

# Fans of the 31st President Find Hate for Hoover Greatly Depressing

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## Blamed for the Crash of '29 and Booed In Bad Times, He's Just 'Misunderstood'

BY LOUISE RADNOFSKY

WASHINGTON—Bashing Herbert Hoover is in vogue again, and that upsets Glen Jeansonne.

Mr. Jeansonne, a professor at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, is part of a small cadre of academics who've taken on the task of restoring the reputation of the nation's much-maligned 31st president.

When Mr. Jeansonne was in high school, "they wanted to get through Hoover as quickly as possible in order to get to the New Deal," the historian recalls. As a graduate student, he was told not to write a paper on Hoover's presidency "because nothing happened." When Mr. Jeansonne was researching a book on the Hoover administration last winter, he

says he was often the only person in the reading room of the Hoover presidential library in West Branch, Iowa.

Hoover is "the most misunderstood and the most underappreciated president," Mr. Jeansonne says.



Herbert Hoover

That's got a lot to do with the fact that Hoover's term coincided with the Crash of 1929. Many Americans blame him for the Great Depression that followed, believing that he put ideological loyalty to the free market

ahead of trying to help people suffering from the downturn. As a result, disparaging references to Hoover are a negative economic indicator, tending to rise whenever markets falter and economies stumble.

Accusations of Hooverism  
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featured in this year's presidential race. Republican candidate Sen. John McCain repeatedly criticized the tax plans of his Democratic rival, Sen. Barack Obama, by contending in a stump speech: "The last president to raise taxes and restrict trade in a bad economy as Sen. Obama proposes was Herbert Hoover. That didn't turn out too well."

Sen. Harry Reid of Nevada contrasted comments from Sen. McCain ("the fundamentals of our economy are strong") with those of Hoover after the Crash ("The fundamental business of the country...is on a sound and prosperous basis.")

In Canada, Liberal politician Bob Rae dubbed incumbent Prime Minister Stephen Harper "Herbert Hoover in a blue sweater" during that country's recent election campaign. Mr. Harper won.

For Hoover champions, such talk is tiresome, echoing the snickers they get at dinner parties and even from colleagues. They suspect Hoover derision is among the reasons a portrait of the only Iowa-born president has been relegated to one of the governor's conference rooms at the state capitol in Des Moines, rather than being displayed more prominently.

The accusations also aren't true, say proponents of Hoover. They point to warnings Hoover gave during the 1920s that low interest rates risked triggering a stock-market crash. When it came, 11 months after he was elected president in 1928, Hoover created the Reconstruction Finance Corp. to push credit into banks, and arranged \$300

million of loans to states to distribute aid.

And far from being a free-market stickler, Hoover instituted a public-works program that at the time was the largest ever, including the creation of 360 public buildings. The program prompted accusations from Franklin D. Roosevelt's camp during the 1932 election campaign that Hoover was "leading the country down the path to socialism."

Hoover's historians have modest ambitions: They just want him to get a little more credit for paving the way for Roosevelt's expanded government intervention, and for breaking with a line of presidents, including his immediate predecessor, Calvin Coolidge, who were content to see depressions as cyclical and inevitable.

"I don't think the U.S. could have leapt straight from Coolidge to the New Deal without Hoover in between," Mr. Jeanson says, adding, "I think if Roosevelt had been elected in '28, Hoover would have won in '32."

Mr. Hoover's partisans accept that he will never be considered among the greatest of the nation's leaders but hope that he might achieve a small rise in stature, perhaps overtaking some of the less-popular presidents such as Benjamin Harrison, John Quincy Adams or even Gerald Ford.

"If you could get him to bump up a few places...that would be something," says Joan Hoff, now a professor at Montana State University in Bozeman. Ms. Hoff was considered one of the first historians to reappraise the president when her book, "Herbert Hoover: Forgotten Progressive,"



Associated Press

President **Herbert Hoover**, posing here with his dog King Tut, has been blamed for **causing the Depression**, but fans say that's an unfair assessment.

was published in 1975.

Some of the criticisms of the Hoover presidency remain unchallenged. He often publicly denied the extent of unemployment and poverty associated with the financial crisis, for example, though some historians argue that this was important to combat panic. He also signed into law the Smoot-Hawley Tariff Act, raising import duties to their highest level in decades. The act is considered by many to have prompted retaliation from U.S. trading partners and worsened global economic woes.

Yet some debates have been settled in Hoover's favor, including the notion that he was just ignorant, indolent or incompetent.

"Many of the things that are said about Hoover today, particularly that he was an apostle of *laissez faire* and a tool of Wall Street, are simply untrue," says William Leuchtenburg, professor emeritus at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill who recently wrote a Hoover biography after spending most of his career as a New Deal historian.

Still, attendance is sluggish

at the Hoover presidential library and historic site in West Branch. The library receives few visitors: 52,000 in the fiscal year ended Sept. 30, 2007, compared with 330,000 for that of Lyndon B. Johnson—the most popular of the presidential libraries—and 305,000 for Ronald Reagan's.

After three years and a pile of rejection letters from conservative organizations, the library association recently raised \$1 million to underwrite an independent documentary on Hoover's life, which is scheduled to come out next year. Its annual revenue, between \$1 million and \$1.2 million, is only about a third of the revenue of Roosevelt's library association, and a fifth of Kennedy's. Timothy Walch, the library's director, says he's watched presidential candidates campaign in Iowa for years, and they never stop by for a visit.

"Frankly, it's been so negative over the past 25 years or so that I don't see how it could get any more negative," says Mr. Walch, who hopes that the Hoover knocks in this campaign could be a chance to finally set the record straight.

It wasn't always so. Hoover arrived in office as a popular secretary of commerce who had earned a reputation for decisiveness and competence handling Washington's response to the Mississippi River flood disaster of 1927, says Kendrick Clements, a retired University of South Carolina professor.

He also ran a successful food-relief program in Belgium during World War I, organized domestic food production in the U.S. between 1917 and 1918, oversaw famine aid to Russia in the early 1920s and directed more relief efforts in

Europe after World War II.

"Hoover invented the ex-presidency," says George Nash, an independent scholar and author of a three-volume biography of Hoover, referring to his subject's work after leaving the White House. During that time, "people stopped personalizing the Great Depression and blaming it on Hoover."

Indeed, Hoover was voted one of Gallup's 10 most-admired American men in 10 separate years between 1948 and the end of his life in 1964. A New York Times obituary noted that his post-presidential career, which also included heading presidential commissions for Dwight Eisenhower and Harry S. Truman, "restored him in the affections of millions."

Soon after, however, the skepticism returned. All people really want to know about Hoover now, says Mr. Clements, is, "Did he cause the Depression?" "Was he a terrible president?"

Hoover admirers say they take heart in the rehabilitation enjoyed by previously unpopular presidents, such as Truman, and perhaps the current occupant of the White House.

"It seems almost inevitable that someone, somewhere, will write a revisionist book on Bush," says Mr. Nash. "It's how historians keep themselves employed."

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