

Herbert Hoover: A Public Life

by *David Burner*

(Alfred A. Knopf; xii + 433 pp.; \$15.95)

David Little

Herbert Hoover: A Public Life is a significant and timely book—significant because it alters prevailing impressions of Hoover, timely because it locates a point of arresting similarity between Hoover and Jimmy Carter.

Toward the end of his tenure as thirty-first president, Herbert Hoover is supposed to have asked someone for a nickel in order to telephone a friend. "Here's a dime," he was told, "Call up all your friends." For a long time his very name was a mark of derision: Shantytowns were "Hoovervilles," "Hoover blankets" were newspapers used for warmth, empty pockets turned inside out were known as "Hoover flags."

Hoover's inept response to the crisis of the Depression was largely the reason for history's unkind treatment of him. But his image as nothing but a twentieth-century Nero, indifferent and inert as he observed the collapse of society around him, is unfair. Hoover was more complex and more interesting than that.

David Burner sets the record straight in a clearly written, well-ordered discussion of Hoover's public life. Hoover was not, over his long life (1874-1964), callous to human misery and need, nor was he uniformly opposed to energetic government. After a highly successful career as a mining engineer, he turned his considerable energies and managerial abilities to directing the efforts of the American Citizens' Commission for Relief in Belgium. The CRB, as it was called, distributed food to Belgian victims of World War I, a work that saved hundreds of thousands of lives. Because of his great success in voluntary relief work, President Wilson appointed Hoover in 1918 United States Food Administrator. In this capacity he worked to stabilize prices against specu-

lation in food, to create an efficient centralized agency under his direct and complete control. Hoover became a kind of "food dictator," necessary, he believed, under wartime conditions.

After the war he manifested the same take-charge spirit in redirecting the work of the Food Administration toward relief and reconstruction in Europe, including the Soviet Union. Hoover's work in this connection reflects anything but the hands-off, let-the-market-take-its-course attitude with which he later became associated. Burner writes: "Hoover himself termed the undertaking a second American intervention. Now the object was the economic rehabilitation of a ravaged and disordered continent, to 'save life and prevent anarchy.'...This Wilsonian dream required, as Hoover later put it, the imposition of certain regions of 'absolute dictatorship over economic forces,' and the virtual control of the world's food supply enabled him to do this."

Again, as secretary of commerce under Harding and Coolidge, Hoover was an activist administrator who favored considerable expansion of government regulation. "Between 1921 and 1928 Hoover and his associates succeeded in transforming the Commerce Department from a miscellaneous collection of small technical bureaus into an organization of 1600 employees mainly concerned with promoting, guiding and protecting American economic development. While the department never fulfilled its more grandiose ambitions—a highly rationalized American economy and the virtual elimination of poverty—it added a variety of new agencies and programs...[and] pushed its influence into nearly all of federal economic policy, and proceeded to link public with private action through a series of impor-

tant cooperative conferences."

Hoover favored legislated regulations over airplanes and air travel, railways, waterways and water resources, and industrial pollution. He addressed the severe unemployment problem of 1920-22, and recommended that the government finance public works projects, particularly road building. He showed deep sympathy for the plight of the working man, and strongly favored collective bargaining. Unions, he believed, were a "normal and proper antidote for unlimited capitalistic organization."

Finally, Hoover's campaign for the presidency in 1928 (and his initial period in office) was perceived as progressive and reformist, too much so in fact for conservative Republicans and some Democrats. While social reformers like Jane Addams stood firmly in his camp, none other than Franklin Roosevelt complained during the '28 campaign that Hoover had exhibited "a most alarming desire to issue regulations and to tell businessmen generally how to conduct their affairs."

Hoover was forever organizing conferences and exerting energetic leadership in the areas of public health, the rights and opportunities of women and children, Indian rights, conservation, and antitrust activity. On tax reform he favored a "steeply graduated tax on legacies and gifts...for the deliberate purpose of disintegrating large fortunes." His appointments to the Supreme Court were distinguished—Charles Evans Hughes as chief justice, Owen Roberts and Benjamin Cardozo as associates (Hoover looked hard for a woman to appoint).

Perhaps most significant of all, Hoover's anti-Depression measures, such as the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933, the Reconstruction Finance Corporation (for making easy loans to depressed businesses), the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, the Revenue Act of 1932 ("the most progressive tax law of the decade") were all absorbed and in some cases expanded by Roosevelt. Recently, FDR's close advisor Rexford Tugwell disclosed: "We didn't admit it at the time, but practically the whole New Deal was extrapolated from projects that Hoover started."

