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# Herbert Hoover and the Great Drought of 1930

David E. Hamilton

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For most Americans 1930 was a year of economic hardship. The nation was still suffering from the shock of the stock market crash; the deepening industrial depression showed few signs of lifting; and the agricultural depression grew considerably worse. These crises historians have examined at length. But they have almost entirely neglected one of the most severe disasters then facing the nation: the Great Drought of 1930.<sup>1</sup>

Overshadowed by the more severe drought of the mid-1930s, which produced the Dust Bowl, the calamity of 1930 has been lost to most students of American history. Yet, in his annual message to the president, Secretary of Agriculture Arthur M. Hyde called it "the worst drought ever recorded in this country." The Weather Bureau reported that because of "its long duration, the large area involved, [and] the economic loss sustained," it stood in "first place in the drought history of the country." The chairman of the American National Red Cross told a national radio audience, "In all its experience of more than a thousand emergencies the Red Cross has never been confronted by a disaster of larger proportions."<sup>2</sup> Temporarily at least, the drought emerged, along with unemployment, business recovery, and agricultural surpluses, as one of the nation's most pressing problems.

Ironically, the drought presented Herbert Hoover with an excellent opportunity to reestablish and enhance his tarnished image as a capable and concerned political leader. By the summer and fall of 1930 the nation's mounting economic woes had begun to cut into his popularity. But the drought was a

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<sup>1</sup> The two most extensive published treatments of the drought are in article form: Roger Lambert, "Hoover and the Red Cross in the Arkansas Drought of 1930," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly*, XXIX (Spring 1970), 3–19, and Robert Cowley, "The Drought and the Dole," *American Heritage*, XXIII (Feb. 1972), 16–19, 92–99. For the most extensive treatment of the drought, see Nan E. Woodruff, "The Great Southern Drought of 1930–31" (Ph.D. diss., University of Tennessee, 1977).

<sup>2</sup> United States Department of Agriculture, *Yearbook of Agriculture, 1931* (Washington, 1931), 1, 194; *New York Times*, Jan. 23, 1931, p. 17.

problem on which he should have been able to capitalize. The public still envisioned him as the "Great Humanitarian," the man who had aided the helpless Belgians during the World War, the people of Europe after the war, the famine-stricken Russians in 1921 and 1922, and the homeless victims of the Mississippi Flood in 1927. When it became apparent that the drought was a disaster of major proportions, it was generally expected that Hoover would again skillfully direct the relief operation and that the successful handling of the relief operation would strengthen his position with Congress, the press, and the American public.<sup>3</sup>

Such expectations, however, were not to be realized. On the contrary, Hoover and leading members of his administration entered into a bitter, protracted, and highly criticized battle with Congress over the nature of the relief effort. In this the president took positions that did much to destroy his image as a compassionate and skilled relief leader. The story of how this came about is an intriguing one that can reveal much about Hoover's conception of the proper functions of the federal government and about his ability to exercise presidential leadership in a period of crisis. It also offers evidence bearing on the continuing reassessment of Hoover and his presidency.<sup>4</sup>

Centered in the Mississippi and Ohio River valleys, the drought of 1930 was a truly national problem. According to Secretary Hyde, the "hard hit" area consisted of "about 30 states, including all those in the great central area extending from Virginia to Montana and from Pennsylvania to Texas." In these states the intense heat wave and the lack of rain brought about conditions never before experienced on so wide a scale. Forest fires raged out of control; rivers and streams dried up; the Mississippi River was reduced to "a comparative trickle"; hydroelectric plants were forced to close; and wild game, birds, and fish were found dead in great numbers. By August, wells were running dry, and thousands of farmers were hauling water to their farms, first for livestock, later for human consumption. Health officials noted a disturbing rise in morbidity and mortality rates among infants and children and a marked increase in pellagra, typhoid, and other deficiency and filth diseases. Throughout the afflicted areas mass church meetings praying for rain became common occurrences.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> The *New Republic* wrote that the drought provided Herbert Hoover with "an opportunity to play again the role which he knows by heart, and in which the public fancies him." Its editors added that "this is bound to restore a certain amount of the confidence which he has lost by blunders in other forms of activity." "The Week," *New Republic*, LXIV (Aug. 20, 1930), 1. Arthur Krock wrote: "For the task there could be no better man at the head of the government than Mr. Hoover." *New York Times*, Aug. 10, 1930, sec. 3, p. 5.

