**Premier’s HTA History Scholarship**

Hoover and the Great Depression

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Focus of the Study

The focus of my study tour of the United States of America was to study the Presidency and work of Herbert Hoover. Hoover came to the Presidency considered one of the most able Republican politicians of the Progressive Era, someone who was an incredibly successful Secretary of Commerce and humanitarian on a large scale, particularly during and after the First World War. Yet as President he largely failed to provide adequate policies to deal with the Great Depression. This long held perception of Hoover as President is one often associated with failure and inadequacy. What sparked my interest in the subject is the recent literature rewriting a history of a Hoover Presidency particularly in relation to his attempts at combating the Great Depression. Several works have been released, most notably Amity Shlaes *the Forgotten Man*, which are a revision of the 1920s and the economic devastation of the Great Depression. These histories are often to draw parallels with the current economic downturn in America which is the greatest economic challenge since the Great Depression. As a result, these histories can be partisan in nature. I was particularly interested if any of this recent history and economic commentary had an impact on how Hoover and this period of US history was taught in the classroom. How was Hoover portrayed in American history? Has the always been the case? Has there been a recent shift as a result of some revision of this period?

Some on the highlights of my study tour include:

* + Visiting the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library and Museum and viewing the exhibitions and galleries as well as speaking with archivist Spencer Howard.
  + Touring the Herbert Hoover National Historic site in West Branch, Iowa.
  + Visiting a number of schools; Phillips Andover Academy, Sidwell Friends School, Phillips Exeter Academy, The Collegiate School and the Ethical Culture Fieldston School and the classrooms of a number of history and social science teachers, to watch lessons and talk to students about their perceptions and knowledge of Herbert Hoover and the Great Depression.
  + Participating in a class on Designing and Producing Media in Education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, Boston Massachusetts.
  + Attending the formerly named Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) Conference in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania as I thought about the best way to use technology to disseminate my project.

These varied experiences were fundamental in my development of a deeper understanding of the responses of Hoover’s Government during the Great Depression and people’s perceptions of these. The Great Depression had impacts on the economic, political, social and cultural life of the country which are again very real issues today as America faces the largest economic downturn since this event.

Herbert Hoover Presidential Library and Museum, West Branch, Iowa

[The Herbert Hoover Presidential Library and Museum](http://hoover.archives.gov/) is located in the town of Herbert Hoover’s birth, West Branch, Iowa. West Branch is a small town, which, at the time of Hoover’s birth had little more than 500 residents and was settled by Quakers in the 19th Century. The Herbert Hoover Presidential Library and Museum is located next to the Herbert Hoover National Historic Site. Herbert Hoover National Historic Site contains the birthplace of Herbert Hoover as well as a number of other significant buildings of early West Branch, Iowa. It was interesting to see these buildings preserved as they would have been when Hoover lived in them. They give you a sense of the difficult upbringing of Hoover and the challenges he would have faced as a young boy growing up in a small Midwest town. Often in biographies, this difficult upbringing and the Quaker faith with which Hoover was brought up in are seen as fundamental to his later success as a humanitarian and in business.

The Herbert Hoover Library and Museum next to the Historic Site is a wealth of information on President Hoover and the years of his Presidency. The library and museum is over 44,000 square feet and contains the entire correspondence of Hoover’s life and Presidency, a range of excellent temporary and permanent exhibitions, as well as outstanding educational programs. In my visit to the museum what really assisted my understanding of the topic were three things: Permanent galleries six and seven, primary and secondary documents available in the archives, and discussions with archivist Spencer Howard.

Permanent Galleries six and seven were incredibly interesting as they dealt specifically with the focus of my research. Gallery six was centred on ‘The Great Depression’. The aim of this exhibition is to place the events of the Great Depression in context and detail some of Hoover’s early responses while in government. The first few lines of description in the exhibition give an indication of the perspective the gallery is likely to take:

“As early as 1925, then-Secretary of Commerce Hoover had warned President Coolidge that stock market speculation was getting out of hand. Yet in his final State of the Union Address, Coolidge saw no reason for alarm. "No Congress...ever assembled has met with a more pleasing prospect than that which appears at the present time"...said Coolidge early in 1929. "In the domestic field there is tranquillity and contentment...and the highest record of prosperity in years."

While it is true from 1925 Hoover had expressed some reservation about speculation in the stock market, it is difficult to place to a large share of responsibility on Coolidge. Particularly, as the State of the Union Address referred to was almost one year prior to the beginning of the Great Depression. While Hoover certainly warned of speculation when he came to government in 1929, few significant attempts were made to reign in this speculation. The remainder of the gallery is a description of the onset of the Great Depression and Hoover’s attempts at reinstating confidence in the economy. The information presented is quite objective in nature and attempts to show Hoover as someone who was trying to enact policies so the nation could be on the road to economic recovery.

