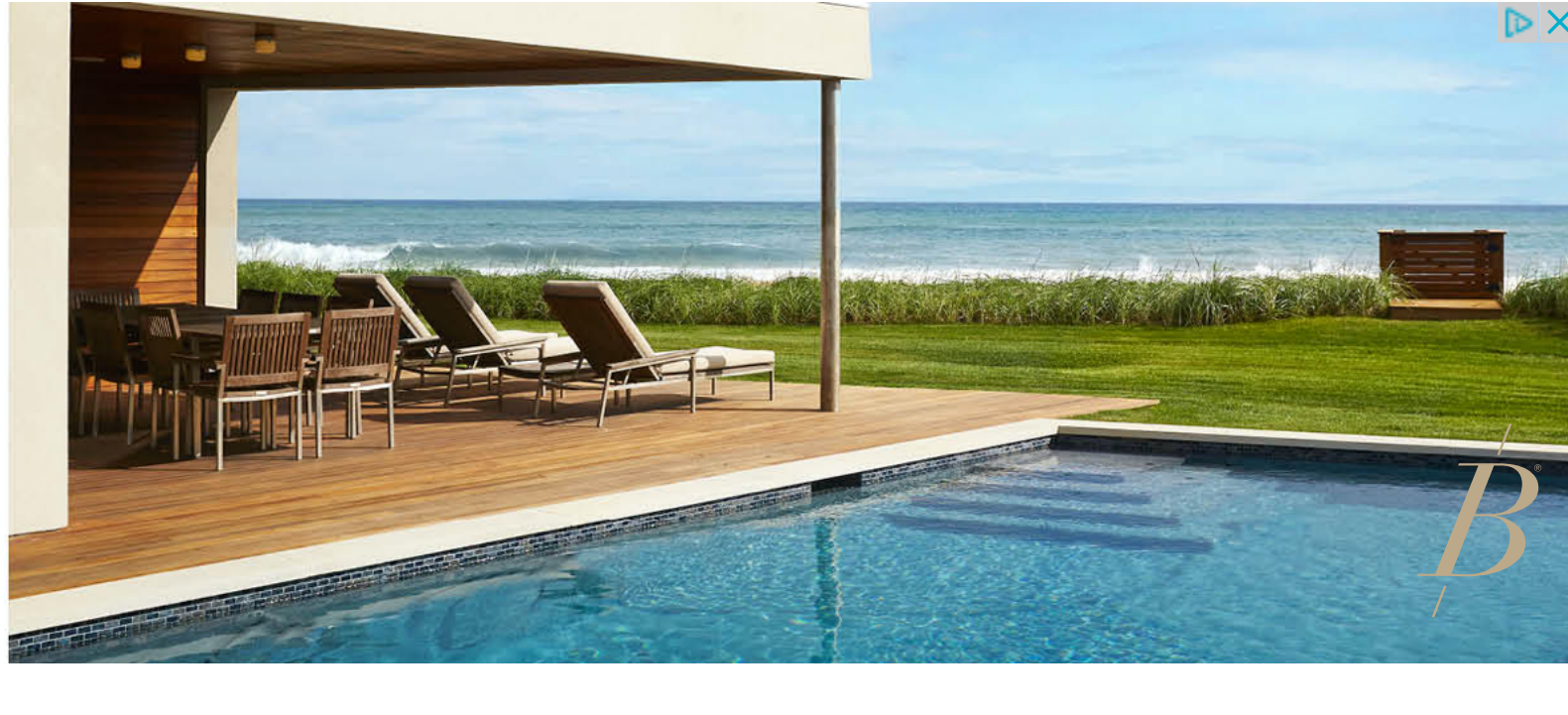


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Review: A Wonder Boy on the Wrong Side of History

Herbert Hoover was a prodigy of ability and insecurity, scruple and ambition, ruthlessness and charity. Edward Kosner reviews 'Hoover' by Kenneth Whyte.

By Edward Kosner

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Herbert Hoover was an American tragic hero—a man brought down by the very qualities that made him great.