<sup>4</sup> On Hoover the most important biographies have been Joan Hoff Wilson, *Herbert Hoover: Forgotten Progressive* (Boston, 1975), and David Burner, *Herbert Hoover: A Public Life* (New York, 1979). For other recent works, see Robert H. Zieger, "Herbert Hoover: A Reinterpretation," *American Historical Review*, 81 (Oct. 1976), 800-10, and the bibliographical essay in Wilson, *Herbert Hoover*, 283-300. For a recent survey of the period from 1917 to 1932 that incorporates much of the Hoover revisionism, see Ellis W. Hawley, *The Great War and the Search for a Modern Order: A History of the American People and Their Institutions, 1917-1933* (New York, 1979).

<sup>5</sup> United States Department of Agriculture, *Yearbook of Agriculture, 1931*, 1-3, 194-202; Alfred J. Henry, "The Great Drought of 1930 in the United States," *Monthly Weather Review*, 58 (Sept. 1930), 351-54; A. J. Henry, Harry B. Humphrey, and B. C. Kadel, "The Great Drought of 1930 in the United States—Supplemental Notes," *ibid.* (Oct. 1930), 396-401; Ovid Butler, "What the

The drought had a devastating impact on agricultural production in the stricken states. For the nation the per-acre yield of all leading crops for 1930 was down 8.9 percent from the previous ten-year average, and in the drought area farm production was cut by as much as one-third to one-half or more. Several states calculated their losses from the drought in the one-hundred-million-dollar range. Although supplies of human food remained adequate, there was a real crisis in supplies of animal feed. The corn crop was the smallest since 1901, and pasturage conditions had never been worse. By August the Department of Agriculture warned that in the afflicted states supplies of feed and hay were in "critical condition."<sup>6</sup>

For those in the stricken area these conditions brought an unprecedented economic disaster. Throughout the drought region farm income was reduced by 25 percent, credit was virtually impossible to obtain, and thousands of farmers were threatened with the loss of their livestock or with foreclosure. The situation was made worse by a sudden rise in bank failures, the deepening industrial depression, and the continued downward spiral of commodity prices. These developments further exacerbated the tight credit situation, limited employment opportunities, and reduced farm income.<sup>7</sup>

Drought Has Done to Trees," *American Forests and Forest Life*, 36 (Nov. 1930), 679–80, 724, 734; John C. Hoyt, "National Aspects of the Drought: U.S. Geological Survey Figures Reveal Significance of Conditions Past and Present," *Civil Engineering*, 1 (Oct. 1931), 1167–71; "The Great Drought of 1930," *Literary Digest*, 106 (Aug. 16, 1930), 5–6; *New York Times*, Aug. 17, 1930, sec. 5, p. 4, sec. 9, p. 1. On health conditions, see the report made by Surgeon General Hugh S. Cummings, "Memorandum for the Secretary of the Treasury," July 24, 1930, Health file, Herbert Hoover Papers (Herbert Hoover Library, West Branch, Iowa), and Hugh S. Cummings to Herbert Hoover, July 15, 1930, *ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> For the drought's impact on crop production, see "Comments to Accompany Crop Report as of August 1," *Crops and Markets*, 7 (Aug. 1930), 276–85; "General Review of Crop Prospects, September 1," *ibid.* (Sept. 1930), 323; "Crop Comments to Accompany Crop Report," *ibid.*, 324–32; "The 1930 Feed Outlook," *ibid.* (Oct. 1930), 396–97; "Comments to Accompany Crop Report," *ibid.* (Nov. 1930), 428; "Statistics of Important Crops, by States, 1929 and 1930," *ibid.* (Dec. 1930), 469; "General Review of Crop Yields," *ibid.*, 507; United States Department of Agriculture, *Yearbook of Agriculture*, 1932 (Washington, 1932), 170–72; Arthur M. Hyde, "Memorandum on the Drought Situation as of August 1, 1930," in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, Herbert Hoover: Containing the Public Messages, Speeches, and Statements of the President, January 1 to December 31, 1930* (Washington, 1976), 324–30; *New York Times*, Aug. 9, 1930, p. 2; *ibid.*, Aug. 17, 1930, sec. 9, p. 1; U.S. Congress, House, Committee on Agriculture, *Drought and Storm Relief—Agricultural Experiment Station in Porto Rico*, 71 Cong., 3 sess., Dec. 4, 5, 1930, p. 43.