The second gallery which was directly related was gallery seven is entitled ‘From Hero to Scapegoat’. This was an intriguing exhibition which sought to illustrate how Hoover had to sacrifice much of his reputation in dealing with the greatest crisis for the US since the Civil War. Two statements are telling in this exhibition:

No American president entered office with greater expectations, or left with more bitter disappointments, than Herbert Hoover.

Hoover's presidency showed the limitations of managerial government in a time of national emergency.

Understandably this gallery takes a sympathetic view of Hoover’s attempts to enact policies to counter the Great Depression. The first statement is certainly true, and is an attempt to express how many hopes Hoover had harboured for the nation only to be unable or unwilling to enact legislation to save it. The second statement is especially interesting given the current debate in the US about the role of government. Traditionally the Republican Party has campaigned, as they did when Hoover won the presidency, on a ticket of limited government. Hoover believed firmly that it was the role of the government to encourage and stimulate business. The most effective way for the government to achieve this was by ‘getting out of its way’. Reducing regulation and allowing the business of America to continue unhindered. Democrats however believe in a larger government which has greater powers to intervene, particularly in times of national emergency. As this statement indicates, Hoover’s philosophy of a limited managerial government was not adequate for a national emergency of such scale. This statement is hardly supportive of the conservative ‘new history’ being rewritten about the 1920s and Great Depression era discussed in the introduction.

During my visit at the Library and Museum I also had the opportunity to spend time in the archives. For a teacher of history to be able to spending a few days sorting through and studying primary documents of the period was a special and rewarding experience. Particularly helpful was archivist Spencer Howard who so generously took the time to assist me in tracking down particular sources I was after. His help and intimate knowledge of the collection was greatly appreciated. The purpose of my time at the archives was to look at the various documents that give insights into Hoover’s intentions, actions, and policies during and prior to the Great Depression. Had Hoover’s failings been exaggerated by some historians that sought to overemphasise the work of Franklin Roosevelt as Shlaes comments? Or does the evidence indicate Hoover had misjudged the time and his policies of private humanitarian aid and distain for large scale government intervention prolong or increase the effects of the Great Depression?

In examining the documents available at the Hoover Library it became clear that Hoover was certainly at the helm during a very trying time in America’s economic history. Documents that defend the view of Hoover as a shrewd economic manager who was the victim of circumstances are sparse. The large majority of evidence, including Hoover’s own memoirs, is that Hoover was dealing with this situation in the best way he knew. The effectiveness of his policies was largely limited which some historians argue was a result of the limited role of the US government in economic matters. There are some documents however that reveal Hoover’s attempts to prevent or limit the crisis. One such document is the newspaper article from 21st March 1926 during Hoover’s term as Secretary of Commerce. The article is a warning by Hoover against reckless speculation on the stock exchange and the need for this speculation to be avoided or a large correction will ensue. In isolation it would be easy to view this as a warning from Hoover about an impending economic crisis. On closer inspection we find that little regulation was enacted by the Federal government, of which Hoover was a part, in response to these fears. In fact the large weight of evidence seems to indicate that Hoover’s philosophy and policies exacerbated the Great Depression.

In my discussions with archivist Spencer Howard he was also able to point me in the direction of some very useful secondary sources on Hoover’s Presidency. Howard’s recommendation for a definitive work on Hoover’s philosophy and attempts to deal with the Great Depression were the first few chapters of David M. Kennedy’s *Freedom from Fear.* For this extensive work Kennedy was awarded the 2000 Pulitzer Prize as well as many other distinguished awards. This work is an excellent study of primary and secondary sources particularly in relation to Hoover’s early responses to the Great Depression. It is interesting to note that this work would not be considered as one of the more conservative ‘new histories’ of the 1920s but a more traditional examination of the 1920s economic culture and responses to the Great Depression. The discussions and exchanging of ideas with Spencer was invaluable to my understanding, particularly in relation to changing interpretations of Hoover’s role during the Great Depression.

The effect of the visit to the Herbert Hoover Library and Museum cannot be underestimated. It was crucial in my understanding of Hoover’s initial responses to the Great Depression and the available primary and secondary sources to be studied. Having an opportunity to view and study the sources examined in the literature gave me some excellent insight into how and on what historians were making judgements.

High Schools – Phillips Andover Academy, Andover, Massachusetts

Throughout my study tour I was fortunate enough to have a number of generous history and social science teachers invite me into their classrooms to speak with their students and observe how this aspect of US history is taught in the classroom. I am very grateful to these teachers and it certainly gave me a brilliant insight into how this topic is taught and perceptions of students and teachers surrounding the issues. The schools I was fortunate enough to visit were: Sidwell Friends School in Washington D.C., Phillips Exeter Academy in Exeter New Hampshire, The Collegiate School New York City New York, Ethical Culture Fieldston School the Bronx New York and Phillips Andover Academy Andover Massachusetts. I primarily viewed year 11 classes (students usually referred to as ‘Juniors’) who were undertaking their compulsory year of US history. The two most useful aspects that related to my study were speaking with the teachers about the organisation and materials used to teach the compulsory year 11 course and the Addison Gallery of American Art’s teaching of the Great Depression.