People think of Hoover, if they think of him at all, as a stiff old man in a double-breasted suit doddering out of the Waldorf Towers on Park Avenue with a wan wave. Historians often rate him with Warren Harding, Andrew Johnson and James Buchanan as among the worst American presidents. Hoover's presidency was overwhelmed by the Great Depression, and he was swept from the White House by Franklin D. Roosevelt's 1932 landslide that heralded the New Deal.

So what's to be gained from another door-stopping biography of the 31st president? As it happens, a great deal. Time and the erosion of American history and civics courses have all but obliterated Hoover from American consciousness. That's a shame, because Hoover's life is one of the most fascinating in our annals, and some of the issues that bedeviled and ultimately destroyed his presidency still resonate today.

In these frantic times, it's nearly impossible to grasp the sustained reach of Hoover's career and achievements. He was born in 1874, during President Ulysses S. Grant's second term and lived to meet John F. Kennedy Jr. in Hoover's final year, 1964. He served in one way or another Presidents Wilson, Harding, Coolidge, Truman and Eisenhower. Conceived during the Panic of 1873, he graduated in Stanford's first class right into the Panic of 1893. In 1929, barely six months into his presidency, what turned out to be the Great Depression convulsed the country. America ultimately recovered, but Hoover's reputation never did.

Kenneth Whyte, a Canadian newspaper and magazine editor and chronicler of William Randolph Hearst, is the latest to try to retrieve this perplexing figure from the controversy and contempt that have enveloped him. Mr. Whyte's "Hoover: An Extraordinary Life in Extraordinary Times" is an exemplary biography—exhaustively researched, fair-minded and easy to read. It can nestle on the same shelf as David McCullough's "Truman," a high compliment indeed.

On the very first page, the author proclaims his subject "a blur," but then goes on to detail how Hoover was actually one of the most peculiar men ever to win the White House—a prodigy of ability and insecurity, scruple and fervent ambition, ruthlessness and philanthropy. High-minded to a fault, he could be a shark in business. He was at once taciturn and compulsively gregarious, hard-pressed to grunt out a "yes" or "no" to guests at his crowded dinner parties. He was married to the love of his life for 45 years, but they rarely lived together in any of his many houses at the same time. They signed their frequent letters to each other "Herbert Hoover" and "Lou Hoover." He was never happier than standing alone for hours in a freezing trout stream waiting for a nibble.



The 31st president of the United States (1929-33).

PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

HOOVER

By Kenneth Whyte

Knopf, 728 pages, \$35



PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

Hoover was one of those people who wake up in adolescence and realize that they are smarter, more energetic, more disciplined and thus more capable than anyone else they encounter. Born to a poor Quaker blacksmith and fervently religious mother in the farming hamlet of West Branch, Iowa, he was orphaned at 9. He was parceled out to relatives as far west as Oregon, always the outsider in these surrogate families. At 14, he went to work as an office boy at an uncle's land-management firm, and soon made himself indispensable. At 17, he was admitted to Stanford, eventually graduating only after a sympathetic professor rewrote a required essay.

His pre-presidential resume was as odd in its way as Donald Trump's, and it prefigured his ordeal in the White House. Hoover studied geology at Stanford and expected to graduate into a good job at the U.S. Geological Survey. The economic downturn scuttled that, so he set out to seek his fortune 9,000 miles away in the gold rush country of Western Australia, a sun-scorched, lawless wilderness, where he sloshed through the muck of long-shot mine tunnels.

Over the next 20 years he made millions as a mining engineer in Australian gold and later in Chinese coal and Burmese zinc. He was a peerless mineral hunter and a slave-driving operator, contemptuous of native labor. In a mining manual he published, Mr. Whyte reports, Hoover "deemed one white worker equal to two or three of the colored races in simple tasks like shoveling, and as high as one to eleven in the more complicated mechanical work." In China, he ran a lucrative joint venture with a well-connected Mandarin. Over time, Hoover managed to seize control of the operation using such shady tactics that he was excoriated by a British judge as a fraudster.

Hoover sold off most of his interests for \$4 million in today's money and re-established himself in London as World War I loomed. Then fate intervened—changing Hoover's life and America's destiny. The outbreak of war stranded tens of thousands of American tourists in London and on the Continent. Unbidden, Hoover showed up at the American consulate to get the refugees safely home. Efficient as always, he organized the rescue effort—the first of a series that established Hoover's reputation as the autocratic savior of the distressed and propelled him to the presidency.