<sup>7</sup> United States Department of Agriculture, *Yearbook of Agriculture*, 1931, 18–22; United States Department of Agriculture, *Yearbook of Agriculture*, 1932, 47. A great deal of information on economic conditions in the drought region may be found in the monthly reports of the various Federal Reserve Banks in the drought region. See Federal Reserve Bank of Richmond, "Monthly Review" (July 31, 1930), 1–8; *ibid.* (Aug. 31, 1930), 1–8; *ibid.* (Sept. 30, 1930), 1–8; *ibid.* (Oct. 31, 1930), 1–8; *ibid.* (Nov. 30, 1930), 1–8; *ibid.* (Dec. 31, 1930), 1–7; *ibid.* (Jan. 31, 1931), 1–7; *ibid.* (Feb. 28, 1931), 1–7; Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, "Monthly Review of Agricultural, Industrial, Trade and Financial Conditions in the Eighth Federal Reserve District" (Aug. 30, 1930); *ibid.* (Sept. 30, 1930); *ibid.* (Oct. 30, 1930); *ibid.* (Nov. 29, 1930); *ibid.* (Dec. 30, 1930); *ibid.* (Jan. 30, 1931); *ibid.* (Feb. 28, 1931); *ibid.* (March 28, 1931); Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta, "Monthly Review of Financial, Agricultural, Trade and Industrial Conditions in the Sixth Federal Reserve District," 15 (Aug. 15, 1930), 1–8; *ibid.* (Sept. 30, 1930), 1–8; *ibid.* (Oct. 31, 1930), 1–8; *ibid.* (Nov. 30, 1930), 1–8; *ibid.* (Dec. 31, 1930), 1–8; *ibid.*, 16 (Jan. 31, 1931), 1–8; *ibid.* (Feb. 28, 1931), 1–8; *ibid.* (March 28, 1931), 1–8. See also reports of Red Cross field agents, Sept. 6–Nov. 1, 1930, Weekly Reports file, Drought Relief, Records of the American Red Cross, 1917–1934, RG 200 (National Archives).

As the fall and winter of 1930 approached, tens of thousands of rural farm families were without feed for their livestock, lacked resources for the next planting season, faced growing health problems, and, in many cases, could not provide food and clothing for their families. While transiency increased at an alarming rate, competition for construction work became desperate, even violent. In one case the National Guard had to be called out to avert a bloody riot.<sup>8</sup> If it had been an unmercifully hot summer, it promised to be an equally cold winter.

By August, dozens of public officials and distressed citizens were writing Hoover about the drought conditions, and, as the clamor for action grew, Hoover moved with confidence and vigor to take charge of the emergency. On August 1, he instructed Hyde to have the Department of Agriculture conduct an immediate county-by-county survey of the drought area. When the survey results were compiled, the president told the nation that the drought had deprived "great numbers of people of their complete livelihood" and that a "great many families" would need "assistance to live over the winter."<sup>9</sup> In order to ensure that the needed assistance was provided, Hoover quickly established a relief operation.

