

Foreword

American politics has often been marked by great rivalries: Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton, Daniel Webster and John C. Calhoun, Abraham Lincoln and Steven A. Douglas, Woodrow Wilson and Henry Cabot Lodge. In more recent times, presidential elections have frequently pivoted on feuds and quarrels between ambitious men: Lyndon Johnson and John F. Kennedy, Kennedy and Richard Nixon, George W. Bush and John McCain.

In the volume before you, we are introduced to another notable (though less celebrated) presidential rivalry, expressed in the form of a decade-long “conversation” over some of the deepest issues in American public life. Herbert Hoover and Franklin Roosevelt were not always adversaries. Their acquaintance began in 1917 in Washington, D. C., where each was serving in the wartime administration of President Wilson: Hoover as United States Food Administrator and Roosevelt as Assistant Secretary of the Navy. Although never intimates, they had good friends in common, socialized from time to time, and appeared to share a Progressive, Wilsonian outlook—to the extent that an admiring Roosevelt came to see in Hoover a worthy heir to Woodrow Wilson’s mantle.

Early in January 1920, Roosevelt wrote to a friend about Hoover: “He is certainly a wonder, and I wish we could make him President of the United States. There could not be a better one.” In the next few weeks, Roosevelt quietly encouraged efforts by Democratic and progressive activists to draft Hoover for President on the Democratic party ticket. It is likely that Roosevelt hoped to be Hoover’s running mate.

Hoover seemed receptive if ambivalent, at first declaring himself an “independent progressive,” repelled by Republican “reactionaries” and democratic “radicals” alike. Eventually the Food Administrator and humanitarian hero, who had been a Bull Moose Progressive in 1912, affirmed a Republican affiliation and maneuvered unsuccessfully for the Republican presidential nomination won by Warren G. Harding. Meanwhile Roosevelt got the Democratic vice presidential nomination he coveted, on a losing ticket headed by James M. Cox.

Although Hoover and Roosevelt’s political paths now diverged decisively, the two men remained outwardly friendly during most of

the 1920s. As Secretary of Commerce under Presidents Harding and Coolidge, Hoover became one of the three or four most influential men in Washington, a man-on-the-move who hoped to land in the White House. Roosevelt, nearly eight years younger, was an-out-of-office Democrat, soon afflicted with polio and struggling to maintain his political viability. As president of a new trade association called the American Construction Council, he attempted with Hoover's blessing to reform the nation's troubled construction industry. The project brought him into contact with the powerful Secretary of Commerce and provided an opportunity to bask in the reflected glory of his "old friend," Herbert Hoover.

All this changed in 1928, when Hoover was elected President and Roosevelt the governor of New York. Their lingering friendship quickly curdled into a rivalry. At the heart of it was colliding ambition—Hoover was President and Roosevelt wanted to be—exacerbated by a number of unpleasant encounters, misunderstandings, and consequent mistrust. Although personal factors frayed and helped to destroy their friendship, their differences transcended personality and became expressed in ideological terms.

Which brings us to the book of documents in your hands. In 1932, when they battled each other for the presidency, Hoover and Roosevelt both insisted that this was no ordinary campaign. For Roosevelt it was "a call to arms"—a crusade—for a "New Deal" and "a new order of competence and courage" in which the "forgotten man" would finally receive his due. Hoover was equally dramatic. "This contest is more than a contest between two men," he declared in October 1932. "It is more than a contest between two parties. It is a contest between two philosophies of government." The election, he warned—in words he later deemed prophetic—would determine the nation's course for "over a century to come."

Both men meant what they said. In the speeches and related documents assembled in this volume, they articulated a fundamental clash of visions over the American economy, over the "American system of life" (as Hoover called it), and over the essence of American self-understanding—all against the backdrop of a frightening national emergency, the worst since the Civil War.

Hoover and Roosevelt—once friends, now enemies—never met again after March 4, 1933, the day of Roosevelt's presidential inauguration. Yet as Gordon Lloyd's collection of documents abundantly discloses, their frank, long-distance "conversation" did not end. As Roosevelt's New Deal unfolded, the rivalry between himself and his predecessor flared anew, with the roles reversed: now it was Hoover's turn to be the critic and accuser.

Once again, personal ambition and mutual distrust helped to goad the two combatants. Hoover, especially, yearned for an election rematch and vindication. But the argument between them dwarfed such particularities. Both knew that they were engaged in a contest for the American mind and political soul. What had gone wrong since 1929? Was the Great Depression a crisis of capitalism, a product of Hooverian mismanagement, or a catastrophe brought on by uncontrollable happenings abroad? Was the New Deal a humane and pragmatic reform movement or a muddled and meddlesome experiment in collectivism? Did the traditional "American System" of limited government, private initiative, and volunteerism fail disastrously in 1929-1932, or did its successor launch America on a dangerous spiral into socialism? Did the New Deal save American capitalism, or did it delay recovery and poison the wellsprings of prosperity? The political winds blew fiercely in the 1930s. Both Hoover and Roosevelt helped to sustain their intensity.

The two protagonists whose words are reproduced in these pages are long gone from the national scene. Yet it is noteworthy how fresh and resonant their claims and counterclaims continue to be. Ever since the Gilded Age (as someone has observed) the Free Market and Governmental Regulation have defined a polarity in our discourse on public policy: Which is the problem? Which is the solution? In 1981, for instance, in his first inaugural address, President Ronald Reagan boldly proclaimed his intention to "curb the size and influence" of the federal government and to make it "stand by our side, not ride on our back." "We are a nation that has a government," he asserted—"not the other way around."

Herbert Hoover was not a pure Reaganite; there was in him too much of the social engineer and temperamental activist for such a label to be affixed to his name. It has been said of Hoover that he was too progressive for the conservatives and too conservative for the radicals. In the 1920s, as a highly energetic Secretary of Commerce, he often chafed under the constraints of his conservative boss, President Calvin Coolidge." But in the larger sweep of the twentieth century, as Professor Lloyd's fine collection illustrates, Hoover the anti New-Dealer clearly contributed to the critique of ever-aggrandizing statism which has long been integral to American conservatism.

In one sense the Hoover-Roosevelt conversation is over: Franklin Roosevelt won his "revolution." His New Deal liberal welfare state is in place (and then some), and no frontal assault upon it stands much chance of success at the polls. Yet philosophically, rhetorically, and at times programmatically, the Roosevelt/New Dealish approach to public policy remains problematic, thanks in part to Herbert Hoover and

the experience of the American people since the Great Depression. Where in American politics should one draw the line between individual liberty and public obligation, between self-reliance and state-mandated security, between entrepreneurial freedom and regulatory government, between self-government and bureaucratic administration? Today, in ever-changing contexts, we grapple with these perennial problems of political philosophy.

For edification on these questions, I urge readers to turn to the pages that follow and to ponder the answers that Herbert Hoover and Franklin Roosevelt gave. You may be surprised by the light their words cast upon our present concerns.

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The Life of Herbert Hoover, in three volumes