Why then Hoover's reputation for incompetence and ineptness? Burner's answer, which should if anything be sharpened and developed, is that Hoo-

ver lacked a coherent framework within which to organize and make effective his reformist inclinations. While he was a social activist and humanitarian, while he favored rationalized authority and government initiative, he was at the same time a strong advocate of voluntary responsibility and individual initiative. He evidenced a deep and growing fear of totalitarian domination, especially toward the end of his administration, with the prospect of expanded governmental control under the New Deal. This fear overwhelmed his natural compassion and blinded him to the inefficacy of his anti-Depression policies. Hoover was the victim of "quarreling goals" which he never bothered to try to reconcile.

Burner argues persuasively that this lack of coherence and consistency stemmed from Hoover's commitment to an "engineering ethos" and a related political naiveté. Rational solutions to discrete technical problems would, once determined and proposed, fall into place in the natural course of things. Because Hoover developed no grand political design for ordering and implementing his policies in a climate of antagonism and conflict, he failed to convey a clear, comprehensible message to a distraught society, and he had almost no impact on Congress. "It was perhaps the private man's shrinkage from rough political contact, the predilection for working by himself, and the habit of perceiving problems as requiring rational, impersonal solutions that made Hoover uncomfortable with the rude, demanding Congress, as well as with the press."

With all the obvious differences in background and outlook between Herbert Hoover and Jimmy Carter, it is the commitment to an engineering ethos, with its specific effects in both cases, that identifies a point of striking similarity. James Fallows, in his *Atlantic* article "The Passionless Presidency," depicts Carter's mind-set as that of another engineer-turned-president. "Carter thinks in lists, not arguments; as long as the items are there, their order does not matter, nor does the hierarchy among them....I came to think that Carter believes fifty things, but no one thing. He holds explicit, thorough positions on every issue under the sun, but he has no large view of the relations between them, no line indicating which goals (reducing unemployment? human

rights?) will take precedence over which (inflation control? a SALT treaty?) when the goals conflict. Spelling out these choices makes the difference between a position and a philosophy, but it is an act foreign to Carter's mind."

Along with a piecemeal approach to

problems, there is between Hoover and Carter a similar dedication to organizational efficiency, a similar progressive humaneness, a similar remoteness from the political process, the same ineptness in mobilizing opinion and support. The likeness must not be overdrawn, but neither should it be discounted. yyv

Walker Percy: An American Search by Robert Coles

(Little, Brown; xx + 250 pp.; \$12.50)

Ralph McInerny

I came to this book shortly after having read the letters of Flannery O'Connor. If I were inclined to look for logic in my personal history, I might reflect on the fact that both Walker Percy and Flannery O'Connor are Southern writers, both are Catholic, and both sought in the thought of Aquinas food for reflection on their art. O'Connor referred to herself as a "hillbilly Thomist," and it is somewhat startling to learn that she devoted fifteen minutes every night to St. Thomas. The *Summa theologiae* as bedside reading. Percy's philosophical reading has been considerably wider; as O'Connor never did, Percy tried his hand at aesthetics, at philosophy.

O'Connor's essays reflect on the vocation of writing, while the essays Percy collected in *The Message in the Bottle* are highly theoretical ruminations on the nature of language, of metaphor, of symbol. This is important for reading Robert Coles's somewhat cloying book on Percy, because Coles devotes the bulk of the work to Percy's essays and the philosophical context he feels must be known to appreciate them. From her letters, it is easy to guess what Flannery O'Connor would have made of such a book devoted to herself. I have no way of telling what Walker Percy makes of this extremely laudatory essay on his work. The question is, what are we to make of it?

Coles is misleading in his opening chapter when he suggests that Walker Percy weighs in philosophically with Kierkegaard, Sartre, Marcel, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, etc. The professional philosopher must be amused by the sort of merit-by-association Coles advances.

In fact, the chapter on Percy's philosophical roots has the facile pace of cocktail party chatter, and I would like to think that Percy would find it acutely embarrassing. That Percy responded to the works of these philosophers has its interest, but to suggest that he thereby gets credit for formulating their thoughts is an exciting but, I fear, reckless way of assigning ownership. When Coles goes on to discuss Percy's essays, he makes a great deal of "The Man on the Train" but does not, as his opening chapter suggests he might, draw the obvious comparisons with the Camus of *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Rebel*. Camus's argument that an absurd art is impossible does everything, and more, that Percy does for alienation.

What are we to make of Coles's basic assumption in the opening two chapters that we can find the analogue for Walker Percy in such philosopher-novelists and/or dramatists as Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre, Gabriel Marcel, et al.? It is not a thesis I should care to have to defend. The most that can be said for Percy's essays is that they show us a man capable of reflecting interestingly on what he has read. They show us a man out of tune with the times, not because of a programmatic atheism, but, presumably, because of his Christian faith. His account of what has gone wrong with mankind would doubtless differ from Camus's or Sartre's, but do we really get that in the essays? Walker Percy shows a receptivity to what Peter Berger has called "signals of transcendence," but apart from the *via negativa* provided him by existentialism and phenomenology he gives his reader no indi-