The relief program that Hoover formulated clearly reflected how he expected the "American system"—his vision of a cooperative, democratic, capitalist commonwealth—to function. Because it encouraged "self-government," the "American system" was a unique socioeconomic order, one that reconciled traditional American values of individual initiative and local community action with the emerging organizational society of the twentieth century. It was the American people's "capacity for cooperation . . . to effect high purposes in public welfare" that allowed democratic self-government to exist and flourish in an age dominated by large impersonal organizations. As he said in his inaugural address, social progress was "born of cooperation in the community." It was not dependent upon the passage of formal and arbitrary legislative measures or the creation of inefficient and coercive governmental bureaucracies. Such measures only stifled self-government and individual action. Still, even though social progress might be impaired by "government restraints," Hoover believed it essential that "the Government should assist and encourage . . . movements of collective self-help by itself cooperating with them."<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> "Report of National Drought Committee," Nov. 1930, Drought file, Hoover Papers; "Trend of the Transient Movement," Jan. 17, 1931, Semi-Monthly Reports file, Drought Relief, Records of the American Red Cross; Edna Whitley to Robert P. Bondy, Feb. 2, 1931, Relief to Ex-Service Men file, *ibid.*; *New York Times*, Aug. 27, 1930, p. 12.

<sup>9</sup> *Public Papers, 1930*, 319, 333. For appeals to Hoover, see correspondence for Aug. 1930, Drought file, Hoover Papers.

<sup>10</sup> *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, Herbert Hoover: Containing the Public Messages, Speeches, and Statements of the President, March 4 to December 31, 1929* (Washington, 1974), 5. The classic exposition of Hoover's thinking was, of course, Herbert Hoover, *American Individualism* (Garden City, N.Y., 1922). In recent years a number of reinterpretations of Hoover's ideological beliefs have appeared. The most illuminating are Ellis Hawley et al., *Herbert Hoover and the Crisis of American Capitalism* (Cambridge, 1973), 3–33; Ellis W. Hawley, "Herbert Hoover, the Commerce Secretariat, and the Vision of an 'Associative State,' 1921–1928," *Journal of American History*, LXI (June 1974), 116–40; Ellis W. Hawley, "Herbert Hoover and American Corporatism, 1929–1933," in *The Hoover Presidency: A Reappraisal*, ed.

Given these perceptions, Hoover sought to avoid statist relief formulas that required formal legislation, large expenditures from the federal treasury, or the expansion of the federal bureaucracy. Such forms of relief were inflexible, stifled voluntary giving, established politicized bureaucracies that had little interest in local communities, and, ultimately, endangered democratic government. The "burden" of relief, Hoover insisted, had to rest at the local and state levels. Yet, at the same time, Hoover realized that if the problem of relief was left solely to local and private resources, these sources might prove to be inadequate. In his first public statement on the drought he announced that "no stone will be left unturned by the Federal Government in giving assistance to local authorities." Not only would it make certain resources available, but it would also take the lead in developing an effective organization, one that was capable of dealing with the crisis while avoiding the regimentation inherent in formal bureaucracies.<sup>11</sup>

As a number of historians have shown, Hoover believed that bureaucratic institutions need not represent the antithesis of grass-roots initiative. In a complex, interdependent society, such institutions were essential, not to usurp or coerce individual, private, and community efforts, but rather to stimulate, coordinate, direct, and sustain them. His earlier organizations, he felt, had demonstrated that this could be done, and in establishing an administrative mechanism for the handling of drought relief, he drew on this previous successful experience in organization building.<sup>12</sup>

