



*How a*  
**NEW GENERATION**  
*of Conservatives*  
**CAN SAVE**  
*the* **REPUBLICAN**  
**PARTY**

**Margaret Hoover**

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# AMERICAN INDIVIDUALISM

**How a New Generation of  
Conservatives Can Save the  
REPUBLICAN PARTY**

Margaret Hoover



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*For my husband, John Avlon,  
the love of my life*

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## INTRODUCTION

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This book has its origins in a lightning-strike moment I experienced during the presidential campaign of 2004. At the time I was just another bubbly young junior staffer, still savoring my good fortune at having secured a position with the Bush-Cheney 2004 reelection campaign. I bounded through the halls of the redbrick office building in Arlington, Virginia that housed President George W. Bush's campaign headquarters. After a morning staff meeting, I decided to swing by my office-mate's desk, tucked in a corner facing south toward the Potomac River, with a clear view of Georgetown and the rest of Washington, D.C. She was a coordinator in the political department, and that morning she seemed troubled.

"Look," she said, pointing to supporting documents that spelled out what became known as the anti-same-sex-marriage strategy.

The regional political directors of President Bush's campaign had been tasked with ensuring that battleground states sponsored ballot initiatives defining marriage exclusively as a union of one man and one woman, thus prohibiting same-sex marriage. As an additional measure to boost political enthusiasm, President Bush would ask Congress to pass an amendment to the Constitution that would federally define all marriages as being between a man and a woman. President Bush's plan was to campaign in these battleground states in support of the Federal Marriage Amendment, in a joint effort with statewide candidates to energize social conservatives, who, it was feared, might otherwise not come out to vote. While they were at the voting booth casting a ballot against same-sex marriage, the thinking went, they would also pull the lever for candidate George W. Bush, the man for whom I worked.

That moment remains vivid in my memory. After an instant of confusion, I felt a wave of disappointment crash over me. A series of questions raced through my mind: Why on earth did the campaign care about defining marriage as being between a man and a woman? Did President Bush really believe it was important to make laws that discriminate against gay men and lesbians? Was this strategy necessary to ensure the president's reelection? Did President Bush think that mobilizing people against gay rights was a good thing? I looked up from the papers on my office-mate's desk and stared out through the window over the treetops toward the nation's capital, feeling sick to my stomach.

That was my Ms.-Hoover-Goes-to-Washington moment. I suddenly realized as never before that the Republican Party—*my* party—was falling seriously out of step with a rising generation of Americans. These up-and-coming young voters value the ideal of individual freedom when it comes to gay rights, as they value some degree of reproductive freedom. And they do not support conservative activists' hard-line positions on immigration and environmentalism. It was on these questions, I felt, that the Republican Party was turning young voters away. In the years since 2004, the problem has only worsened. Unless the party can connect with a younger generation and, at the same time, offer solutions to meet the challenges of modern America, it is destined to remain at best a minority party—or worse, to fade into irrelevance. That would be tragic, because a modern brand of American conservatism is more urgently needed now than ever before.

Today, the United States faces a daunting array of challenges that threaten to imperil the

American dream. Skyrocketing deficits and debt that amount to generational theft are staking a claim to the future prosperity of the youngest Americans. Our economy has lost its vibrancy, a quality that is increasingly associated with our less democratic trading partners and foreign markets. America's status as a world leader has diminished at a time when the world's most volatile region, the Middle East, is in a state of upheaval and the threat of Islamic supremacy looms. A failure to reconcile our twin needs for secure borders and new immigrants has led us into a protracted and divisive immigration crisis. Our schools, rather than facilitating equality of opportunity, increasingly constrict the upward mobility of young people. America's challenges all have one thing in common: They will likely be with us for a long time, and the next generation of Americans will have to solve them, or face America's decline.

I believe that the next generation of Americans—the first to come of age in the new millennium—understands our situation well. The “millennials,” born roughly between the years 1980 and 1999, perceive our political system at an impasse. They fear that as a nation we are incapable of addressing our problems. From every corner, they hear exhausted ideological rhetoric and see political gamesmanship at the expense of practical solutions.

Millennials thought they had found a candidate to break through the rhetorical division and excuses for inaction when they voted overwhelmingly for Barack Obama in 2008. They believed they were electing a man who, as he had promised, would bring change to Washington. His rhetoric spoke to their desire to move beyond the partisan divide of red states and blue states, to unify the country in order to solve problems. They have been disappointed.

As a result, millennials have yet to solidly commit to a political party. As a group, they are confident, open to change, globally oriented, techno-savvy, hyperconnected, and 50 million strong. By political orientation, the largest bloc are Independents, followed by Democrats with Republicans a distant third. Though likely to call themselves liberal, millennials are not proponents of the big-government orthodoxy of modern liberalism. And yet, they are *socially liberal*, adhering to the least traditional views of family, homosexuality, and gender roles. In this sense, they are passionate about expanding individual freedom. They also have idealistic expectations about what government can and should do, and are optimistic about the competence of their elected leaders.

Yet the millennials also demonstrate decidedly conservative tendencies, even though relatively few call themselves Republicans. They show signs of fiscal conservatism and cherish individual freedom, self-expression, and the ability to choose their own way in life. They have favorable attitudes toward business and individual entrepreneurship and are less likely than their parents to say that the government should take on more debt in order to help those in need.

Some might call them “fiscally conservative but socially liberal.” They are ripe for a political party to come along and make the case for maximum freedom, fiscal responsibility, equality of opportunity, social mobility, individual responsibility, and service to community and country. They are likely to frustrate the ambitions of old-line political purists, because they do not fit neatly into the traditional partisan or ideological boxes.

Neither party, in my view, has secured a connection with millennial sensibilities. While Barack Obama succeeded in appealing to them in the 2008 election campaign, his party failed

to do so during the 2010 midterms. Republicans, meanwhile, have never managed to connect. Nor have they seriously tried. That's the purpose of this book: to make the case to millennials that they should give the Republican Party a fair hearing and to make the case to my fellow Republicans that millennials are not a lost cause.

