



## Herbert Hoover's Presidency, Legacy Marred by Role in Great Depression

By Jim Meyers  
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President Herbert Hoover entered the White House after a landslide electoral victory as the nation rode the rest of a tremendous economic boom.

He left office four years later after a resounding election defeat as the country battled the horrendous Great Depression.

Some presidential scholars assert that Hoover did little to deal with the economic downturn following the stock market crash of October 1929. Others insist he laid down the principles of what would become FDR's New Deal.

"The 31st president is best remembered for his disastrous response to the stock market crash and the ensuing Great Depression, pooh-pooing government intervention in favor of self-reliance as millions suffered," Time magazine stated.

"The nickname for shantytowns that cropped up all over the country — Hoovervilles — left little doubt as to who was blamed for the crisis."

A report from the Miller Center at the University of Virginia said that "even as the crisis deepened in 1931, Hoover held fast to his course. He reiterated that the nation's economic woes were largely the result of depressed world economic conditions. He also made clear that he opposed federal intervention in the economy or the construction of a welfare state."

But Murray N. Rothbard, author of the book "America's Great Depression," wrote: "Hoover's role as founder of a revolutionary program of government planning to combat depression has been unjustly neglected by historians. Franklin D. Roosevelt, in large part, merely elaborated the policies laid down by his predecessor."

And a Cato Institute article about Hoover maintained: "Politicians and pundits portray Herbert Hoover as a defender of laissez faire governance whose dogmatic commitment to small government led him to stand by and do nothing while the economy collapsed.

"In fact, Hoover had long been a critic of laissez faire. He used government to prop up

wages, restricted immigration, signed the Smoot-Hawley tariff, raised taxes, and created the Reconstruction Finance Corporation — all interventionist measures.

"Dismantling the mythical presentation of Hoover as a 'do-nothing' president is crucial if we wish to have a proper understanding of what did and did not work in the Great Depression."

Regardless of historians' views about Hoover's dealing with the Depression, they generally agree that he was not a great president.

A poll of presidential historians in 1948 ranked him No. 20 out of 29 presidents, and he went downhill from there. A Siena College poll in 1982 had him No. 27 out of 39; another in 1996 had him No. 35, and a poll in 2008 ranked him 36th out of 42. In 17 polls of scholars, he averaged in a tie for No. 27.

Iowa-born Hoover served as head of the U.S. Food Administration during World War I, and as Secretary of Commerce under presidents Harding and Coolidge. He easily won the GOP presidential nomination in 1928 despite having no prior elected-office experience. And with the nation enjoying a booming economy, voters decided to stay with a Republican in the White House and elected Hoover with 58.2 percent of the vote.

Less than eight months into his presidency, the stock market crashed and brought down the economy with it. The United States was still in the midst of the Great Depression when Hoover ran for re-election in 1932, and he lost to FDR, garnering only 39.7 percent of the vote.

President Harry Truman called Hoover back into public service in 1947 to make the federal bureaucracy more efficient through the Hoover Commission.

When Hoover died in New York in October 1964 at age 90, he had the longest retirement of any president, 31 years, seven months, and 16 days. His mark was passed by Jimmy Carter in September 2012.