrophe of the Great Depression. Hoover believed that the policies he initiated had largely tamed the business cycle and made crashes unlikely. Obviously, he was wrong, but there is no doubt that his work helped to advance economists' understanding of the way the economy worked and began to familiarize politicians with the possibility that government could take steps to control its fluctuations. I have tried to outline what I think are the strengths and limitations of his approach, but it seems to me that ongoing debates among economists and historians about the causes of the depression should make us cautious in assessing blame.

A biographer dealing with a person who has Hoover's range of activities confronts a problem. On one hand, it makes sense to take up a specific issue—his struggle to rationalize the railroad industry, for example—explain its background, and carry the story of his involvement through to its completion. That approach, however, obscures the degree to which a large number of issues landed on his desk all at once, interacted with each other, and demanded simultaneous consideration. To convey that aspect of his experience, I have followed a generally chronological rather than topical organization. I have tried to minimize the repetition required to remind readers where each issue stands when it comes up a second or third time.

I first began working on Hoover (though not on this book) in the mid-1980s. The indispensable resource for anyone working on Hoover and his era is the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library in West Branch, Iowa, and in my experience, it offers one of the most pleasant places to work within the National Archives and Record Administration. When I began working there, Tom Thalken was its director; when I finished, Tim Walch had assumed the position. Both were invariably supportive and accessible. The staff remained remarkably stable over those years and made the library an easy and happy place to work. Brad Bauer, Jim Detlefson, Kathy Grace, Pam Hinkhouse, Mildred Mather, Scott Nolen, Matt Schaefer, Shirley Sondergard, Robert Wood, Cindy Worrell, and Craig Wright all went beyond the call of duty to make my work pleasant as well as rewarding. Spencer Howard, Dale Mayer, Dwight

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Two distinguished historians of this period, Ellis Hawley and Stephen Schuker, read the penultimate version of the manuscript. Professor Hawley's thorough reading and generous comments both encouraged and guided me as I began revisions. My copy of his comments is covered with my notes and questions as one step led to the next. Professor Schuker gave the manuscript the most meticulous reading I have ever received for my work, and his detailed comments on content and helpful suggestions about where to look for further information were combined with excellent recommendations for improvements in the writing. I am delighted to acknowledge the debt I owe these two scholars for strengthening the book in a variety of ways and to absolve them of any responsibility for remaining weaknesses.

As anyone who had tried to write a book knows, family and friends also play important roles in the process. Don and Nancy Barnby, Dave and Susie Hodges, Tom and Valen Brown, Jon and Deborah Krass, Neal and Ann McNabb, Dick and Ann Rempel, Miriam Sponberg, Wilson Clements, Carole Weaver, James Clements, and as always, my wife, Linda Clements, inspired, encouraged, and sustained me. Our new grandson, Ryland Alden Clements, will surely inspire future projects.