Republicans have generated some of the best ideas for tackling the most pressing problems facing millennials—the debt and the deficit, education reform, immigration reform, market-based health-care reform, and practical approaches to environmental conservation. And when it comes to protecting individual freedom, the Republican Party has always prided itself on taking the lead.

But let's face facts: The Republican Party's brand is damaged. The perception that the Religious Right and *social* conservatives dominate the party apparatus is part of what has caused millennials to tune us out. Increasingly disconcerted by this widening gap between the perception of the Republican Party and the expectations of millennials, I undertook a journey in search of a fresh way for my party to appeal to the millennial generation.

I arrived at my destination with the help of an unexpected source: the writings of my great-grandfather, President Herbert Hoover, the thirty-first president of the United States. Growing up a Hoover, I had plenty of insults thrown my way simply on account of my family name. When you're related to one of the great mythical villains of American political history, you grow up constantly on the defensive. My friends' parents, my teachers in grade school and high school, my professors in college—they all pilloried my great-grandfather's presidency, indeed his entire career, as a failure of the highest order.

I won't say that this didn't cost a few tears or leave me without emotional scars, but being a direct descendant of Herbert Hoover has given me a special connection to an extraordinary individual. I never met my great-grandfather, but through family stories and my own exploration of the historical record, I learned about his orphan childhood, his success as a mining engineer, his globe-trotting years in business as a self-made millionaire before the age of forty, and his unprecedented achievement in building up nongovernmental organizations. Herbert Hoover was responsible for saving more lives from hunger and disease than anyone who has ever lived. His career as the most effective secretary of commerce in our nation's history and his efforts to build a public-private coalition to provide power to the nation's western states led to one of the most successful infrastructure projects in history: the Hoover Dam.

Herbert Hoover was millennial in spirit long before the term came into existence. He was like the Bill Gates or Mark Zuckerberg of his day—an innovator who believed in practical solutions, who dedicated his material and intellectual wealth to the service of the world, who believed in a philosophy encapsulated in the title of a little book he published, “American Individualism.”\*

I discovered this modest work, published in 1922, and was struck by its immediacy. It seemed it could have been written just yesterday, so contemporary were its themes. Largely overlooked by historians who hold forth on my great-grandfather's presidency, it is a powerful document: a broad and forceful statement of political philosophy and an extended essay on the relationship between the individual and the state. What I found most extraordinary was the relevance of its message and how it made the case for moderate conservative thinking in an original way. Its author never refers to himself as



“conservative,” yet he offers a compelling explanation for the vital importance of limited but *energetic* government in America’s democratic system. His book celebrates America’s diversity of religious traditions and heritages. It emphasizes the individual’s responsibility to serve his or her community. It presents what modern-day conservatives would appreciate as a fundamentally individual-centered view of society, and it defends that view in a refreshing and convincing manner. The influential American historian Frederick Jackson Turner said it “contains the New and Old Testament of the American gospel.”

That earlier booklet inspired me to write this book. This is a moment when modern conservatism needs to be fresh and convincing. It has lately become deeply nostalgic for the Reagan years, which makes sense, as Reagan was the last conservative leader to enjoy broad political support. He was also the last leader to unite the various tribes of the conservative nation—the neocons, paleocons, social conservatives, fiscal conservatives, and libertarians. Conservatism has always been tribal, but in the absence of a charismatic leader, it has become a contentious and self-cannibalizing movement. And within the conservative nation are plenty of tribal warlords who devote their energies to eliminating rivals who they think aren’t conservative enough. It’s hardly the description of a political movement ready to lead America forward.

American individualism is not only a philosophy that can appeal to the millennial generation, but a prescription for how the conservative movement and the Republican Party can rise above their internecine feuding. By invoking the principles of American individualism, we have a template for addressing the challenges of the twenty-first century in a way that can make modern conservatism relevant for the rising generation.

I recognize that in writing this book, I am taking some risks. Anytime someone writes anything about an entire generation, they risk overgeneralization—and usually commit it. At the outset, let me say that millennials are like every other generation in certain respects. They are for one thing a diverse group. Just as baby boomers were not all wild-eyed, drugged-out attendees at Woodstock, neither are all millennials the hyper-texting Obamaites they are often made out to be. That said, those who study generational shifts in America can describe demographic groups by their shared experiences, by the historical context of their formative childhood years, and perhaps more important, by their outlook, as measured by opinion polls. In these ways, millennials are indeed different from those who came before them, and they do have certain features in common, by and large.

Experts will tell you that generational dividing lines are never carved in stone, that there is an arbitrariness to any generational divide. As someone born on the cusp of Gen X and the millennial generation, I share sensibilities of both but don’t entirely identify with either. That makes my position advantageous, as an observer who can translate from one group to another and help bridge the divide between an older generation of Republicans and what I hope will become a new one.

This book is the culmination of that quest I undertook in search of a Republican-rooted philosophy that can appeal to a broad section of Americans, especially millennials. That major source of my inspiration proved to be a work written nearly a century ago might be surprising. But millennials might also be surprised to discover fresh thinking and new ideas within the Republican Party, and in these sources find the hope and change they are looking for.

\*For those of you interested in reading Herbert Hoover's "American Individualism" in its entirety, I've posted it on my website, [margarethoover.com](http://margarethoover.com).

### GROWING UP HOOVER

*“You have to do your own growing, no matter how tall your grandfather was.”*

—IRISH PROVERB

**T**HIS PAST CHRISTMAS I read a letter from my great-grandmother to my grandfather written on White House stationery. It was September 1931 and the envelope was addressed simply: “Allan Hoover, Stanford University.” The nation’s capital had awoken to a morning thunderstorm, she reported. In Europe, the banks and financial markets were in disarray. Here in America, investors were panicking, borrowers were in default or imminent danger of default, increasing numbers of loans once considered solid were becoming worthless, and American companies could not find the capital to stay in business. America’s economy—the global economy, in fact—was grinding to a halt due to factors and forces that no economist had ever before witnessed. And my great-grandfather, the president of the United States, was trying to manage it all. This letter, from mother to son, cast the historical moment in personal terms: “He certainly has had his hand on the tiller in a hard storm and one still wonders what is going to happen next.”

