What This Country Needs

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Reviewed:

The Shattered Dream: Herbert Hoover and the Great Depression
by Gene Smith
William Morrow, 278 pp., $6.95

Herbert Clark Hoover almost never laughed, or so Gene Smith tells us; but I have one of those visions that historians occasionally allow themselves: if one arose very early (sometime during that missing hour 'twixt four and five), and moved very quietly along the upper reaches of the McKenzie River east of Springfield, Oregon, there Hoover would be, just barely visible in the mist—in his waders, standing tit-high in that damnably cold water, a string of trout drifting downstream from his suspender button, one hand with a fly rod and the other with the latest *New York Times Book Review* section, his head and cigar tilted high, roaring at the latest historical account of his failures. His belly laugh would override the rapids because he would already have read a story about voluntary communes in Iowa, Idaho, and Indiana, and another about Julius Lester's beautiful blast at white radicals for having to learn the same thing over and over and over and....

Herbert Hoover; drawing by David Levine
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Back in the real world one would naturally assume that old-mod Charlie Michelson[1] killed Olde Herbie dead between 1929 and 1933. As a kind of live-ammunition training exercise for the subsequent massacre of Alfred Landon.

Not quite. Professor Richard Hofstadter raised him from the grave in a memorable chapter of his fine book on *The American Political Tradition*.

But then Professor Schlesinger devoted an entire volume to a counterattack on Hoover as a tune-up job for levitating Godfather Franklin. And Izzy Stone can hardly let an issue escape him without swinging his scimitar at what he assures us is the ghost of Hoover ensconced in the White House as clandestine adviser to Richard Nixon and Billy Graham.[2]

But why?

Why so much labor to exorcise a cold and feeble failure? And why so much reliance on analogy to put down Nixon, a man who has generously stockpiled a public arsenal accessible to all critics?

Smith gives us a clue or two but never uses them. So the place to start is with Julius Lester's wryly devastating comment: "The inability to move beyond a politics of reaction has been detrimental to the growth of a white radical movement." For to discuss Nixon in terms of Hoover, and to define Hoover in terms of the Michelson (and textbook) myths, is to display the mind (and politics) of the knee-jerk. The way to get at Hoover, as well as Nixon, is to pick up on two more of Lester's remarks. The first is his accurate observation that white radicals persistently react to specifics instead of seeing the specifics as part of an integrated system that must be dealt with as a system. The second is his call for "a positive revolutionary program."[3]

Now at this point we must go very slowly because we are so confused (as Harold Cruse pointed out a year ago) that, given a problem, we tend to duck into a cloud of quick-frozen New Deal rhetoric for the solution. Hoover was not a revolutionary. He was not even a modern liberal. And he does not deserve uncritical acclaim. But he was an unusually intelligent, and often perceptive, conservative who understood that the system was a system; that it was based on certain clear and not wholly absurd axioms, and that it would work only if the people acted in ways that honored those principles.

"I want to live in a community that governs itself," Hoover explained very simply, "that neither wishes its responsibilities onto a centralized bureaucracy nor allows a centralized bureaucracy to dictate to that local government."[4] "It is not the function of government," he continued, "to relieve individuals of their responsibilities to their neighbors, or to relieve private institutions of their responsibilities to the public." "You cannot extend the mastery of the government over the daily working life of a people," he warned, "without at the same time making it the master of the people's souls and thoughts."

If you are Hoover, that is to say, then your moral imperative demands that you let the system come apart at the seams rather than violate the principles by saving the system *for* the people. One of your principles is that the system is *their* system, and hence the moment *you* save it *for* them you kill the dream. For when you do that you *rule* the people instead of serving the people. And the commitments to honoring principles, and to service, are Quaker creed. Perhaps, even, *the* Quaker faith. And Hoover was a Quaker.

So is Nixon. Of course. So there we have a case of no difference with a fantastic distinction. For Hoover held the dream as if it were the Holy Grail, while Nixon has the Holy Grail carried around in a black box by an aide as if it were the daily code for Armageddon.

Back to Gene Smith and his book. His title is *The Shattered Dream*, yet he shows little if any recognition of Hoover's dream. For Hoover did *not* dream that the system would always function perfectly; or that, in the crisis of the Great Depression, it would right itself automatically and roll on beyond poverty. Hoover's dream was that the people—the farmers, the workers, the businessmen, and the politicians—would pull themselves together *and then join together* to meet their needs and fulfill their potential by honoring the principles of the system.

