
EVERYONE'S MAGIC MOUNTAIN

February 15, 2009

History is selective, and no more so than on President's Day, which since 1971 has been a day in the month of February dedicated to all US presidents, but one that remains understandably focused on the contributions of a major founder, George Washington, and the critical achievements of Abraham Lincoln.

Historians continue to remind us of the singular qualities surrounding the presidency. In contrast to European traditions, the person who occupies the office is directly elected by all of the people, a process that wrenches choice away from common group characteristics and has the innate potential of politically elevating wealthy scion or self-made entrepreneur alike. Though the Constitution calls for a balance of power, it is usually the president on whom all eyes are trained. His, and possibly her, strengths and foibles, along with even casual asides, are dissected and commented on in a manner that considerably overshadows those whose home is found in the halls and corridors of the legislative branch. Many, though not all American presidents, have been as anxious to depart the office as they were to take its oath on Inauguration Day in January. (1)

This is a time of economic uncertainty, rising unemployment, and collapsing financial structures. Perhaps due to these conditions, the 31st president, Herbert Hoover, haunts this President's Day, in large part because he faced the shocks of economic decline in the early 1930's, was broadly found to have been deficient in response, and because the current office-holder, it is hoped, will move beyond these deficiencies—all the while providing appropriate relief without, however, enlarging an expanding government's ability to encroach on the individual's right to enjoy economic and political freedoms.

Hoover was elected to office by a landslide in 1928 and enjoyed only a relative few months of popular acclaim. He was, indeed, a self-made entrepreneur, who survived a lonely, meager, and orphaned childhood in Iowa, went on to study mining engineering in Stanford, California, and did so well on the international mining scene that by the second decade of the 20th century he was already confiding to himself and to those around him that there was a lot more to life than making money (2).

Hoover ran a dauntingly difficult refugee relief and food distribution program in Europe both before and after World War I. Later, as Secretary of Commerce, he standardized sprawling governmental operations. Drawing both on his own career as a mining engineer and on his successful wartime legacy, which included a heightened degree of volunteerism, he stood staunchly behind policies that would engender technical efficiency and innovation, as well as the creation of sustainable public-private partnerships rather than the emergence of a leviathan of governmental intervention to spur national and international development.

But the mid- 1920's were prosperous years in comparison to the devastation to markets, homes, and hearts, that began in October, 1929 and that cascaded forward in time, seemingly without end. There are hints that Hoover was himself wary of too

many high public expectations when he first took office, and that his past encounter with wartime calamities might not necessarily be up to the task of making Americans' labor secure in a lasting way. Eventually, his stubborn support of high tariff legislation, despite the appeals of one thousand economists, brought about a strenuous reaction from abroad that put trade itself on a war footing and sent the US home front on an increasingly downward spiral that stretched inland from port cities to Hoover's beloved countryside towns.

One of the most peace-loving of men became one of America's most maligned of presidents. He was verbally scorned at baseball games, shantytowns became widely known as Hoovervilles, and in 1932 the new president, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, was known to have avoided a customary pre-inauguration get-together. Even a mighty artifact of his engineering prowess, the Hoover Dam, was renamed, at least temporarily, the Boulder Dam, an attempt to vigorously erase his memory from the national landscape. His transformation from the Great Humanitarian into the Great Scrooge of the contemporary public's imagination seemed to many a completed fact, as banks everywhere failed all the while he appeared strenuously attached to the older virtues of individualistic self-reliance rather than to the national appeal of a New Deal that promised a governmental participation in the declining economy that was on par with its powerful wartime role.

President Hoover's embittered feelings about his Depression-era treatment at the hands of politicians, the public, and many in the media, stretched well into his post-presidential years. But these were, in fact, lengthy, 32 in number, and brought a series of recognitions and official calls for help. President Harry Truman and Dwight Eisenhower relied heavily on his expertise at bringing order to expansionary governmental operations after World War II. An additional and lasting contribution has been Hoover's Institute of War, Revolution, and Peace, located on the campus of his alma mater. Memories of still factories and despairing breadlines softened inevitably with the passage of time and the generations. He was not only celebrated on his 80th and 85th birthdays, but lived long enough to count President John F. Kennedy as a friend.

Herbert Hoover also lived long enough for many analysts of economic crises to look back on him as one of the most unlucky of American presidents. A lack of consensus at the recent world economic forum points as well to a continuing need to clarify Hoover's insistence that the Great Depression was due less to domestic concerns than to a failure to resolve complex multilateral debt relations after the Second World War. Nevertheless, President's Day finds the 31st holder of the office without a comfortable place in American history. It is largely in his personal life that some degree of association can be found.

Hoover's personality is often depicted as having been as monotone as a scene from a prairie yet flexible enough to have occasionally departed from any rigid mold. As a stern, hard-working Quaker, he was, and was expected to be, a supporter of Prohibition, but was not beyond urging his son to take a small drop of drink once in a while to tide him over in hard times. He firmly believed in the powers of entrepreneurship to establish and maintain prosperity. But he decried the excesses of blatant consumerism. He possessed, moreover, a technician's calling and appeared decidedly aloof from the early 20th century's rich literary life. He never seems to have immersed himself in the difficult existence and short rebirth through philosophical means at Thomas Mann's notable sanatorium that was actually located

in that day's Davos, Switzerland. But he might have felt some satisfaction at the fact that the meeting of economic leaders now held there annually still finds an ideological compromise between private and public sector pursuits refractory, if not elusive.

Hoover, both in his presidential and long post-presidential years, does not seem to have put down his energetic pen or left his desk, whether in Iowa, Stanford, or Washington, D.C. While identifying with the complexities of international outcomes, he might well have enjoyed one of his very few vacations at the same mountaintop where business, apart from annual conferences, has operated in a voluntary way, free to redesign and alter itself in a fashion that appeals to any who can avail themselves of its services. The Magic Mountain's famous sanatorium has long since been converted into a hotel, more specifically in 1954, or during the hectic time former President Herbert Hoover was working for the Eisenhower administration. (3) It was recently cited by a national rating agency as the Historic Hotel of the Year 2008, and among its many attractive features is one that entitles guests that stay at least 3 days and nights, between Sunday and Friday, a special discount of 10 percent.

(1). Cunningham, Homer F. *The Presidents' Last Years: George Washington to Lyndon B. Johnson*. McFarland and Company, Inc., Jefferson, North Carolina and London (1989). (2) Leuchtenberg, William. *Herbert Hoover*. New York, Henry Holt Company.(2009) (3) Schatzalp Winterkristall Online(Hotel Schatzalp-Davos)

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