In most American families, the personal and the political rarely overlap so completely. Notes from mothers to sons are not typically written on White House stationery. After all, there have been only forty-four presidents. And as a direct descendant of one of them, I have been extraordinarily privileged to hear stories about how history was made from those who were in the room. I have read, and held in my hands, many letters like the one above detailing the inner thoughts of the people who were confronted with the greatest challenge of our nation’s economic history.

And yet this privilege has come with a great cost. To be a direct descendant of Herbert Hoover is to inherit the full weight of history’s disapproval. My eighth-grade textbook blamed my great-grandfather for everything from Black Tuesday’s stock market crash in October 1929 to the 25 percent unemployment rates and breadlines that followed in the Great Depression. Countless history books have detailed “Hoovervilles,” the cardboard shelters of the homeless; “Hoover hogs,” edible armadillos; “Hoover flags,” penniless pockets turned inside out; and “Hoover blankets,” newspapers repurposed for outdoor sleeping. Hoover’s name was so synonymous with hard times that the midwestern drought that led to the dust storms and failed harvests of the Dust Bowl somehow seemed to have been his fault.

We Hoovers have been in a defensive crouch for eight decades. Today, people say that our political culture has become coarse, uncivil, and even violent. But after Franklin Roosevelt defeated my great-grandfather for the presidency in 1932, my family bore the psychological

scars for decades. I remember talking to my grandmother about what it was like in the 1930s when Hoover was in the political wilderness and Roosevelt had captured the nation's heart. She reminisced next to a photo of her father-in-law, "the Chief," smiling and smoking his favorite pipe at the Bohemian Grove. She spoke of his kindness and intelligence—and of the millions of dollars that the Democratic National Committee spent to destroy his reputation. The worst part about the attacks was that they worked. Roosevelt did not just win an election: he won the approval of history. Now my great American ancestor gets invoked every time a politician wants to score easy points by calling an opponent the "worst president since Herbert Hoover."

When my father was growing up in the 1950s, the Depression was still fresh in American minds. My dad's experience was searing, as he was forced to defend himself in fistfights on school playgrounds. "Your granddad caused the Depression!"—*whack!* Compared with that, I had it easy. By the early 1990s, when I was in school, I found that just the mention of my family name could still evoke negative feelings among some of my friends' parents, especially the committed Democrats. They didn't even try to hide their disapproval when it came to my political heritage.

I suppose some children might have tried to distance themselves from the family name. Some presidential descendants do exactly that in an attempt to wriggle out from under the shadow of history. But I knew about another Herbert Hoover. I knew from my grandparents about the private man, about his indomitable will, his surprising wit, and his capacity to put ideas into action. I knew that he was from modest means and had been orphaned at a young age, and that despite this background, he grew up to become one of the wealthiest self-made men in the world. I knew that before he was president, he was regarded as one of the leading lights of his generation. I knew he had risked his fortune in order to save Belgium from starvation during the First World War. I knew he had helped organize a massive effort to feed the people of Central and Eastern Europe after the war. I knew he was called "the master of emergencies," was considered a pioneer of international nongovernmental organizations, and was a man known to his contemporaries as the Great Engineer and the Great Humanitarian. And he achieved all that before the age of forty-five!

As a teenager, I could see that the world perceived Herbert Hoover as a cartoon villain. And like any teenager aroused to defend the defenseless, I thought it profoundly unjust. Sure, I had a distinct interest in seeing his name redeemed, but I also felt something deeper: the determination to help set history's record straight.

But to defend him, I had to learn far more about Herbert Hoover's life and times. I would have to peel back the layers of conventional wisdom that often obscure complex events. I would have to question those who offered a simplified explanation for a decade of economic upheaval. I also would have to rein in my instinct for defending the family name at all costs. I knew that I would have to forget at times that my last name was Hoover, and just see where the facts led me.

As it turns out, this quest ended up changing me profoundly. I learned not to blindly trust what others proclaimed to be historically true, because even the best scholars make errors, and all "intellectuals" have their own biases. I learned not only that history is often written to serve the interests of the winners, but also to explain everything that follows in a coherent narrative—even when the facts are as elusive, ambiguous, and difficult to interpret as the

were for the people living through them and looking for clarity at the time.

The advantage I had is that I started my work from a position of absolute skepticism about the conventional wisdom. I began to think independently. I discovered early on that anyone could be wrong in her or his assumptions. I learned to distrust groupthink and ideological orthodoxy. I saw how even self-described critics of our society—feminists at the women's college I attended, avowed Marxists in the Latin American Studies programs where I was enrolled—were often incurable go-along-to-get-along types who would never dare challenge their own ideological conventions. These were conformists parading around as nonconformists; they all dressed in the same clothes, read the same books, knew the same people, and voted for the same politicians.

And I learned something else: The more I pressed and the more I questioned, the more I liked uncovering the fuller, forgotten truth. It became infectious—a habit of mind that began to turn to other parts of my life. I didn't just go along to get along. I was my own person. And that turned out to be the greatest gift my great-grandfather bestowed upon me across the generations: the courage to think independently.



I began my quest by reading the works of others: historians such as George H. Nash, Eugene Lyons, Richard Norton Smith, and great writers like William F. Buckley Jr. They had looked more seriously at Hoover's life and presidency, and they had discovered a picture far different from the one often presented by the traditional historical narrative. The picture of Hoover that emerged was of an organizational wunderkind, an extraordinary American whose life story had contemporary resonance. There is an abundance of objective information that can be used to vindicate his legacy. Enough time has passed that it is now possible to view Herbert Hoover through a nonpartisan lens as an American original.