That dream defined both the basis and the nature of his anti-depression program. In his view, the government could

> ...best serve the community by bringing about co-operation in the large sense between groups. It is the failure of groups to respond to their responsibilities to others that drives government more and more into the lives of the people.

Thus he offered ideas, his own influence, the services of the national government, and increasing monetary help short of massive federal intervention. But he could not go beyond his commitment to the principle that the people were responsible—"this is the people's problem"—and embark upon what he considered the "disastrous course" of centralized, irresponsible, and increasingly irresponsive and manipulatory bureaucracy.

As it happened, he did provide more federal aid than had been offered in any other depression, and would have supplied far more if the Democrats had not defeated or spiked a long list of proposals after their victory in the 1930 Congressional elections. And he did in truth block out the basic shape of the New Deal. But he simply could not give over and admit through his actions that he had abandoned his commitment to an American community and to the spirit and the will of the people.

And that faith had its useful side. Led by Gerard Swope of General Electric, some corporation giants pushed him to endorse a plan, presented as a cure for the Depression, that would have given them official sanction to exercise vast powers over the entire political economy. Hoover erupted in angry opposition. It was "the most gigantic proposal of monopoly ever made in history" and "a cloak for conspiracy against the public interest"—a long step toward fascism. It later became, of course, the blueprint for the NRA of the New Deal.

You have to take Hoover whole. He should have given more direct relief and he should have blocked Swope and his cronies. He should have offered more of himself sooner to the people and he should have held fast to that beautiful faith in the people. The visceral truth of it all is that Hoover was done in by his faith in the dream of a cooperative American community, and by his ruthless intellectual analysis of what would happen if the dream was not honored.

Either the people save their country or it does not get saved. It may get stuck back together. It may get managed well enough to remain operational. It may even get shoved into the next historical epoch. But it does not get saved. Meaning it does not get purified by the people demanding that it operate according to its principles.

Hoover was traumatized by the failure of the people to take charge of their immediate lives and then join together in cooperative action, and by his terrifying insight into what the future would be if the people continued to duck their obligation—or if they settled for less.

Do not laugh. Hoover outlined our future in 1923. We are living in it now. We do not like it. And even yet we have not taken charge of our immediate lives so that we can then come together and create an American community. *We* have *let* the future that Hoover foresaw in 1923 *happen to us*. Hoover *did not do it to us*.

To fully comprehend this, we must understand that Hoover knew modern American industrial society better than *any* other President. It takes one to know one. And he had been one. And had become increasingly disturbed and concerned. Let us begin in 1909, with the chapter on labor in his famous (and still used) exposition of the *Principles of Mining*. "The time when the employer could ride roughshod over his labor is disappearing with the doctrine of '*laissez faire*,' on which it was founded." Indeed, unions were "normal and proper antidotes for unlimited capitalistic organization." The good engineer "never begrudges a division with his men of the increased profit arising from increased efficiency." And the good engineer took an honest "friendly interest in the welfare of the men"; and further understood that

> ...inspiration to increase exertion is created less by "driving" than by recognition of individual effort, in larger pay, and by extending justifiable hope of promotion.

Of course it is capitalistic. And of course it has a tinge of paternalism. But it is personal, it is moral, and it reveals an awareness that the past is past—and that the corporation poses a serious danger to community.

The Bolshevik Revolution extended Hoover's awareness of such matters; in part because, as he noted, it "was a specter which wandered into the [Versailles] Peace Conference almost daily," and he dealt with it as an adviser to President Wilson. He naturally opposed communism as being destructive of individuality *and* true cooperation among individuals and groups. But he did understand that the Revolution was the work of men and women striving to realize their potential. Misguided as they might be, he acknowledged that they, too, were reaching for the dream.

Even more important, perhaps, Hoover saw and understood the rise of fascism long before most other American leaders. During those same years of the early 1920s, moreover, he extended his awareness of what the corporation was threatening to do to America. The

> ... congestion of population is producing subnormal conditions of life. The vast repetitive operations are dulling the human mind.... The aggregation of great wealth with its power to economic domination presents social and economic ills which we are constantly struggling to remedy.

He then pulled it all together in a perceptive (though horribly mistitled) essay called *American Individualism* that he wrote as he entered upon his long service as Secretary of Commerce (1921-1928). From experience and observation, Hoover concluded that capitalistic industrial society (and specifically America) had become functionally divided into three major units, and that the society was poised on the threshold of becoming a syndicalist system. One group was composed of capitalists, including agricultural entrepreneurs as well as industrial, banking, and commercial operators. The second functional bloc was labor.

