

18.8

Herbert Hoover, "American Individualism" (1928)

Prior to winning the presidency in 1928, Herbert Hoover (1874–1964) enjoyed great professional success. Born near West Branch, Iowa, and raised a Quaker, Hoover graduated from Stanford University in 1895 with a degree in geology. His skills as a mining engineer made him a multimillionaire. In 1914, President Woodrow Wilson appointed Hoover the national food administrator. Hoover's efforts in organizing relief efforts and food production drew wide acclaim. From 1921 to 1928, Hoover served as secretary of commerce for Presidents Warren G. Harding and Calvin Coolidge. Hoover promoted foreign trade, collective bargaining for workers, and government regulation of new industries such as radio and aviation. When Coolidge decided not to run for reelection, the Republican Party selected Hoover to challenge New York governor Al Smith, the Democratic nominee. In this excerpt from his final campaign speech, Hoover explains his views on government and individual character.

FOCUS QUESTIONS

1. How does Hoover distinguish between the European and American economies?
2. What does he believe makes the American economic system successful?
3. How does Hoover claim that Republicans and Democrats differ in their approaches to the nation's problems?
4. What does Hoover believe is the proper role of government in American society? Do you share Hoover's views? Explain your answer.

When the war closed, the most vital of all issues both in our own country and throughout the world was whether governments should continue their wartime ownership and operation of many instrumentalities of production and distribution. We were challenged with a peace-time choice between the American

SOURCE: "Text of Hoover's Speech on Relation of Government to Industry," *The New York Times*, October 23, 1928, 2.

system of rugged individualism and a European philosophy of diametrically opposed doctrines—doctrines of paternalism and state socialism. The acceptance of these ideas would have meant the destruction of self-government through centralization of government: It would have meant the undermining of the individual initiative and enterprise through which our people have grown to unparalleled greatness.

The Republican Party from the beginning resolutely turned its face away from these ideas and these war practices. . . . When the Republican Party came into full power it went at once back to our fundamental conception of the state and the rights and responsibilities of the individual. Thereby it restored confidence and hope in the American people, it freed and stimulated enterprise, it restored the government to its position as an umpire instead of a player in the economic game. For these reasons the American people have gone forward in progress while the rest of the world has halted, and some of the countries have even gone backwards. . . .

There has been revived in this campaign, however, a series of proposals which, if adopted, would be a long step toward the abandonment of our American system and a surrender to the destructive operation of governmental conduct of commercial business. Because the country is faced with difficulty and doubt over certain national problems—that is prohibition, farm relief, and electrical power—our opponents propose that we must thrust government a long way into the businesses which give rise to these problems. In effect, they abandon the tenets of their own party and turn to state socialism as a solution for the difficulties presented by all three. It is proposed that we shall change from prohibition to the state purchase and sale of liquor. If their agricultural relief program means anything, it means that the government shall directly or indirectly buy and sell and fix prices of agricultural products. And we are to go into the hydroelectric power business. In other words, we are confronted with a huge program of government in business.

There is, therefore, submitted to the American people a question of fundamental principle. That is: shall we depart from the principles of our American political and economic System, upon which we have advanced beyond all the rest of the world, in order to adopt methods based on principles destructive of its very foundations? And I wish to emphasize the seriousness of these proposals. I wish to make my position clear, for this goes to the very roots of American life and progress. . . .

Let us first see the effect upon self-government. When the Federal government undertakes to go into commercial business, it must at once set up the organization and administration of that business, and it immediately finds itself in a labyrinth, every alley of which leads to the destruction of self-government. . . .

Bureaucracy is ever desirous of spreading its influence and its power. You cannot extend the mastery of the government over the daily working life of a people without at the same time making it the master of the people's souls and thoughts. Every expansion of government in business means that government in order to protect itself from the political consequences of its errors and wrongs is driven irresistibly without peace to greater and greater control of the nation's

press and platform. Free speech does not live many hours after free industry and free commerce die.

It is a false liberalism that interprets itself into the government operation of commercial business. Every step of bureaucratizing the business of our country poisons the very roots of liberalism—that is, political equality, free speech, free assembly, free press, and equality of opportunity. It is the road not to more liberty, but to less liberty. Liberalism should be found not striving to spread bureaucracy but striving to set bounds to it. True liberalism seeks all legitimate freedom first in the confident belief that without such freedom the pursuit of all other blessings and benefits is vain. That belief is the foundation of all American progress, political as well as economic.

Liberalism is a force truly of the spirit, a force proceeding from the deep realization that economic freedom cannot be sacrificed if political freedom is to be preserved. Even if Governmental conduct of business could give us more efficiency instead of less efficiency, the fundamental objection to it would remain unaltered and unabated. It would destroy political equality. It would increase rather than decrease abuse and corruption. It would stifle initiative and invention. It would undermine the development of leadership. It would cramp and cripple the mental and spiritual energies of our people. It would extinguish equality and opportunity. It would dry up the spirit of liberty and progress. For these reasons primarily it must be resisted. For a hundred and fifty years liberalism has found its true spirit in the American system, not in the European systems. . . .

By adherence to the principles of decentralized self-government, ordered liberty, equal opportunity, and freedom to the individual, our American experiment in human welfare has yielded a degree of well-being unparalleled in all the world. It has come nearer to the abolition of poverty, to the abolition of fear of want, than humanity has ever reached before. Progress of the past seven years is the proof of it. This alone furnishes the answer to our opponents, who ask us to introduce destructive elements into the system by which this has been accomplished. . . .