Hoover's path was hardly easy. Unlike his contemporaries among the Eastern elite, he was born with no material advantages. He was the second son of an Iowa frontier blacksmith who died of a heart attack when young "Bertie" was six years old. Three years later typhoid fever took his mother, an outspoken Quaker minister, and the orphaned boy was separated from his siblings and sent to live with an eccentric uncle in Newberg, Oregon. In 1891, at age seventeen, he demonstrated sufficient character and promise to be admitted to the first class of Stanford University, which became his spiritual home. The rest of his life was shaped by his years at Stanford. He graduated with a degree in geology, a field valuable to some of the fastest-growing global industries of that day. It was there that he met his future wife, Lou Henry, who became Stanford's first woman to graduate with a degree in geology.

After Stanford, Hoover got his start on the lowest rung of the mining industry, pushing a ore cart in California mines, earning two dollars a week working ten-hour night shifts. He graduated to an office job as an assistant to a prominent mining engineer who then recommended him to an English firm that hired him to explore undeveloped mines in western Australia for possible investment. Good fortune shone upon him: Hoover recommended a site for a mine that turned into one of the largest gold veins in western Australia, and it remained active for more than six decades.

At age twenty-four, at the close of the nineteenth century, Hoover was a true global citizen. After Bert cabled a marriage proposal to Lou Henry from Australia, the couple wed.

Monterey, California, and the next day set sail for China, where Hoover established new coal mines for his firm. There the newlyweds had front-row seats at one of the watershed events that ushered in the twentieth century: the Boxer Rebellion. My great-grandmother sweetened bullets from her porch each morning and passed the days avoiding artillery fire and studying Mandarin Chinese, adopting the character “Hu” as her name, which became my Chinese name when I studied Mandarin in Beijing one hundred years later. Trapped in the final encampment of foreigners in China, protected from thousands of Boxers by just two thousand Russian and British soldiers, Bert organized food supplies and Lou tended to the wounded. Tianjin was relieved by an international force in July of 1900, and the Hoovers escaped to England in a German mail boat. My great-grandmother kept amazing notes detailing her time in China in a journal her father had given her as a wedding present. She had a pioneering spirit to match her husband’s.

Herbert Hoover referred fondly to his life prior to America’s entrance into the First World War as his “years of adventure.” This was no exaggeration. By the time he was in his late twenties, he had circumnavigated the globe five times by steamship, overseen mining operations on virtually every continent, and barely escaped the political upheaval that marked the end of colonial empires in China.

Hoover was put in charge of building and managing mines on every continent except Antarctica. He was like one of the tech tycoons of our age—by the time he was twenty-eight he was the highest paid person in the world under the age of thirty, according to the *San Francisco Chronicle*, which reported his annual salary as \$33,000 (equivalent to more than \$850,000 in 2010). Later, at the height of his career as an international businessman, he employed more than 100,000 people on four continents.

But Hoover’s run of business success was halted by the outbreak of world war, after Germany invaded Belgium and France in 1914. With as many as nine million French and Belgian citizens in imminent danger of starvation, Hoover was asked by the American ambassador in London to organize what would become the first-ever international republic of relief, the Commission for Relief in Belgium (CRB). Hoover oversaw an effort to deliver food relief to these millions, and thanks to his success he became an international hero. Operating under its own flag, and with a monthly budget of \$12 million supplied by voluntary donations and government grants, the CRB enjoyed a support system that included navies, ships, factories, mills, and railroads. The CRB was managed so efficiently that after the war Hoover was able to draw on its surplus operating funds and transform them into a scholarship fund to enable Belgian and American exchange students and scholars to pursue advanced degrees in the partner country. Since that time, the Belgian American Educational Foundation (BAEF) has provided more than three thousand Belgians and nine hundred Americans with the opportunity to spend a period of advanced study in the United States and Belgium. The ninety-year-old BAEF both commemorates and perpetuates the special Belgian-American friendship launched by Herbert Hoover.

After the United States entered the war, President Woodrow Wilson appointed him food administrator, in charge of managing the country’s, and the army’s, food supply. After the war he became, in essence, the food administrator for the world, as he oversaw the distribution of food relief to more than twenty countries throughout Europe and the Near East. In 1921 he led a successful campaign to combat a catastrophic famine in Soviet Russia.

Hoover despised the system of Soviet Communism but insisted, “Twenty million are starving. Whatever their politics, they shall be fed!” and managed to secure a \$20 million grant from the U.S. Congress for Russian food relief. PBS recently documented this heroic undertaking in the American Experience film *The Great Famine*, which tells the story of how Hoover-led relief saved the lives of many millions, and how the Soviet regime later thoroughly erased the episode from Russia’s history books. It was the first case of massive humanitarian aid being delivered to the population of an ideologically hostile government.

Seventy years later, I had the privilege of meeting one of those men whose lives he helped save. He was an eighty-year-old Russian man, who had seven decades earlier walked ten miles daily to a food distribution point for condensed milk and “Hoover rolls.” He wept as he grasped my young hand. My brother and I stammered, and tried to tell him how grateful we were for his thanks. But the truth is, we felt so unworthy of his thanks and were humbled to be related to a man whose compassion and resourcefulness had saved this man’s life, and the lives of millions of others like him. Through this old man’s still-thick Russian accent, he told us how his entire outlook on life had been transformed by the example of Herbert Hoover’s generosity. He decided to come to America, believing that a country that fed its enemies must be great. He went on to become an inventor and developed a substance that was used to remove static from the Space Shuttle’s surfaces. With a wink, he informed me that if you rubbed a golf ball with it before teeing off, it would fly fifty yards farther than normal. I was thirteen at the time, and since then I have often contemplated how radically different this man’s life would have turned out without the intervention of Herbert Hoover.

This man was hardly alone. According to Hoover’s biographer, George Nash, Hoover was directly responsible for saving the lives of as many as one-third of Europe’s population during and immediately after World War I.

Here was someone who could have devoted himself completely to making money. Instead, he spent years trying to rescue millions from hunger and starvation, making an emphatic decision to “let the fortune go to hell.” That impulse—to use one’s skills for as elevated a purpose as possible—reminds me of the values cherished by many of my friends in the twenties and thirties today, millennials with a commitment to public service. Like Bill Gates, who stepped down as the head of Microsoft in order to pursue worldwide philanthropy, Hoover decided to become an international activist in order to advance the greater well-being of mankind. He was an enormously successful businessman who believed that the best way to build on his success was to serve society as a whole.

