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AMERICAN INDIVIDUALISM



HERBERT HOOVER

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY GEORGE H. NASH

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INDIVIDUALISM



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INTRODUCTION



I

On September 13, 1919, Herbert Hoover returned to the United States a troubled man. Ten months before, at the conclusion of the First World War, he had sailed to Europe at President Woodrow Wilson's request to administer food relief on a continent careening toward catastrophe. The once mighty German and Austro-Hungarian empires—America's enemies in the war—lay shattered. Across

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vast stretches of Europe, as 1919 began, famine, disease, and bloody revolution threatened to sunder a civilization already deeply wounded by “the war to end all war.”

As Wilson and the Allied leaders of Great Britain, France, and Italy struggled to draft a peace treaty in Paris, Hoover and his American Relief Administration delivered food to millions of people, reorganized the transportation and communications networks of nations prostrate from conflict, and helped check the advance of communist revolution from the East. Thanks in considerable measure to the Herculean efforts of Hoover and his associates, perhaps one-third of the population of postwar Europe was saved from starvation and death.

As Hoover journeyed home to America, his personal reputation was at its zenith. Five years earlier, as a respected American mining engineer living in London, he had organized a private relief agency that delivered and distributed food to the entire civilian population of Belgium (more than 7 million people) for the duration of the war. It was a voluntary, philanthropic effort without precedent in human history, and it made him an international hero. Now, from Finland to Armenia,

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from the streets of Vienna to the plains of eastern Poland, his name and that of the American Relief Administration were hailed for their humanitarian achievements. Tens of millions of people owed their lives to his exertions. In America he was lauded as “the Napoleon of Mercy.” In Great Britain, John Maynard Keynes called him “the only man who emerged from the ordeal of Paris with an enhanced reputation.”¹

Yet that autumn Hoover was not content. For several months he had pleaded with the Allied leaders in Paris to lift their blockade of the defeated German enemy and allow the healing currents of peaceful exchange to flow. Only after a long, wearisome struggle did he attain this objective. Every day at the peace conference he had witnessed a dispiriting display of national rivalry, vengefulness, and greed. He had observed, too, the sometimes violent attempts of reformers and radicals to construct a new social order on the principles of Marxist socialism. It was a time, he said, of “stupendous social ferment and revolution.”²

Hoover returned to his native land and (he soon told friends) with “two convictions . . . dominant in my mind.” The first was that the ideology of

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socialism, as tested before his eyes in Europe, was a catastrophic failure. Socialism's fundamental premises—that the “impulse of altruism” could alone maintain productivity and that bureaucracy at the top could determine the most productive roles for each individual—said Hoover, were false. Only the “primary school of competition,” Hoover countered, could do that. Oblivious to this truth and to the fundamental human impulse of self-interest, socialism had “wrecked itself on the rock of production.” It was unable to motivate men and women to produce sufficient goods for the needs of society. Without increased productivity and the resultant plenty, neither social harmony nor an improved standard of living for the masses would occur. To Hoover the economic demoralization of Europe in 1919, with its attendant suffering, was the direct result of the bankruptcy of socialism.³

Hoover's second conviction was also firmly held. More than ever before he sensed the “enormous distance” that America had traveled from Europe during 150 years of nationhood.⁴ To Hoover it now seemed that “irreconcilable conflicts” in ideals and experience separated the Old World from the New.⁵ The New World, he came to believe, was