In order to "lay the foundation," Hoover asked the governors of the afflicted states to meet with him in Washington, where, on August 14, he outlined his plan for creating an elaborate hierarchical organization. At the top would be a National Drought Relief Committee (NDRC), chaired by Secretary Hyde and made up of representatives from the Federal Farm Board, the Federal Farm Loan Board, the Red Cross, the Federal Reserve Board, the Treasury Department, the American Railway Association, and the banking establishment. At the state level, each governor was to appoint a state drought-relief committee comprised of a state agricultural official, a leading banker, a Red Cross representative, a railway representative, and a leading farmer. Once the state committees had determined which counties needed organized relief, they would then appoint county committees, each comprised of a leading citizen as chairman, the county agricultural agent, a leading banker, a Red Cross representative, and a leading farmer.

The goals of the organization, as Hoover outlined them, were to assist needy

Martin L. Fausold and George T. Mazuzan (Albany, 1974), 102–19; Craig Lloyd, *Aggressive Introvert: A Study of Herbert Hoover and Public Relations Management, 1912–1932* (Columbus, Ohio, 1972); Carolyn Grin, "The Unemployment Conference of 1921: An Experiment in National Cooperative Planning," *Mid-America*, 55 (April 1973), 83–107; and Bruce A. Lohof, "Herbert Hoover, Spokesman of Humane Efficiency: The Mississippi Flood of 1927," *American Quarterly*, XXII (Fall 1970), 690–700.

<sup>11</sup> *Public Papers, 1930*, 319, 324, 336. See also, Hoover to Joseph Ransdell, Aug. 12, 1930, Drought file, Hoover Papers.

<sup>12</sup> Hawley, "Commerce Secretariat"; Lloyd, *Aggressive Introvert*; Lohof, "Herbert Hoover, Spokesman of Humane Efficiency." See also Hoover's comment in *Public Papers, 1930*, 339.

families over the winter, prevent unnecessary sacrifices of livestock, and protect the public health. At every level the relief committees were to determine what aid could be provided by lending institutions, businesses, governmental agencies, and Red Cross chapters. They were then to "mobilize and organize" these resources as quickly as possible. Once mobilized, the higher levels would become support systems for local action. Should a county's needs outstrip its resources, the state committee would make additional aid available; and should any state's needs outstrip its resources, the national committee would ensure that sufficient aid was provided.<sup>13</sup>

As envisioned by the president, each of the groups represented in the organization would also have its special duty or obligation. The Red Cross was to be responsible for "all cases of individual distress." The railroads were to offer special rates on feed, hay, water, and livestock transported into or out of any county that had suffered as much as a 50 percent loss in hay, corn, and pasturage. The Bureau of Agricultural Economics was to gather information on feed sources, livestock markets, and localities with abundant pasturage, disseminating this through a weekly bulletin. A committee of health experts, representing the Public Health Service, the Bureau of Home Economics, and the Red Cross, was to "work out plans and prepare information" for control of nutritional diseases. Public works agencies, especially those concerned with road construction, were to expand employment by undertaking projects in the drought areas. Credit agencies, acting under the leadership of a special credit coordinator, were to make new farm credits available.<sup>14</sup>

Of these tasks the provision of credit was considered the most critical. Consequently, Henry M. Robinson of the First National Bank of Los Angeles was quickly designated as credit coordinator, and out of a meeting with banking representatives came a series of proposals for providing loans. Local financial institutions, it was thought, might secure new credits from correspondent banks, the Federal Reserve Banks, the Federal Intermediate Credit Banks, or the Federal Farm Board. Where these local institutions were no longer in operation, "bankers, business men, and farmers" should proceed at once "to the formation of agricultural credit corporations" that would allow them to secure loans or rediscount paper with the intermediate credit banks.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> *Public Papers, 1930*, 336–39, 345–46; *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, Herbert Hoover: Containing the Public Messages, Speeches, and Statements of the President, January 1 to December 31, 1931* (Washington, 1976), 55.