As a Quaker with pacifist instincts, Hoover found himself profoundly impacted by his experience as a witness to the human suffering and “rivers of blood” caused by European wartime carnage and revolutionary aftermath. He was also influenced, during the First World War, by the autobiography of Andrew White. White, the first president of Cornell University, was also a historian and diplomat whose personal collection of artifacts and documents relating to the French Revolution greatly contributed to posterity’s understanding of this watershed event. Reading White’s autobiography, Hoover realized that he himself was in a position to collect artifacts and documents relating to the tumultuous military, political, and economic events unfolding all around him. While overseeing postwar food relief efforts throughout Europe, he began to organize the collection of such materials, and in 1919 he made a gift of \$50,000 to Stanford University to house what began as the Hoover War

History Collection and would become the world's largest private repository of documents relating to twentieth-century political history. The Hoover Institution on War, Revolution and Peace, as it is known today, is my great-grandfather's proudest legacy. It remains dedicated to its original purpose. The Hoover Institution's mission, as Hoover stated it in 1959, is "from its records, to recall the voice of experience against the making of war, and by the study of these records and their publication, to recall man's endeavors to make and preserve peace, and to sustain for America the safeguards of the American way of life."

Hoover returned home a hero after the war, one of the best-known men in America. After serving in Woodrow Wilson's Democratic administration, he was encouraged to run for president by people in both parties, including one young assistant secretary of the Navy named Franklin Roosevelt, who wanted him to run as a Democrat. Instead, after the 1920 election, Republican president Warren Harding made him commerce secretary. Harding's successor, Calvin Coolidge, called him "Wonder Boy." A newspaper cartoonist joked that his title was "Secretary of Commerce and Under-Secretary of Everything Else."

Hoover was not a man brought up in politics and patronage. As secretary of commerce, he took no interest or pleasure in settling scores or carving out special deals for political allies. Instead, he set out to solve some of the basic problems of a modern industrial economy. We take for granted that businesses will compete on a level playing field. We assume that every electrical appliance will use the same AC/DC current and that most products will be sized using the same standard. But in Hoover's day, that wasn't the case. So he aimed to bring order out of chaos.

In his role as commerce secretary, he sought to turn the federal government into a kind of referee for the free market. Ever wonder why you purchase eggs by the dozen? Or why bricks are all  $3\frac{5}{8}$  X  $2\frac{1}{4}$  X 8 inches? Or why milk is pasteurized and sold in quarts and gallons? Why tires for automobiles are of standard sizes, or why traffic lights and highway safety standards don't vary from state to state? All these standardizations occurred because Hoover believed the government could make industry more efficient. He didn't believe in forcing industries into compliance through legislative action, but instead initiated hundreds of conferences and meetings to build consensus about the best path forward. He focused on how voluntary cooperation between industry and government, driven by common goals, could improve industry's performance.

Hoover recognized that government has an important role to play. He championed efforts to significantly reduce the incidence of child labor. He pushed to eliminate the seven-day workweek in the steel industry. Both efforts succeeded not because Hoover jammed the legislation down the throats of businesses, but because he used conferences, studies, and public exposure to show industries how they could benefit from improving efficiency through standardization. For example, he encouraged the home construction industry to standardize their key building materials. The result was a significant decrease in the cost of building a home, making home ownership more affordable for Americans of modest means, and thus increasing the overall size of the home construction market.

In his work, Hoover drew on a diversity of thinking and ideas. He wanted the government to be a *catalyst* for solutions, not a designer of them. He delighted in the search for fresh approaches that emerge from genuine collaboration. Eight decades later, this approach to problem solving is the same one preferred by members of the millennial generation.



Hoover was also a believer in the power of technology. He recognized the capacity of radio to transform communications, and was the first person ever to appear via television transmission (in 1927!). He anticipated the future of air travel, and the first airfield in the Washington, D.C., area was called Hoover Field in recognition of his role in establishing aviation standards.

When his governing philosophy emerged, it was different from what had prevailed in the Harding and Coolidge administrations: laissez-faire policies that he scornfully regarded as “every man for himself and the devil take the hindmost.” He saw a vigorous—but limited—role for government to play, establishing the rules of the road: helping to ensure a fair framework of equal opportunity within which people would be free to live their lives to the best of their abilities.

In 1922, he articulated his philosophy in a commencement address that he never delivered but which was published as a small book called “American Individualism.” It was a statement of his beliefs and a defense of the American system at a time when ideologies like communism and fascism had begun to challenge old-world assumptions. At the time of its publication, the *New York Times Book Review* wrote that it was “among the few great formulations of American political theory” and Fredrick Jackson Turner wrote that “it contains the New and the Old Testament of the American gospel.” “American Individualism” not only offered a sketch of Hoover’s political philosophy. It suggested a path forward for America, one that remains relevant enough today to have animated my own thinking on the subject—and to have inspired the title of this book.

In the spring of 1927, Hoover was again called on to oversee humanitarian relief, this time in the American heartland, when the Mississippi River flooded well beyond its banks. The Great Mississippi River Flood of 1927 was the Hurricane Katrina of the 1920s: it displaced more than one and a half million Americans, destroyed two million acres of crops, and killed thousands of cattle and other livestock. Hoover left Washington and went to the Midwest to coordinate with local governments to build tent cities complete with beds, electricity, running water, hospitals, and kitchens. He managed to have these facilities in place by the time the floodwaters had crested.

Hoover did all this without federal dollars, choosing instead to raise private funds for the relief efforts. The fund-raising drive succeeded, bringing in \$25 million in donations and low-interest loans, all of which were repaid. Later, in his memoirs, he remarked about the rescue efforts that “those were the days when citizens expected to take care of one another in times of disaster and it had not occurred to them that the Federal Government should do it.”

Hoover’s heroic coordination of the Mississippi River flood relief catapulted him to new heights in American politics. The chorus at the 1928 Republican National Convention was “Who but Hoover?”

