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HERBERT HOOVER, THE MAN

It is not easy to speak briefly of the character of a man whose personality was so many-sided that he could accomplish all the wonderful things of which we have been so forcibly reminded by the previous speaker. Volumes could be written about his versatility that gave him top rank as a mining engineer -- he was named engineer of the century by the first engineering society of America; a commanding and increasingly important place in the business world -- he gave up the certain prospect of great wealth that he might render great service to humanity; a great leader in government -- his enemies thwarted much of his effectiveness, and his friends were not wise enough to realize what he did accomplish till the passage of years had cleared their vision; an author who wrote many of the things that the world needed to have on record, a record that no other man on earth could have provided; and above all, the indispensable leader in the greatest life-saving enterprises that the world has ever known, from the dawn of creation until today.

But I am to speak of his individual qualities, not his versatility. And first among these I should place his absolute, unchangeable, unassailable moral integrity. His enemies could attack his philosophy, his economic tenets; they could blame him for a world crisis for which he had no responsibility and which he could in large part have averted with the right political co-operation; but there was no flaw in his armor of moral rectitude. In his personal conduct, in his family life, in his business transactions, in his international affairs, in his handling of all the billions of relief from America to the ends of the earth, he maintained the high ideals that had been taught him by his village blacksmith father and his quaker teacher-preacher mother, and later by his uncle and aunt with whom he lived during his boyhood and youth in Newberg and in Salem, and by the teachers in Friends Pacific Academy, where he was a student at its very beginning and where, according to his own testimony, he received the training that led him decades later to his vast fields of human service. The Decalogue was vital law to him, as was its summary by the greatest of all his teachers, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart -- thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself."

The second element of his character that I would have us consider has to do with the second great commandment which the Great Teacher declared to be like the first. Herbert Hoover loved his fellowmen. The black aborigines in Australia, the impoverished coolies in China, the terrified and starving men and women and children in Belgium, the Germans whom we had been taught to hate until many blind one-hundred-percent Americans considered it a patriotic duty to kick a dashhund simply because he was a German dog, the twenty million starving Russians in that most terrible of all modern famines which most folks did not know about and most of those who did have forgotten, for all of these and many others, in our own and in scores of other countries, the heart of Herbert Hoover went out in a way that took him and his queenly wife to the ends of the earth. Herbert Hoover loved humanity, and invested his life in helping men and women and children. His hand-written letters to children who have written to him, a few of which are printed in his book, ON GROWING UP, his leadership in Boys Clubs of America,

and other things that seem so small in comparison with his leadership in the work for tens of millions, are simply other evidences of his love for humanity. nam

Another quality that contributed to his greatness was his invincible courage. Without it much of his work could never have been done. It was not merely the way he handled his tasks as a mining engineer, sharing in the perils of the men who worked under him and accomplished things that other leaders had declared impossible; it was not merely the heroism that he showed and which his devoted wife shared in the Boxer Rebellion in China; it was not merely his courage in crossing the North Sea again and again and again not knowing at what second a German-planted mine or a German submarine might send them into eternity and carry out the ideal of German marine warfare in those days, "Sunk without a trace." He faced human perils greater than merely the perils of the material world. He was the man who could stand face to face with the German Kaiser and bring him to a decision which the imperious Wilhelm had scorned even to consider. He was the man who could oppose the Big Four at the council chamber who were seeking to starve Germany into the acceptance of a treaty which declared that the entire guilt of World War I was theirs, and to assume reparations that everybody knew they never could pay. Indomitable courage was one of the outstanding characteristics of Herbert Hoover.

Another characteristic was a remarkable combination of originality and independence. When he faced a problem, whether one of material nature or one in the more difficult area of human nature, he was likely to come up with a solution that nobody else had thought of, or that somebody may have thought of but abandoned as impossible. This sort of situation arose more than once in his mining engineering work in Australia, where a new method accomplished the supposedly impossible. And while he was American Food Administrator, much of his work was accomplished by methods that experts were sure could not succeed. There was inescapable need for vast additional stores of food for American soldiers overseas and for others of the Allies, both in the field and in areas remote from actual combat; and the number of men removed from productive labor on the farms increased the need for greater emphasis on increased production of food in America and decreased consumption of basic foods. Many in high places in government were sure that voluminous laws must be enacted to control the consumption of meats, sugar, flour and other eatables; and there must be stringent laws limiting gasoline consumption, with heavy penalties for the violation of these and a myriad other laws that were considered necessary. Herbert Hoover believed that American citizens would cooperate when the need for cooperation in such matters was made clear to them. And as Food Administrator he carried out his ideals with a minimum of laws and legal penalties. And so we took our supposed quota of meat and shortening; we used jelly on our bread instead of butter; we ate potato bread and bean bread and buckwheat bread and corn bread, with never a taste of white wheat bread; we used our small quota of gasoline, and met all the limitations that "directives" put upon us -- and were much the better as a result of our deprivations. Here, as in other activities, Herbert Hoover chose to be the Food Administrator. He knew what had to be done and he knew how to do it, and he did not want to be handicapped by others who knew so many things that were not so.

Independent as he was, Herbert Hoover was loyal to the American ideal of obedience to law. He obeyed the law, whether he was fishing for redeiders on the MacKenzie or entertaining royalty in the White House. America was under national prohibition during his administration, and the executive mansion had the unusual experience of not having a drop of intoxicating beverage alcohol inside its walls for society leaders from America or for royal potentates from overseas. The first time I ever met him personally was when the Teapot Dome scandal was at its height. He had just come from a cabinet meeting. One of the president's cabinet members was involved in violation of the law that landed him in a federal penitentiary, and the Secretary of Commerce, Herbert Hoover, was fighting out the personal question as to whether he should resign from a cabinet where such a scandal could center, or remain in the cabinet and help to clean up the foul situation. I never saw a face so drawn as his was except the face of an athlete finishing a two-mile race in which he had given everything he had. Violation of the law, in high places or in low, found no favor in the heart nor in the mind of the little Quaker boy from West Branch and Newberg -- and presently from London, Berlin, Paris, St. Petersburg, Rome, Peking, Adelaide, Washington, Palo Alto, New York -- and where not?