The content to be covered in compulsory US history in only one full academic year is vast. While state by state syllabi can vary it is usually the period from the reconstruction of the Civil War until the present. Speaking with US history teacher Tracy Ainsworth at Phillips Andover Academy gave me an excellent sense of the challenges presented in teaching the course that resonate with history teachers in many countries. There is a significant amount of content to cover in a very limited time. When asking specifically about the teaching of the US in the 1920s and the Great Depression it became apparent that on average somewhere between one and two weeks of class time was devoted to the US between World War I and II. This teaching time largely centred on the clash of cultures in the 1920s, a brief description of how the Great Depression came about and a close examination of the New Deal and its policies. In all schools I visited textbooks were used as the central teaching and information tool outside of the classroom. Reading was set for students each week. The two central texts used to teach the US survey course to year 11 students are: Alan Brinkley’s *American History: A Survey* and Eric Foner’s *Give Me Liberty*. Each school I visited used one or the other text. While both texts are certainly very comprehensive as surveys of US history the depth of information and significant detail on Hoover’s policies in response to the Great Depression are limited. Brinkley does contain more detail in this area as the Great Depression is his area of expertise. In both cases these texts do not subscribe to new histories or interpretations of the period of the 1920s. Both remain firm in their description of Hoover’s actions and policies throughout his presidency.

In my time at Phillips Andover Academy I was fortunate enough to view a very special learning project. The Addison Gallery of American Art is a department within Phillips Academy which is dedicated to the collection American Art. This gallery is open to members of the public but is also used specially for learning projects arranged with various faculties. In my time at the school I was fortunate enough to speak with Rebecca Hayes, the Interim Curator of Education for the gallery. We spoke about a recent exhibition that was created for the Great Depression. Interestingly the exhibition centred on the lives and communities during the Great Depression. Rather than a focus on political or economic history it was the understandings of images about the lives and effects on the community of the Great Depression. It was encouraging to see a school trying to engage students in such as impressive and diverse way. It was also a reminder that during the policies of both Hoover and Roosevelt American’s suffered great hardships.

ASCD Conference, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

The final two aspects of my study tour are focused on the dissemination of my project. Initially the idea of presenting my research was through an educational tool using social media. The learning experiences I gained at both the ASCD Conference and the Harvard Graduate School of Education opened up a number of other exciting possibilities.

The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) is an educational organisation that has over 150,000 members in 145 countries. I had the opportunity to travel to their 67th Annual Conference in Philadelphia. The purpose of attending the conference was to further understand the best way using ICT to disseminate my project. Over the three days of the conference I attended numerous workshops that dealt with creating ICT activities in the classroom. The most useful session was a session facilitated by Angela DiMichele-Lalor and Jennifer Borgioli from Learner Centered Initiatives (LCI). The purpose of the session was to assess critical thinking demands for web 2.0 based tools. The focus of the presentation was about the best ways to develop critical thinking skills and which web tools lend themselves to teaching these thinking skills. This session was crucial to me deciding not to produce a social media website but use a more simplistic form on technology to produce an activity that developed more critical thinking.

Harvard Graduate School of Education, Cambridge, Massachusetts

The element of my study tour I was most looking forward to was attending and participating in a class at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. The purpose of this element was to investigate how best to disseminate my project through the development of material that would assist students in understanding Hoover’s role in the Great Depression and the range of perceptions surrounding it. The class that I attended was Designing and Producing Media for Education with Professor Joe Blatt. The class was a presentation by a former student of Professor Blatt’s, Jillian Orr, who worked for an organisation WGBH Interactive Kids. WGBH Interactive Kids were funded by the Public Broadcasting Services to create educational games using the television character Curious George. Ms Orr spoke about the extensive process involved with designing these games and some of the educational philosophy behind what skills and understandings they were hoping for students to gain. This was an invaluable learning experience for me as I understood how to plan and implement a sophisticated educational project based on my research. Again this reinforced what I had learned at the ASCD conference and helped me solidify what material I intended to produce from my study tour.

Conclusion

The experience of travelling the United States on a study tour has been an exceptional experience for me in developing my understanding of Herbert Hoover’s initial responses to the Great Depression and whether the recent rewriting of the history of the US in the 1920s had taken any effect in education. Speaking with students, teachers, university academics, museum curators, and archivists has allowed me to deepen and solidify my understanding of this topic. There is no doubt my teaching of this topic will be different as a result and hopefully the resources it produces will help students better understand this period of history. I am grateful to all the people who graciously offered their time to speak with me and tell me about their experiences teaching, learning and researching this topic. I also very thankful for the work of the History Teachers Association of New South Wales in providing me with this opportunity by supporting the Scholarship and the Premier of NSW for offering the scholarships through the Department of Education and Communities, Premier’s Teacher Scholarship secretariat.