Toward the end of his triumphant 1928 campaign for president, Hoover gave a speech that summed up his Republican Party’s philosophy. He called it “Rugged Individualism.” It is a speech that is still cited today—and it was in many ways a campaign-style distillation of the ideas expressed in “American Individualism” six years earlier.

“The American system,” Hoover said, “is founded upon the conception that only through ordered liberty, freedom, and equal opportunity to the individual will his initiative and enterprise spur on the march of progress. And in our insistence upon equality of opportunity

has our system advanced beyond all the world.”

Hoover saw the 1928 presidential election, and the differences between the Republican and Democratic parties, as a “choice between the American system of rugged individualism and European philosophy of diametrically opposed doctrines—doctrines of paternalism and state socialism.... Every step of bureaucratizing of the business of our country poisons the very roots of liberalism—[namely] political equality, free speech, free assembly, free press, and equality of opportunity. It is not the road to more liberty, but to less liberty.”

The “Rugged Individualism” speech endures, as do the underlying differences between the Republican and Democratic parties. On the one hand, a focus on the individual and the free market, and on the other hand an emphasis on government intervention into private industry by means of regulation and bureaucratization—a contrast highlighted in our current political debates and at Tea Party rallies. The choice remains between an American model and a European model of governance, and the long-term stakes remain the same: the road to liberty or the road to serfdom.

Hoover won the presidency by the largest landslide in American history, capturing almost 60 percent of the popular vote, the only civilian to have ascended to the presidency without previously holding elective office.

But his run of good fortune and success soon ended. Seven months after he assumed office in 1929, the stock market crashed, triggering a series of events that led to the Great Depression. Hoover hardly sat on his hands in the wake of the sudden decline in the economy—instead he set to work launching or accelerating public works efforts. He proposed to Congress a \$160 million tax cut along with a doubling of outlays for public buildings and dams, highways and harbors. By the spring of 1930, Hoover’s response to the crisis had received widespread acclaim, as the *New York Times* editorialized: “No one in his place could have done more.... Very few of his predecessors could have done as much.”

But it was not enough. The collapse of foreign banks and international trade along with persistent drought conditions in the Midwest drove unemployment up from five million to more than eleven million by 1931. The economy would not recover for more than another decade.

Circumstances beyond Hoover’s control greatly complicated his efforts to revive the economy, and there was one area where my great-grandfather was truly at a disadvantage. He was trying to cope with a global depression in a modern industrial economy without the benefit of some of the core theories of modern economics. Most major theories of macroeconomics were developed, in fact, by studying what happened during the Great Depression. John Maynard Keynes, Friedrich von Hayek, Milton Friedman, and other prominent economists emerged from that period with critical theories about monetary and fiscal policy, trade, and the interrelationship of taxes and the economy as well as the value of countercyclical policies. But none of this expertise was available to Hoover in 1930.

Not surprisingly, he made some mistakes. He signed the Smoot-Hawley legislation that increased U.S. tariffs on imported goods, contributing to a global decline in trade (although this affected only 4.2 percent of the U.S. economy, so its impact, it has been argued, has been overstated by later economists). He pressed employers to maintain wages, which made it harder for employers to hire workers. And he cooperated with Congress to balance the budget with the expiration of Coolidge-era tax cuts in 1932, which resulted in the largest tax

increase in history. The fact is, a modern-day conservative would find none of these mistakes easy to explain, let alone defend. But in each of these cases, he was responding to political pressures without the ability to gauge how his actions might affect the economy, and his actions were certainly less radical than those he was urged to adopt by his political rivals or those later pursued by his successor. In our current debates, the *context* for Hoover's decision making has been entirely lost.

I believe that the most effective defense of Hoover is not just that he did better than anyone could have, but that his successor did no better. Roosevelt's administration enacted dozens of laws, in the process creating an alphabet soup of agencies to attend to almost every aspect of American life and transforming the relationship between government and the individual. But Roosevelt's economic record was no better than Hoover's. The little-known truth is that the American economy actually *worsened* during Roosevelt's second term, and did not begin to recover until the Second World War jump-started industry. Yet, somehow Hoover still gets all the blame.

Roosevelt did succeed in one important respect: he *appeared* to care more than his predecessor. Politics is perception, and this image of FDR was a direct outgrowth of his well-oiled political machine. During the 1932 campaign, Charles Michelson and the Democratic National Committee were armed with a million-dollar budget to organize a smear operation to destroy Hoover's reputation. Michelson was the hyperpartisan hack who coined the term "Hooverilles" and continually attacked Hoover as an uncaring, do-nothing, apathetic leader who ignored the hardships suffered by "the little man." Historian Thomas Fleming characterizes Michelson's attacks as a series of "atrocious assaults on President Hoover, portraying him as a vicious egotist who had self-promoted his greatest living American title out of raw ambition for power." Nothing could have been further from the truth, and the smear campaign drove my great-grandmother to write long letters to her children for posterity detailing how deeply her husband did indeed care for "the little man."

During the Bonus Marches of 1932, when World War I veterans marched on Washington demanding their war bonuses early (which Congress categorically denied), twenty thousand men were camping out at the Anacostia Flats in Washington, D.C. Hoover secretly arranged for tents, food, and water; yet unlike today's politicians, he took no credit for this effort. Brought up in the Quaker tradition, he did not believe that glory should follow those who do good works. In this case, he didn't have to worry.

After his defeat in the 1932 election, Hoover retreated to his Palo Alto home (now occupied by the president of Stanford University). Unlike most ex-presidents up to that point, he remained active in public policy. Yet the bitter partisanship of the 1932 campaign did not let up. Immediately following his swearing-in ceremony, FDR personally rescinded Herbert Hoover's Secret Service detail. As William F. Buckley Jr. wrote, "Mr. Hoover went away unguarded, discredited, unloved." Harold Ickes, secretary of the interior, changed the name of one of Hoover's greatest achievements, the Colorado River Project, from Hoover Dam to Boulder Dam when it was dedicated in 1936, an injustice so petty and grotesque that Harry Truman corrected it upon assuming the presidency after Roosevelt's death.

