

Rugged Individualism – Herbert Hoover

(October 22, 1928)

I intend... to discuss some of those more fundamental principles upon which I believe the government of the United States should be conducted....

During one hundred and fifty years we have built up a form of self government and a social system which is peculiarly our own. It differs essentially from all others in the world. It is the American system.... It is founded upon the conception that only through ordered liberty, freedom and equal opportunity to the individual will his initiative and enterprise spur on the march of progress. And in our insistence upon equality of opportunity has our system advanced beyond all the world.

During [World War I] we necessarily turned to the government to solve every difficult economic problem. The government having absorbed every energy of our people for war, there was no other solution. For the preservation of the state the Federal Government became a centralized despotism which undertook unprecedented responsibilities, assumed autocratic powers, and took over the business of citizens. To a large degree, we regimented our whole people temporally into a socialistic state. However justified in war time, if continued in peace-time it would destroy not only our American system but with it our progress and freedom as well.

When the war closed, the most vital of issues both in our own country and around the world was whether government should continue their wartime ownership and operation of many [instruments] of production and distribution. We were challenged with a... choice between the American system of rugged individualism and a European philosophy of diametrically opposed doctrines doctrines of paternalism and state socialism. The acceptance of these ideas would have meant the destruction of self-government through centralization... [and] the undermining of the individual initiative and enterprise through which our people have grown to unparalleled greatness.

The Republican Party [in the years after the war] resolutely turned its face away from these ideas and war practices.... When the Republican Party came into full power it went at once resolutely back to our fundamental conception of the state and the rights and responsibility of the individual. Thereby it restored confidence and hope in the American people, it freed and stimulated enterprise, it restored the government to a position as an umpire instead of a player in the economic game. For these reasons the American people have gone forward in progress....

There is [in this election]... submitted to the American people a question of fundamental principle. That is: shall we depart from the principles of our American political and economic system, upon which we have advanced beyond all the rest of the world....

I would like to state to you the effect that... [an interference] of government in business would have upon our system of self-government and our economic system. That effect would reach to the daily life of every man and woman. It would impair the very basis of liberty and freedom....

Let us first see the effect on self-government. When the Federal Government undertakes to go into commercial business it must at once set up the organization and administration of that business, and it immediately finds itself in a labyrinth.... Commercial business requires a concentration of responsibility. Our government to succeed in business would need to become in effect a despotism. There at once begins the destruction of self-government....

It is a false liberalism that interprets itself into the government operation of commercial business. Every step of bureaucratizing of the business of our country poisons the very roots of liberalism that is political equality, free speech, free assembly, free press and equality of opportunity. It is not the road to more liberty, but to less liberty. Liberalism should not be striving to spread bureaucracy but striving to set bounds to it....

Liberalism is a force truly of the spirit, a force proceeding from the deep realization that economic freedom cannot be sacrificed if political freedom is to be preserved. [An expansion of the government's role in the business world] would cramp and cripple the mental and spiritual energies of our people. It would extinguish equality and opportunity. It would dry up the spirit of liberty and progress... For a hundred and fifty years liberalism has found its true spirit in the American system, not in the European systems.

I do not wish to be misunderstood.... I am defining general policy.... I have already stated that where the government is engaged in public works for purposes of flood control, of navigation, of irrigation, of scientific research or national defense... it will at times necessarily produce power or commodities as a by-product.

Nor do I wish to be misinterpreted as believing that the United States is a free-for-all and devil-take-the-hindmost. The very essence of equality of opportunity and of American individualism is that there shall be no domination by any group or [monopoly] in this republic.... It is no system of laissez faire....

I have witnessed not only at home but abroad the many failures of government in business. I have seen its tyrannies, its injustices, its destructions of self-government, its undermining of the very instincts which carry our people forward to progress. I have witnessed the lack of advance, the lowered standards of living, the depressed spirits of people working under such a system....

And what has been the result of the American system? Our country has become the land of opportunity to those born without inheritance, not merely because of the wealth of its resources and industry but because of this freedom of initiative and enterprise. Russia has natural resources equal to ours.... But she has not had the blessings of one hundred and fifty years of our form of government and our social system.

By adherence to the principles of decentralized self-government, ordered liberty, equal opportunity, and freedom to the individual, our American experiment in human welfare has yielded a degree of well-being unparalleled in the world. It has come nearer to the abolition of poverty, to the abolition of fear of want, than humanity has ever reached before. Progress of the past seven years is proof of it....

The greatness of America has grown out of a political and social system and a method of [a lack of governmental] control of economic forces distinctly its own our American system which has carried this great experiment in human welfare farther than ever before in history.... And I again repeat that the departure from our American system... will jeopardize the very liberty and freedom of our people, and will destroy equality of opportunity not only to ourselves, but to our children....

Questions for the "Rugged Individualism" reading

Use Herbert Hoover's "Rugged Individualism" speech and Ch. 32 to answer the following questions:

1. What did President Hoover mean by the term "rugged individualism?" How did this reflect his views about the role of government?
2. Describe the significance of volunteerism in the Hoover administration's approach to easing the nation's suffering during the Great Depression.
3. How were shantytowns, soup kitchens, and bread lines a response to the Depression? How successful were they?
4. Bullet-point 5 reasons why you think this is referred to as Hoover's "Rugged Individualism" speech.