<sup>14</sup> *Public Papers, 1930*, 336–39; "Report of National Drought Committee," pp. 1–8; United States Department of Agriculture, *Yearbook of Agriculture, 1931*, 3–5; "Memorandum No. 1—Drought Relief Organization," Aug. 30, 1930, Drought file, Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture, RG 16 (National Archives).

<sup>15</sup> "Banker's Report," Aug. 27, 1930, Statements of the Secretary file, Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture; "Information for the Report of Secretary Hyde on the Work Done on the Drought Problem," Oct. 14, 1930, Drought file, Hoover Papers.

<sup>16</sup> James L. Fieser, "Memorandum on Conference on Drought Committee at the White House," Aug. 21, 1930, Weekly Reports file, Drought Relief, Records of the American Red Cross; "Report of National Drought Committee," p. 17, Drought file, Hoover Papers; "Banker's Report"; United States Department of Agriculture, *Yearbook of Agriculture, 1931*, 33–34; [C. W. Warburton], "With the National Drought Relief Committee," Oct. 24, 1930, box 1, folder Q, Correspondence

Originally authorized by legislation in 1923, primarily to make medium-term farm credit available, such corporations were now seen as a way to give "courage to the normal banking machinery" in the stricken area. They were, moreover, clearly in line with the kind of organizational development that Hoover considered desirable and progressive. They would, it was hoped, be a form of local community action, drawing needed capital (\$250,000 for a state corporation and \$10,000 for one at the county level) from local sources, making use of local management, and strengthening the ties between interdependent community interests. In theory at least, bankers and businessmen, who were dependent on the local agricultural economy, would "unite in action" to revive that economy, thus benefiting both themselves and the general community. The credit corporations, then, would not only provide emergency credit relief but also serve "as permanent institutions in the aid of agriculture."<sup>16</sup>

The alternative to such action, as some were already suggesting, was a large congressional appropriation for emergency crop loans secured only by crop liens. The provision of such credit was not without precedent. But on no occasion had an appropriation for it ever exceeded \$6 million. And in the eyes of the president and other administration leaders, lending of this sort was both dangerous and undesirable. It posed administrative problems that the Department of Agriculture had no desire to tackle. It could lead to the extension of loans for which there was no "reasonable expectation of repayment," thus confounding credit with charity and "schooling people to disregard their obligations." And it could open the way to other and still more dangerous forms of federal lending. If Congress made a massive appropriation for drought stricken farmers, then congressmen from urban areas would demand a similar measure for unemployed workers.<sup>17</sup>

While seeking "sound" forms of credit mobilization, Hoover was also working with the Red Cross to make assistance available for those unable to secure loans or find new employment.<sup>18</sup> Over the years his relations with Red Cross leaders had been close, and this continued to be the case. The chairman of the

Relating to the Federal Drought Relief Committee, Records of the Federal Extension Service, RG 33 (National Archives). On the intermediate credit banks, see Claude L. Benner, *The Federal Intermediate Credit System* (New York, 1926).

<sup>17</sup> See C. W. Warburton to Harry Wilson, Oct. 29, 1930, box 8, Correspondence of the National Drought Relief Committee, 1930–1932, Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture; Warburton to Henry Robinson, Oct. 27, 1930, *ibid.*; Warburton to Chester Morrill, Oct. 2, 1930, box 4, *ibid.*; Warburton to A. Lane Cricher, Sept. 16, 1930, box 1, Correspondence Relating to the Federal Drought Relief Committee, Records of the Federal Extension Service; J. G. Puterbaugh to John G. Lonsdale, Sept. 8, 1930, Drought file, Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture; Arthur M. Hyde to State Drought Relief Chairmen, Aug. 30, 1930, *ibid.*; Hyde to J. E. McCord, Sept. 3, 1930, *ibid.*; "Report of National Drought Committee," p. 18. Hoover also believed that if borrowers could not repay a loan "without great suffering . . . charity should be the alternative." Fieser, "Memorandum on Conference on Drought Committee at the White House."