Within one month of entering the Oval Office, Harry Truman summoned Herbert Hoover from the shadows and into the White House, rekindling his career in public service. Truman dispatched Hoover to Europe on a thirty-eight-nation tour to oversee food relief in the wake

of the Second World War, thereby empowering him to reprise the role he had played so effectively three decades earlier. In 1947, Truman established the first of two “Hoover Commissions,” each helmed by my great-grandfather and dedicated to streamlining the postwar executive branch and improving government efficiency. The two presidential bipartisan friendship inaugurated an extended period of energetic activity during which Hoover wrote a dozen books and became a much sought-after counsel for political leaders of both parties, a performance that shaped the modern postpresidency.

And so Hoover turned the page to a new chapter in his life. No longer the mining engineer, the relief organizer, the cabinet officer, or even the president, Hoover became, in the words of historian Richard Norton Smith, “a philosopher of modern conservative thought.” He had begun to play this role with the publication of “American Individualism” in 1922.

Hoover had seen firsthand Europe’s experiments with socialism and Bolshevism and the rise of fascism, and he felt he ought to affirm why America must resist the temptation to follow those paths. He believed fundamentally that America’s greatness lay in the individual using God-given talents and working with others, as the essential building block of society. He believed in America’s inherent dynamism—that the absence of old-world social castes in the United States, which allowed an individual to rise from extreme poverty to fabulous wealth within a lifetime, was a unique gift to Americans. He believed that the nation’s diversity of faiths was a strength, endowing it with a richness of spiritual traditions, heritages, and beliefs from which it could continue to draw inspiration and new energy. He believed that America’s record of welcoming new cultures and initiating new traditions set it apart. He believed that our civic tradition of volunteerism was the backbone of every community and could not be matched by centralized government action. At the core of his philosophy was the profound belief that the individual was the engine driving it all. And ten years later, he had a stark philosophical counterpoint in Roosevelt’s policies.

In 1934, spurred by his alarm at where Roosevelt was taking the country, Hoover wrote a direct rebuke of the New Deal in a book called *The Challenge to Liberty*. He saw in the New Deal a dramatic expansion of the federal government’s role in the life of the individual. He saw this as a dangerous encroachment that would “cripple or abandon the heritage of liberty for some new philosophy which must mark the passing of freedom.”

Hoover understood that promises extended by the government come with a cost. With every promise to ease the pain of loss comes the price to be paid by ordinary citizens. Once the government takes upon itself by force the role normally performed by the individual, he wrote, it becomes “the master of the man.” And indeed, Hoover cited several areas where the government had become the master: it devalued the currency and devalued existing debt; it forced collective bargaining on employers; it concentrated corporate power in oligopolies and trusts; it fixed prices; it levied taxes on food and clothing and other essentials; it began to engage in business activity that had always been reserved for the private sector, such as power generation; it told farmers what to grow and how much to grow; and it restricted the expansion of business in specific industries. And it did all this with the power to prosecute and jail individuals found in violation of the new rules.

This concentration of power alarmed Hoover. Unfortunately, his words did not persuade Americans to turn away from the New Deal. Far from it: during the eight years before the start of World War II, the federal government grew enormously. And once in place, the ne

bureaucracy began to generate its own reason for being. Inertia would set in; no argument, even one rooted deeply in constitutional principles of limited government, could defeat it. The legacy of Roosevelt is not the individual programs introduced under the New Deal, but the idea that the federal government should remain a permanent fixture in the life of the individual, from birth until death. It is the legacy that every Democratic president and even some Republican presidents have sought to enlarge upon.

In contrast to the top-down vision of the New Deal bureaucrats, my great-grandfather understood that the proper role of the government was to support the individual's pursuit of opportunity, not to guarantee a particular outcome. He saw the danger in allowing a powerful government to replace many of the essential institutions of civic life—churches, community organizations, families—thus depriving America of the diversity of solutions and ideas that had made it great. He helped lay the foundation for what has become one of the central tenets of modern conservative thinking: "The government that is powerful enough to give you everything you need is powerful enough to take it all away."



Vindicating Herbert Hoover's legacy is an uphill battle, because today Democrats are still running against my great-grandfather. Senator Joe Biden offered this remark during the 2008 presidential campaign: "I'm proud to say that we Democrats aren't experts at Herbert Hoover depression economics like John McCain and his pals. From Franklin Roosevelt to Bill Clinton, we just get elected to clean up the economic mess these Republicans leave behind." Senator Harry Reid had this to say about my great-grandfather: "For Herbert Hoover, I guess ignorance was bliss. It wasn't until the American people replaced this out-of-touch Republican president with a Democrat, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, that our nation's economic recovery began."

More disturbing, conservatives and Republicans have joined this chorus. In 2008, John McCain made history by becoming the first *Republican* nominee to run against Hoover, when he said, "My friends, the last president to raise taxes during tough economic times was Herbert Hoover, and he practiced protectionism as well ..." Mitt Romney piled on as recently as the 2011 Conservative Political Action Conference with "Obama's Hoovervilles," and even Rush Limbaugh has shamefully called our current president "Barack 'Hoover' Obama."

I happen to have an ongoing argument with pundit Glenn Beck, whom I have gotten to know a bit from our shared perch at Fox News over the past few years.

If you've watched Glenn Beck's television show during the past year, or listened to his radio program, you've been exposed to his crusade against progressivism. Beck has launched a movement to identify and expel progressives from government, and has framed it in a historical narrative that begins with Teddy Roosevelt's Bull Moose candidacy for president in 1912 and extends straight through to Barack Obama's White House. Beck has plopped Herbert Hoover into the middle of this narrative, mischaracterizing him as just another progressive.

