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### The Life of Herbert Hoover: Fighting Quaker, 1928-1933

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as it is on his Sunday School's reading list. Without citing Glaspell, Coffman argues for a similar influence for *The Christian Century*: often the far-out becomes the new norm.

*The Life of Herbert Hoover: Fighting Quaker, 1928–1933*, by Glen Jeansonne. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. xxi, 539 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$60.00 hardcover.

Reviewer Cal Coquillette is assistant professor of history emeritus at the University of Dubuque. He is the author of two articles in the *Annals of Iowa* (1999 and 2000) on President Herbert Hoover's economic policies.

Glen Jeansonne's account of the Herbert Hoover presidency, 1928–1933, challenges history's view of Hoover as one of the nation's worst presidents. Historians generally agree that Hoover and his administration were mostly ineffectual in combating the first years of the Great Depression. Following the stock market crash of 1929, Hoover became a victim of economic circumstance and a subject of ridicule. In part, that was attributable to a reticent, indeed dour, personality, a disdain for politics, and a desire to work behind the scenes through committees, commissions, and conferences. It is little wonder, then, that he is often perceived as a do-nothing president. Jeansonne, following exhaustive research in the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library in West Branch, Iowa, concludes that "Hoover was a great man and, more importantly, a good man, but his presidency was only a partial success" (466).

By the time Hoover became president, he enjoyed an international reputation. He was born in West Branch, Iowa, orphaned at age 9, and 20 years later had accumulated a fortune as a mining engineer abroad. He had served as Food Relief Administrator following World War I and as Secretary of Commerce under Presidents Harding and Coolidge during the 1920s. He became nationally prominent as the federal government's point man dealing with the great Mississippi River flood of 1927. Although he never held an elective office until November 1928, Herbert Hoover was a household name with an enviable record of accomplishment. If ever there was a chief executive poised to deal with an economic crisis, or any crisis for that matter, Hoover seemed to be the right man for the time.

The Great Depression, however, called for both exceptional political skills and imagination, both of which Hoover lacked. While farm and tariff legislation consumed excessive amounts of his time, as Jeansonne notes, perhaps that was indicative of his propensity to study the trees and miss the forest of the deteriorating economy. Meanwhile, the Federal Reserve, today's economic stabilizer, was then timid and

ineffective, and viewed the nation's money supply from the standpoint of inflows and outflows of gold, on which the dollar was based.

Perhaps the centerpiece of Hoover's attempt to mitigate the effects of the Great Depression was the Reconstruction Finance Corporation (RFC), although it is not even listed as a topic in the index to Jeansonne's book. The RFC was designed to bail out ailing banks and railroads or, as one pundit put it, "to feed the sparrows by first feeding the horses." Hoover could never cotton to the idea of providing federal relief directly to those in need, much less paying farmers to curb their acres in production. His successor, Franklin Roosevelt, would later use the RFC as the engine of federal credit as well as to provide direct federal payments (and jobs) to those in need, including farmers. The New Deal established the basis of the welfare state we know today, resisted by Hoover then and by most Republicans ever since.

The nadir of the Hoover presidency was reached during the interregnum between Hoover's defeat for a second term in November 1932 and Roosevelt's inaugural in March 1933, especially during the months of January through March with the peak of the nationwide banking crisis. Hoover, the lame duck, could move nothing through Congress. Roosevelt, as president-elect, and despite appeals from Hoover, did nothing. What Hoover wanted, though Jeansonne does not say as much, was for Roosevelt to publicly declare, before taking the oath of office, that the United States would remain pledged to the gold standard. That pledge from FDR, Hoover believed, would be enough to stop the bank runs, appease Wall Street and Main Street businesses, and stop the hoarding of cash.

Hoover pleaded and prodded throughout February and right up until midnight on the eve of the inaugural, but he was dealing with an acknowledged political master. Hoover pouted in his correspondence to FDR, and later in his memoirs he blamed the banking crisis largely on him. Jeansonne takes Hoover's side, even though Roosevelt had no obligation to do or say anything prior to his inauguration, preferring instead to leave all options open. Hoover could not grasp how a floating U.S. dollar could be applied to contracts, trade, or monetary transactions without proper backing, even though Great Britain had been off gold for a year-and-a-half and seemed okay. The problem required great vision, which was beyond Hoover, and although FDR tried for a while to stimulate inflation by manipulating the price of gold, he finally fixed the price of gold to the dollar. Hoover's ideology can be summarized as, if in doubt, do nothing. Roosevelt's, following his presidential inauguration, was the reverse: if in doubt, try anything.

One reason Hoover is perceived as a do-nothing president is that he was not a risk taker and did almost everything behind the scenes. That hurt him politically, as Jeansonne points out, in his relations with Congress. As Secretary of Commerce for nine years, Hoover was a seasoned administrator who knew how to convene committees, conferences, and commissions, all with solid agendas. Jeansonne labels him “a technocrat with a heart” (76). But that heart had very little instinct for politics. Hoover was not prone to backroom deal-cutting when it came to moving federal legislation. Unfortunately, being too hands-off meant that critical legislation was either killed or bottled up in committee for months. Indeed, Congress passed more legislation during the first hundred days of FDR’s administration in 1933 than in all four years of Hoover’s term. Jeansonne’s description of the Hoover presidency as a “partial success” may be generous.

Herbert Hoover was a good man, but not a great president. He was honest and hard-working, but lacked political skills and even a sense of humor, although Jeansonne tries hard to “humanize” him. His successor, Franklin D. Roosevelt, in contrast, was a great president but not a good man. Roosevelt was cunning and duplicitous but a master of politics. Hoover’s image was crushed by the Great Depression while Roosevelt’s was enhanced, at least until 1936. The onset of World War II and the subsequent Allied victory alleviated the effects of the Great Depression and elevated FDR’s status to the upper tier of U.S. presidents.

*From Society Page to Front Page: Nebraska Women in Journalism*, by Eileen M. Wirth. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2013. xvi, 186 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography. \$17.95 paperback.

Reviewer Kimberly Wilmot Voss is associate professor of journalism at the University of Central Florida. She has written extensively about women in journalism.

For too long people have generalized about women’s roles at newspapers. Yes, these women were marginalized. In some cases, they were literally put in separate rooms from the male reporters. Yet their roles on the margins did not mean that they did not have an impact—especially on their readers. The soft news that most women covered was often about humanity. After all, the content in the women’s or society pages included family, fashion, and food—topics that affect the daily lives of readers.

Eileen M. Wirth’s book, *From Society Page to Front Page*, is helpful in challenging those generalizations. In her research, Wirth examined