<sup>18</sup> Hoover to Hyde, Aug. 28, 1930, Agriculture file, Hoover Papers; John D. Cremer, "Memorandum Concerning Conferences between President Hoover and Representatives of the American Red Cross on August 8th and 11th, 1930, Relative to the Drought Situation," President's Emergency Committee for Employment file, Drought Relief, Records of the American Red Cross; A. L. Schafer, "Memorandum of Visit of Judge Payne to President Hoover," Aug. 13, 1930, Weekly Reports file, *ibid.*



organization, Judge John Barton Payne, had attended the governors' conference, had been appointed to the NDRC, and, at Hoover's request, had set aside \$5 million to assist drought victims. As Hoover saw it, such states as Ohio, Illinois, and Indiana, because of their "great wealth," might be left to handle their own relief problems. But Arkansas and parts of other South Central states would be in need of Red Cross relief. This area had yet to recover from the Mississippi Flood; and since its normal agencies of self-help were incapable of providing much aid, the Red Cross would have to carry much of the new burden. In all, he warned initially, the relief bill might come to several times the \$17 million raised for the Mississippi Flood.<sup>19</sup>

In Hoover's view the Red Cross was ideally suited to provide this kind of aid. It represented the best in organized voluntarism, an agency that not only was effective but also avoided the bureaucratic rigidities inherent in formal governmental institutions. It could, he believed, "take care of a vast amount of assistance that would not be covered by any legislation," and because it was so structured as to combine central coordination with local units staffed by local citizens it was capable of meeting community needs with "a sympathetic hand and a local understanding." If the local chapters required additional support, they could turn to the national chapter; and if it became necessary for the national headquarters to secure further funds, it could initiate a fund-raising drive to tap the generous American spirit of voluntary giving. It was America's "national insurance against the suffering of disaster." Since it was supported by the entire country and since the day might come "when any of us may have claims upon its assistance or protection," it was "not charity in the normal sense of gift without obligation."<sup>20</sup>

By the end of August Hoover believed that he had established a relief program capable of preventing human suffering and putting stricken farmers back on their feet. He also believed that he had avoided the kind of program that might threaten democratic self-government and other traditional American values. Through the new relief organization, with its 22 state committees and over 1,600 county committees, the manpower and resources of the public and private sectors could be drawn together and brought to bear in an efficient, apolitical, and comprehensive manner. The program could draw on the talents of a wide array of state and local leaders who were well acquainted with and concerned about their own local situations. Yet it necessitated no increases in the size of the federal bureaucracy or of the federal payroll. It allowed the burden of relief to rest at the local level, while permitting the federal government to assist and encourage, but not supplant, local efforts.<sup>21</sup>

Initially Hoover's actions received much praise. Will Rogers felt that it was "like old times to have Mr. Hoover taking personal charge of our heat and drought calamity." The *Literary Digest* found Hoover's relief plans "over-

<sup>19</sup> Fieser, "Memorandum on Conference on Drought Committee at the White House"; "Extract from Memorandum by Mr. Fieser Concerning Conference with the President," Sept. 5, 1930, *ibid.*; Hoover to John Barton Payne, Sept. 3, 1930, Red Cross file, Hoover Papers.

<sup>20</sup> *Public Papers, 1930*, 471, 563. See also *ibid.*, 185.

<sup>21</sup> Once the relief committees were organized, Hoover told the press, "we have an effective organization that can meet any emergency." *Ibid.*, 353.

whelmingly approved throughout the country." And the *Nation* concluded that "Mr. Hoover is not a man to be stampeded by a national disaster, and his attitude toward the present crisis seems to us to have been eminently sensible."<sup>22</sup> Such unanimity of opinion, however, would soon dissolve. In practice, as a growing number of observers quickly came to realize, Hoover's multi-faceted relief package was not functioning as he had envisioned.