After Germany invaded Belgium, he promoted himself into the job of feeding the starving Belgians. This was a ticklish operation involving raising hundreds of millions of dollars, persuading the British to allow food ships to penetrate their blockade of the North Sea and the Germans not to commandeer the rations. It was a spectacular success, and prompted Woodrow Wilson to add Hoover to the U.S. delegation to the Versailles peace conference, where he presciently warned against punitive German reparations.

Warren Harding proclaimed Hoover "the smartest gink I know," and made him secretary of commerce, a role that Hoover inflated into the czar of the American economy. "Control was almost as oxygen to him," writes Mr. Whyte. He managed to escape the stigma of the scandals that emerged after Harding's death in 1923 and prospered under the new president, Calvin Coolidge. When the great Mississippi flood of 1927 inundated much of the Midwest, Hoover organized the disaster recovery effort—pioneering what became a half-century later FEMA, the Federal Emergency Management Agency. Silent Cal found Hoover valuable but insufferable and dubbed him "wonder boy."

Like many fiascos, Hoover's presidency started off promising enough. He temporized enough about Prohibition ("a great social and economic experiment") during the 1928 campaign to thrash Al Smith, the wet Roman Catholic Democratic candidate, winning 58% of the vote and 40 states. The stock market had quintupled since the bull run's start in 1921. The rampant speculation and loans to brokers spooked Hoover, and he tried to impose restraint. He was stunned by the eventual crash, but as he had in earlier crises, he mobilized to control the damage. Working 14- and 16-hour days, he extracted promises from corporate chiefs not to impose layoffs and from union bosses not to call strikes. He even came up with a version of a stimulus bill to recharge the economy.

But self-reliance was bred in Hoover's bones, and he rebuffed the clamor for vigorous federal intervention. He vetoed an early version of the Tennessee Valley Authority and a plan to set up government job exchanges and refused to pay veterans' bonuses early, inciting the bonus marchers who stormed the capital until subdued by troops led by Maj. Dwight Eisenhower and Maj. George Patton. He did set up the Reconstruction Finance Corp., which proved so effective later under FDR. But Hoover's reticence kept him from comforting the stricken even as false signs of recovery yielded to deeper collapse. The spreading encampments of the destitute were appropriately labeled "Hoovervilles."

Roosevelt's 1932 triumph embittered Hoover, who watched the new president's muscular embrace of policies like the bank holiday and fudging the gold standard that he himself had been too timid to push. He spent broody hours alone playing solitaire and compiling lists of people who had been disloyal to him. He finally roused himself to castigate the New Deal as "a muddle of uncoordinated and reckless adventures in government" and equated it with "Bolshevism, Hitlerism, Fascism."

Just 58 when he left office, Hoover fashioned a third act as a conservative evangel of small government and personal responsibility. On the brink of World War II, he was a fervent America-first noninterventionist. "Hoover did recognize Hitler as a madman and a menace to the peace," writes Mr. Whyte. But he insisted that Germany and Japan were no threat to the U.S., even if Hitler should conquer Great Britain. Roosevelt should stop provoking Japan, he argued, and let Hitler and Stalin fight to the death. As America mobilized, Hoover lamented to a friend, "We are the lepers. At least our consciences are clear."

Hoover stayed active to the end. He ran commissions on government reorganization for Truman and Eisenhower, established a conservative think tank at Stanford, and was hailed at Republican conventions. He wrote seven books in his last five years at the Waldorf Towers. When he died, he had lived longer than any American president except John Adams.

Mr. Whyte is neutral almost to a fault in his judgment of Hoover, particularly the choices he made as president and beyond. However brilliant the man, he managed time and again to put himself on the wrong side of history, his inescapable legacy.

—Mr. Kosner is the former editor of Newsweek, New York, Esquire and The New York Daily News.

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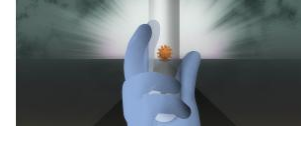
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