I don't fault Beck for making this mistake once, or even twice. After all, Hoover did call himself an "independent progressive in the Republican tradition." He believed, for example, that children shouldn't work in factories, and that government had a responsibility to prevent child labor and unsafe working conditions. But does that make him a socialist? Not at all. Hoover was no progressive in the continuum from Woodrow Wilson to Franklin Delano

Roosevelt. He was instead FDR's most prominent and consistent philosophical opponent. He detailed his opposition to socialism, big government, and, later, the New Deal in successive essays and books. Glenn Beck completely overlooks this evidence, and although I have brought it to his attention, he continues to repeat his mistake. I suppose it's easier to hammer away at Herbert Hoover. But on this, Glenn Beck is worse than Joe Biden: he gets it wrong even when he knows better. Certainly the liberal image of Hoover as an uncaring and out-of-touch, do-nothing president was always wrong. But conservatives who dismiss Hoover out of embarrassment, ignorance, or a misplaced sense of principle are just as misguided.

There are signs, however, that the tide is finally beginning to turn. The financial crisis of 2008 and the unprecedented experiments in federal takeovers of banks and auto companies as well as the creation of penalties and taxes regulating the private health insurance market and now the federal effort to regulate carbon—all these measures have given conservatives as well as independents, a reason to reconsider their vilification of Hoover. They are taking a fresh look at the history and the economics of the Great Depression and the New Deal.

The columnist and political thinker Thomas Sowell writes that “what was widely believed then and later was that the stock market crash of 1929 was a failure of the free market and the cause of the massive unemployment that persisted for years during the 1930s. Given the two most striking features of that era—the stock market crash and a widespread government intervention in the economy—it is not immediately obvious which was more responsible for the dire economic conditions. But remarkably little effort has been made by most of the intelligentsia to try to sort out the cause or causes. It has been largely a foregone conclusion that the market was the cause and the government intervention was the saving grace.”

Amity Shlaes's 2006 bestseller, *The Forgotten Man: A New History of the Great Depression* inspired a wave of scholarship that has begun chipping away at the perception of FDR as the country's economic savior during the Great Depression. Other books, such as historian Burton Folsom Jr.'s 2008 *New Deal or Raw Deal: How FDR's Economic Legacy Has Damaged America* and the 2009 work by Robert Murphy, *The Politically Incorrect Guide to the Great Depression and the New Deal*, have challenged the predominant narrative that FDR's New Deal saved America from Herbert Hoover's Great Depression. In a *Wall Street Journal* article titled “Did FDR End the Depression?” Folsom answered in the negative: “It's a myth. FDR did not get us out of the Great Depression—not during the 1930s, and only in a limited sense during World War II.”

In the reevaluation of Herbert Hoover, Americans are becoming acquainted with his life and career prior to and after leaving the White House, when he made some of his most lasting achievements. Hoover's legacies are as diverse as the electrification of the new skyline of the Las Vegas Strip, the vast agricultural economy of California, the Hoover Institution's contributions to public policy, and the descendants of the millions of Europeans he saved from starvation. Those who fixate only on making money or winning elections will find it an unhappy existence much of the time. My great-grandfather understood this, and that's why he chose to dedicate his life to serving others.

He was always oriented toward the future. He was, after all, the first president born and raised west of the Mississippi River, which was still considered America's great frontier. It was there where he was laid to rest, on the sunrise side of a hill in the humble hamlet of West Branch, Iowa, overlooking the cottage in which he was born and his presidential library.

Hoover was a globalist and a technologist, and he understood America's rising position in the world. He believed that America could extend its power not just with arms, but also with assistance. Surely no nation in the history of the world had ever done so much to help civilians in other nations as America did under Hoover's guidance. And that is a tradition that continues to this day.

These are all values that I see as familiar, because they are the values of my generation. In some ways, Herbert Hoover can be considered a millennial in spirit: young at the turn of the century, aware of America's past but deeply committed to building its future. His greatest passion and highest calling was service to others, and he measured his life's successes not in dollars and votes but in results achieved. He lived a life that millennials today would embrace, and I believe he gave voice to their interests, and those of every generation committed to the ideals of American individualism.

### CONSERVATIVE TRIBALISM

*“The term conservatism has come to cover so wide a range of views, and views so incompatible with one another, that we shall no doubt see the growth of hyphenated designations, such as libertarian-conservative and aristocratic-conservative.”*

—MILTON FRIEDMAN, 1962

#### Which Tribe Do You Belong To?

Paleocons, neocons, lib-cons, enviro-cons, Crunchy Cons, so-cons, Religious-Right conservatives, traditionalist conservatives, southern conservatives, western conservative Goldwater conservatives, Tea Party conservatives—if you are somewhere right of center, which tribe do you belong to?

Growing up in Colorado, I was reared in the spirit of what my father described at my wedding as “western conservatism”: individualism tempered by responsibility for the community; a predilection for limited federal government, lower taxes, the entrepreneurial spirit, and individual initiative; and an appreciation for the idea of American exceptionalism. Or put more crassly, western conservatives are the ranchers who pump their shotguns before yelling, “Keep your government off my land and out of my bedroom.” That’s the tribe in which I was raised, and yes, my dad gave me my first shotgun when I was twelve.

But in my journey across the conservative universe—through America’s West Coast and East Coast conservative think tanks and its activist groups inside the Beltway and beyond—and as a result of my employment as a staffer on Capitol Hill, in political campaigns, and at the White House—I have discovered that Milton Friedman’s description of conservatism is especially apt: Conservatism is a nation of tribes, governed by warlords, spouting often incompatible and irreconcilable philosophies and principles.

Thirty years ago, Ronald Reagan was able to bring harmony to the cacophony of conservative interests, and for a brief time they all sang from the same song sheet. But since then, for most of the time, tribalism has ruled, with one tribe ascending in national influence as another descends. Without a unifying leadership or a pragmatic campaign to rally around, conservatives have spent a lot of time over the past two decades in a proverbial circular firing squad, engaged in a deadly squabble over who is and who isn’t conservative enough.

But millennials don’t see all that. The truth is, most millennials think conservatism means “social conservatism,” and to put it mildly, they are not impressed.

Millennials are the most ethnically diverse, nonwhite generation in American history. They are the most socially liberal. A sound majority of them believes that homosexuality should be



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