I have endeavored to present to you that the greatness of America has grown out of a political and social system and a method of control of economic forces distinctly its own—our American system—which has carried this great experiment in human welfare farther than ever before in all history. We are nearer today to the ideal of the abolition of poverty and fear from the lives of men and women than ever before in any land. And I again repeat that the departure from our American system by injecting principles destructive to it which our opponents propose, will jeopardize the very liberty and freedom of our people, and will destroy equality of opportunity not alone to ourselves but to our children. . . .

capitalist society. But the later 1930s marked a shift in tone. As the rise of fascism abroad portended another world war, authors and musicians such as Thornton Wilder, William Saroyan, and Aaron Copeland celebrated American life. With grave threats facing the United States, Americans prepared to defend their values and institutions.

THEMES TO CONSIDER

- The impact of the Great Depression upon urban and rural areas
- The objectives and components of the New Deal
- Criticism of the New Deal
- Workers' responses to the Great Depression
- Artistic reflections of the 1930s

19.1

The Depression Hits Philadelphia (1931)

Disproving predictions that the economy would rebound quickly, the Great Depression was prolonged and pervasive. The banking system collapsed. Factories were overburdened with unsold merchandise. Prices plummeted. These economic problems had devastating effects on individuals. Millions lost their life savings when financial institutions failed. Unemployment reached 25 percent. Urban families and those already living in poverty were particularly hard-hit by the economic crisis. As the Depression paralyzed American cities, Congress began investigating the dire conditions facing many urban families. In this passage, Dorothy Kahn, executive director of the Jewish Welfare Society of Philadelphia, tells the Senate Subcommittee on Unemployment Relief about the difficulties facing the urban poor.

SOURCE: U.S. Congress, Senate, Subcommittee on Unemployment Relief, "Statement of Miss Dorothy Kahn," *Hearings before the Senate, Subcommittee on Unemployment Relief, Senate Committee on Manufacturers*, 72nd Congress, 1st Session, (28 December 1931), 73-77.

FOCUS QUESTIONS

1. How did the Depression affect many families in Philadelphia?
2. How did people respond to their economic troubles?
3. How did the New Deal attempt to resolve the problems that Kahn describes?

The Chairman: What happens to these families when they are evicted?

Miss Kahn: The families in Philadelphia are doing a number of things. The dependence of families upon the landlords, who seem to have a remarkable willingness to allow people to live in their quarters, rent free, is something that has not been measured. I think the only indication of it is the mounting list of sheriff's sales where property owners are simply unable to maintain their small pieces of property because rents are not being paid. Probably most of you saw in the newspapers the account of the "organized" representation of the taxpayers recently, where they vigorously and successfully opposed a rise in local taxes, largely because of the fact that they are under a tremendous burden through nonpayment of rents. That, of course, is the least of the difficulties, although I think this is the point at which we ought to stress one of the factors that Mr. West and other speakers have brought out in their testimony, that is the effect on families of the insecurity of living rent free, and in addition to that, the effect on their attitude toward meeting their obligations. Some of us would not be surprised if rent paying became an obsolete custom in our community. There are also, of course, evictions and the evictions in Philadelphia are frequently accompanied not only by the ghastly placing of a family's furniture on the street, but the actual sale of the family's household goods by the constable. These families are, in common Philadelphia parlance, "sold out."

One of the factors that is never counted in all of the estimates of relief in this country is the factor of neighborliness. That factor of neighborliness is a point that I would like to stress here, because it seems to us who are close to this problem that this factor has been stretched not only beyond its capacity but beyond the limits of human endurance. We have no measure in Philadelphia today of the overcrowding that is a direct or indirect result of our inability to pay rent for families. Only the other day a case came to my attention in which a family of 10 had just moved in with a family of 6 in a 3-room apartment. However shocking that may be to the members of this committee, it is almost an every-day occurrence in our midst. Neighbors do take people in. They sleep on chairs, they sleep on the floor. There are conditions in Philadelphia that beggar description. There is scarcely a day that calls do not come to all of our offices to find somehow a bed or a chair. The demand for boxes on which people can sit or stretch themselves is hardly to be believed. . . .

Only the other day a man came to our office, as hundreds do day after day, applying for a job, in order not to have to apply for relief. I think we have already stressed the reluctance of individuals to accept relief, regardless of the source from

which it comes. This man said to our worker: "I know you haven't any money to give us. I know there isn't enough money in the city to take care of the needs of everybody, but I want you to give me a job." Now, we have so many applications of that kind during the day that it has gotten to the point where we can scarcely take their names as they come in, because we have no facilities for giving jobs. In this particular case this individual interested me because when he heard that we had no jobs to give him, he said: "Have you anybody you can send around to my family to tell my wife you have no job to give me! Because she doesn't believe that a man who walks the street from morning till night, day after day, actually can't get a job in this town. She thinks I don't want to work." I think it is not necessary to dramatize the results of a situation like that. And there are thousands of them. It is only one illustration.

Another thing, it seems to me to be important to stress is the effect of this situation on the work habits of the next generation. I think it has not been brought out that in the early period of this so-called "depression" one of the most outstanding features of it was the fact that young people could get jobs even when old people of 40 years and over could not get jobs, and it has become quite customary for families to expect that their young members who are just coming of working age can replace the usual breadwinner, the father of the family. It is easy to forget about these young boys and girls reaching 14, 15, 16, 17, 18 years of age, who have had no work experience, and if we think of work not as merely a means of livelihood but as an aspect of our life and a part of our life, it has a good deal of significance that these young people are having their first work experience, and experience not with employment but with unemployment; that in addition to that they are looked to as potential breadwinners in the family; that they are under the same strain, the same onus that the father of the family is under, suspected of malingering, suspected of not wanting to work—all of these things which the average individual sees not as clearly as we see them in terms of millions of unemployed. . . .