Another quality that endeared him to those who had the privilege of being his personal friends was his really delightful sense of humor. During much of his life there was little opportunity for him to give evidence of this quality. Too many people were dependent on him for him to have time to laugh -- often he had no chance even to smile. He was not like Abraham Lincoln in this regard, much as he resembled Honest Abe in other particulars. Lincoln could throw off temporarily the great burden that was crushing the life out of him, and by some rollicking story that would convulse his auditors, with him joining in the laughter, he could ease the pressure of his terrible responsibility for a time, at least. But there was seldom such hilarity for Herbert Hoover. Day and night for many long periods he had to know that the lives of thousands, sometimes millions of men, women and children hung on his ability to reach a right decision. But sometimes in private conversation among his chosen friends, with his wife, who was so definitely a complement to him, so definitely what he was not in some social lines, he could unbend, and laugh and joke and enjoy himself and add to the joy of others. And there came a time when, if he chose, he could delight an audience with his wit and humor. I was in one big gathering where he mixed wit and humor with his very serious address and got more than one hearty laugh; and I was in another great gathering in which his speech was interrupted again and again by uproarious laughter that fairly shook the house.

It would be hard for some people to believe that a man of such colossal achievements as those of Herbert Hoover could be genuinely humble, but he was. He did not consent to the restoration of his birthplace until after the death of his wife. When he finally consented to the restoration of the house in Newberg where he had lived with his uncle and aunt, Dr. and Mrs. H. J. Minthorn, it was not to be the Hoover House, though most people call it that; it was to be the Minthorn House, as it is, officially. On one of his visits to Newberg I took him over to the college and showed him the simple plaque on the wall in Wood-Mar Hall which mentions briefly the steps

from boyhood to world prominence, and his only comment as he turned away was, "Too flattering."

Indefatigable energy was another of Herbert Hoover's qualities. Work eight hours a day, ten hours, twelve, sixteen -- sometimes twenty-four. Shortly before his 86th birthday a visitor was waiting till Hoover could see him and one of his secretaries told him that her employer was working from eight to twelve hours every day. "How can he do that?" said the visitor. "He is almost 86 years old." "Yes" replied the secretary, "but he doesn't know that."

When Lou Henry Hoover died, Tate had come near to breaking the heart of this giant among men. Dr. Burt Brown Barker, who is president of the Herbert Hoover Foundation which restored the Winthorn House, and who was a boyhood friend of the former president and his friend until his death, said to me after Mrs. Hoover's death, "Herbert Hoover is the loneliest man in the United States." But grievously as he missed the heroic companion of his heroic years, he threw himself into the tasks that nobody else could do, such as the writing of AN AMERICAN EPIC, and keeping as many as eight secretaries busy he completed this and other monumental works before age curtailed and at last put an end to his labors.

Herbert Hoover was elected to the presidency of the United States by the greatest majority ever given to a presidential candidate. He was defeated four years later by the greatest majority for his opponent in our history. The story of how the loved and honored world hero was brought down so low in the minds of his countrymen is not appropriate to deal with here. The lies that were broadcast, the political opposition to every proposal for relief from the world depression that was a delayed detonation from World War I (the president had just said to the Congress the day that my wife and I were the guests of him and Mrs. Hoover, "you must not play politics with human misery" but they did) -- the story of that "smear" campaign is not one of the most pleasing stories in American history. Many things about it are very hard to believe; but the most remarkable thing about it is the fact that Herbert Hoover never became bitter. Many of his friends were bitter beyond measure. Many of them still are, in spite of the efforts of some who participated in that "smear" campaign to make an atonement by writing about their victim some of the finest things that have ever been written about him; and notwithstanding the statement of Eleanor Roosevelt that Hoover was not responsible for the depression that contributed to his downfall. But Herbert Hoover maintained his equanimity; went about the work that was his, unembittered, and ready for any service that he could render to his country and the world.

And there came opportunity for great service, which he gladly rendered. America came to honor him again, as in the days before his election to the presidency. He came to be recognized as an elder statesman. The change had come rapidly, as had come the loss of favor with the people. At one national convention of his party the meager applause when he appeared was little less than insult to one who had held the highest office in the greatest nation in the world; four years later the spontaneous and long-continued ovation that was given him was like nothing else which that convention produced.

Now he is gone, and in every continent there is mourning for his passing. The son of the village blacksmith and the humble Quaker teacher-proclaimer, by what he was and by what he did became president of the United States and the world hero of the Twentieth Century. There is a passage in the Bible which says, "There were giants in the earth in those days." There are giants in the earth in these days, too, and one of them as a boy went to school here, fished in our streams, played with his schoolmates, did chores in what is now the city park named in his honor. We can think of him as the giant of vast world affairs, and we can think of him, too, as the boy, full of fun but full of earnestness. Of him, as of Lincoln whom Lowell was describing in his Commemoration Ode, it can be said,

Here was a type of the true elder race,
And one of Plutarch's men talked with us face to face.

~~Address of Levi T. Pennington at the Memorial Service for
Herbert Hoover at the Friends Church at Newberg, Oregon,
at 9:30 A. M., October 22, 1964.~~