The third was defined by a rather tricky concept, that of the public *per se*. It was in substance, though neither in form nor in rhetoric, a class. That is, it was all the small and middle-sized independents and their dependents—along with labor. Meaning most of us. Hoover was in effect making an analysis of the giants, on the one hand, and the rest of society, on the other: those with national power and those who had to cooperate if they were to avoid manipulation.

> The American people from bitter experience have a rightful fear that great business units might be used to dominate our industrial life and by illegal and unethical practices destroy equality of opportunity.

From this it followed that two criteria had to be met if the dream was to be fulfilled. First: the government had to act, simultaneously, as umpire of the actions of the three groups *and as leader of the public in coming together in cooperative action*.

Beautiful. And damnably difficult.

Hoover maneuvered some of it almost beyond belief. As in his successful battle to define broadcasting as a public forum. And as in his use of brain power and moral power to keep wages high in 1929 and 1930.

Compare that with Nixon.

No problem. Nixon has no moral power.

On with Hoover's second imperative: the people had to accept and discharge their responsibility to come together in cooperative action to create "a community that governs itself." Then came the eerie part. The future map. What would happen if the people gave up on the dream? If the corporations took over—fascism. If job-oriented labor leaders took over—a mutant, mundane, and elitist corruption of socialism. If government *per se* took over—an elitist, bureaucratic, and community-destroying hell-on-earth.

So right it shakes you.

If the people abdicated their responsibility for realizing the dream, and instead relied on the government, Hoover projected a period of increasingly unsuccessful bureaucratic pseudosocialism. And then, "in the United States the reaction from such chaos will not be more Socialism but will be toward Fascism."

So what we have now is the worst possible combination of what he saw as the three possibilities.

But he *must* have failed beyond giving too little relief, beyond waiting too long to give more of himself, and beyond being bull-headed about his dream.

True.

His mishandling of the Bonus Army.

That story is the best thing in Smith's book. He describes it very well, but he does not tell us what it means. To understand that, you have to know the dream. And then face the truth that by 1932 the people had not taken charge of their immediate lives and begun to come together to create a community. Instead, they had begun to petition the government for salvation.

For the feel of how Hoover reacted, do not waste your time ransacking the archives. Just listen to The Doors doing the first verse of "The Soft Parade." His dream was crumbling, dribbling down into Washington by ones and twos. Then by thousands. And he drew the traditional American civilian conclusion. People marching pose a military problem. The explanation for that response is basically simple: the people have done little serious marching except on the way to war.

Now the American military have the patience that begets great power: wait for the civvies to come to us and then we are in charge. And so they were. MacArthur and his minions. The third-person types. MacArthur to an aide: "MacArthur has decided to go into active command in the field."[5]

But the key was Hoover's trauma. That shut him off: confused the desperation of the people with the willful intent of the people. He mistakenly thought they wanted what we have today. So he gave over to MacArthur. And Douglas did his thing. Bayonets, sword-drawn cavalry, tear gas (a baby died), and fire. (And then another failure. For MacArthur usurped power, went beyond his orders, and Hoover did not strike him down.)

But the people only wanted what they thought was the New Frontier—help from the Metropolis for the country. Help from a few of the people for most of the people. In Hoover's view, however, that was impossible. He was correct. The Metropolis is not a few of the people helping the rest of the people. The Metropolis is managers and directors ruling the people. In reality the New Frontier was simply the Metropolis as the center of the empire, lording it over us at home and abroad with increasing indifference (even contempt) for what Hoover understood as the principles of the system—and for Hoover's dream. If the Metropolis saves the country, it does so by changing what Hoover believed in as the people and the community into The Empire.

Hoover was against The Empire. That was the Quaker. Not Nixon-Quaker. Just Iowa-boy-Hoover-Quaker. Meaning that he Honest-to-God-and-to-the-people simply wanted us to exchange the things we create for the things we need. And to give of ourselves to each other in times of well-being as well as in times of crisis. If we did that, then there would be no government intervention and management in our honest exchange, we would remain masters of our lives, and we would create an American community.

So we come right down on it. The trouble with Hoover was that he believed. Not just in us. But in the very best in us.

To get straight on that is to understand the great strengths of his foreign policy along with his weaknesses during the Depression. The guiding axiom was to act, as a people, in ways that would build an international community. To be a good neighbor. "We have no hates; we wish no further possessions; we harbor no military threats." That meant, *ipso facto*, that he "absolutely disapproved" of the concept of the United States as Big Brother to the world.

