

*Notes for Teachers:*

This eight-document exercise requires students to undertake a series of standard historical tasks: they must first define important terms (liberal and conservative, which take on various meanings over time), both at significant moments and in the students' own time; Second, they must note and understand that important historical figures were not one-dimensional, but changed their own minds as times and circumstances changed; and, finally, they must try to go beyond mere description and writing analysis from ambiguous and problematic historical documents and situations.

The question first hints at the traditional, liberal interpretation of Herbert Hoover as a conservative, do-nothing president, in contrast to the active, experimental Franklin D. Roosevelt, whose New Deal gave the Democratic Party and the nation as a whole a new definition of "liberal." By asking "to what extent are these characterizations valid?" the question allows students to accept all, part, or none of that interpretation. Instead of going along with the portrait of conservative Hoover and liberal FDR, they might see both Hoover and FDR as conservative, both of them as liberal, or even see Hoover as liberal and FDR as conservative. This is truly a question for which there is no "right" answer.

At the same time, it is a question for which definitions are all important, because students who formulate totally idiosyncratic definitions of conservative and liberal will make it extremely difficult for themselves to explain why Hoover and FDR have been "commonly thought of" as conservative and liberal.

The documents begin before the Depression commences and before Hoover has taken office. Document A is taken from Hoover's famous "Rugged Individualism" speech, given during the 1928 presidential campaign — while "Republican prosperity" still held sway. Because of the stereotype, students sometimes have trouble hearing what Hoover is really saying; they think he's saying that he himself is not a liberal. In fact, he is saying that he is a liberal — a true liberal — then he goes out of his way first to define "false liberalism," then to define what true liberalism is.

Hoover is probably more concerned with separating himself from conservative Republicans than from liberal Democrats, because he is careful to say that true liberals

(like himself) favor equality of opportunity (but not of condition), and that government has a legitimate role in preserving such equality. It is worth remembering that BOTH parties considered nominating Hoover for the presidency in 1920, after he had spent several years working for a Democratic president, Woodrow Wilson, and an active federal government that was prosecuting the Great War. After that, as Secretary of Commerce, he had worked for business-government cooperation under Republican presidents Harding and Coolidge.

In short, Hoover was no William Graham Sumner, and he speaks for the progressive wing of the Republican party in saying so here. Was he merely trying to win back those who deserted the Republicans for LaFollette in 1924? Perhaps. But that does not rule out sincerity in one who prided himself on being above party politics, and whose public life coincided with a growing popular belief that democracy was compatible with an active government.

When students move on to Document B, its date (December 2, 1930) should tell them that by now Hoover is president, and the Depression is well under way — and has been for over a year. (Even students who like to think they can get by without memorizing dates need to know 1929.) Students looking for a "conservative" Hoover will find him: "Economic depression cannot be cured by legislative action or executive pronouncement." So will those looking for a more activist Hoover: he lists public works projects spending of more than half a billion dollars, although he warns that "The volume of construction work in the Government is already at the maximum limit warranted by financial prudence." And wise students bring in outside information will mention the Reconstruction Finance Corporation (RFC) and other federal recovery measures that Hoover was at least willing to sign into law.

Document C finds Hoover confronting the contemporary charge that he was not doing enough, and reminds students that Hoover drew the line at federal relief to individuals. The conservative Hoover warns that federal spending must not "stifle" private, state, and local government efforts at recovery, but the more flexible Hoover promises that if those efforts flag, "I will ask the aid of every resource of the federal government." Again, ambiguity prevails. The student must judge which Hoover predominates.