Hoover was keenly aware that "a large part of the world had come to believe that they were in the presence of the birth of a new imperial power intent upon dominating the destinies and freedom of other people," and he recognized the necessity for nonimperial—and anti-imperial—action. The Quaker knew it was not enough simply to say that Dollar Diplomacy was "not a part of my conception of international relations."

First things first. Control the bankers. The government, he asserted bluntly, "has certain unavoidable political and moral responsibilities to guide and control such loans." "No nation should allow its citizens to loan money to foreign countries unless this money is to be devoted to productive enterprise." Otherwise the government would be drawn ever deeper into the maelstrom of intervention. That meant no loans to prop up Potemkin-like governments, no loans for military purposes, and none for "political adventure." And it meant no government underwriting because that "placed the risk on the taxpayer and not upon the private banker."

The financiers and their allies were too powerful, and Hoover could not win a clear victory in that battle. He needed help from the people which they never gave. But he blocked the bankers when and as he could, kept the issue before the public, and refused to be drawn into intervention. Thus, when he became President, he promptly published J. Reuben Clark's memorandum on the Monroe Doctrine, a document that President Calvin Coolidge had buried because it destroyed the grounds for using the policy as a sanction for such interventions. Thus he returned to the policy of recognizing Latin American governments without demanding that they satisfy US criteria. And thus he withdrew the Marines from Nicaragua and Haiti, and refused to send them into Panama, Honduras, or Cuba.

Of course, all that principle poses a problem. If you cannot properly intervene for the bankers, neither can you intervene to reform the backward or to block the difficult and the bothersome. Once again the trouble with Hoover was his damn stubbornness about that dream. He was all the time trying to play it straight.

Hoover resolved the dilemma by cutting through to first principles on military policy. The armed forces of the United States had the one purpose of guaranteeing "that no foreign soldier will land on American soil." "To maintain forces less than that strength is to destroy national safety, to maintain greater forces is not only economic injury to our people but a threat against our neighbors and would be a righteous cause for ill will amongst them."

That meant that the Chinese had to meet the Japanese attack of 1931 with their own resources and will. The assault on Manchuria was of course "immoral," but "the United States has never set out to preserve peace among other nations by force"—and Hoover was not about to begin. "These acts do not imperil the freedom of the American people, the economic or moral future of our people. I do not propose ever to sacrifice American life for anything short of this." To intervene in China, moreover, "would excite the suspicions of the whole world." And, finally, a sense of history: "No matter what Japan does in time they will not Japanify China and if they stay long enough they will be absorbed or expelled by the Chinese."

Reminds one of John Quincy Adams. "America goes not abroad in search of monsters to destroy.... She might become the dictatress of the world; she would no longer be the ruler of her own spirit."[6]

Herbert Clark and John Quincy: too bad they are gone. Spiro Agnew could spend the rest of his life chasing after them, screaming all the while that it was time to take care of those effete radical-liberal snobs who are undermining and destroying the nation and its rightful place in the world.

So we come back to what the man Julius Lester says: if we concentrate on destroying Hoover, then "ultimately we will destroy ourselves."

What I mean is that Gene Smith tells us that Hoover, in the depths of the hell of 1931, said that "what this country needs is a great poem. Something to lift people out of fear and selfishness."[7]

If you kill a Quaker engineer who came to understand that—and to believe in and to commit himself to that—then you have murdered yourself.

Letters:

Robert Dawidoff

Justice to Herbert Hoover

January 28, 1971

William A. Williams

1. Michelson was the Democratic Party's publicity agent who mounted a powerful smear campaign against Hoover based on the classic techniques of the false choice and the false syllogism (very similar to the current advertising for Winston cigarettes).

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2. A convenient review of the Hoover literature is Murray N. Rothbard, "The Hoover Myth"; now reprinted in *For A New America*, edited by James Weinstein and David W. Eakins (Vintage, 1970), pp. 162-79.

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3. *Liberation* (June, 1970), pp. 38, 39, 40.

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4. The bulk of the basic information on Hoover, and his ideas and policies, is available in published sources. For ease of reference, most of these quotations have been taken from Ray Lyman Wilbur and Arthur Mastick Hyde, *The Hoover Policies* (Scribner's, 1937). Significant exceptions are noted in the text.

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5. Smith, *The Shattered Dream*, p. 159.

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6. 1821 Fourth of July Oration, Washington, D.C.

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7. Smith, *Ibid*., p. 67.

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