The states and counties, to be sure, were quick to heed Hoover's call for organization. In the eyes of the national committee, they exhibited a "fine spirit of self-help" and a "desire to meet the needs of each community with local resources just as far as practicable." But as winter approached, it readily became apparent that conditions were simply overwhelming local efforts to provide employment and credit. Small yields and low prices had curtailed farm income, and the closing of coal mines, lumber mills, and factories was now pushing the supply of farm laborers to a record high at a time when demand for farm laborers had never been lower. In addition, there was a new wave of bank failures. Between November and February over five hundred banks in the drought area closed their doors, making it even more difficult for farmers to obtain financing.<sup>23</sup> Committee surveys in November indicated that as many as three hundred to four hundred thousand farmers were in need of loans. Eight of the most severely stricken states calculated that they alone would require \$64 million in emergency credits.<sup>24</sup>

Assistance from the national committee was limited. Although the administration released \$125 million in road funds and subsequently secured approval for \$116 million in federal works projects, these projects provided little employment for stricken farmers. Few of the projects were started over winter, and, in any case, many construction firms carried their own crews while farmers often lacked the necessary skills to qualify for the few jobs that opened up.<sup>25</sup>

Reduced freight rates also failed to work out as envisioned. In all, the Department of Agriculture certified over one thousand counties as being eligible for special rates, and in these the railroads initially made rate cuts ranging from 50 to 66 percent. But the effect on railroad income soon became too great,

<sup>22</sup> *New York Times*, Aug. 8, 1930, p. 19; "The 'Self-Help' Drought-Relief Program," *Literary Digest*, 106 (Aug. 30, 1930), 9; "The Great Drought," *Nation*, CXXXI (Aug. 20, 1930), 195.

<sup>23</sup> "Report of National Drought Committee," p. 6. For the data on bank failures, see *Federal Reserve Bulletin*, 16 (Dec. 1930), 783; *ibid.*, 17 (Jan. 1931), 26; *ibid.* (March 1931), 175. On the labor situation, see "Farm Labor Supply and Demand, September 1, 1929-1930," *Crops and Markets*, 7 (Sept. 1930), 335; "Farm Labor Supply and Demand, October 1, 1930," *ibid.* (Oct. 1930), 395; "Farm Labor Supply and Demand, December 1, 1929 and 1930," *ibid.* (Dec. 1930), 507; "Farm Labor, March 1, 1931," *ibid.*, 8 (March 1931), 86-87. For contemporary comments, see Russell Owen, "Drought Losses Burden the South," *New York Times*, Feb. 2, 1931, p. 2; Russell Owen, "Where Drought Sears Land and People," *ibid.*, Feb. 15, 1931, sec. 5, pp. 3, 22; Russell Owen, "Kentucky's People among Most Needy," *ibid.*, Feb. 6, 1931, p. 1; "Arkansas's Fight for Life," *Literary Digest*, 108 (Feb. 28, 1931), 5-6; John B. Hudson et al., "Drought: Field Reports from Five of the States Most Seriously Affected," *New Republic*, LXVI (Feb. 25, 1931), 37-41.

<sup>24</sup> "Report of National Drought Committee," pp. 10-17.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4; Warburton to Hyde, Sept. 6, 1930, Drought file, Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture.

and as the October renewal date drew closer, federal authorities faced growing railroad pressure to reduce the number of certified counties. They were forced to adopt a conservative stance in order to gain a thirty-day extension; after that, even Hoover could not persuade the railroads to continue their reductions. On December 1 the program was discontinued.<sup>26</sup>

The hope that credit needs could be met through the federal intermediate credit banks also proved to be misplaced. From almost every stricken state came the same complaint: the intermediate credit banks, because of their stiff security requirements, could offer little or no aid. Nor were Farm Loan Board officials disposed to liberalize the requirements. They stated emphatically that the banks were "not in a position to act as emergency relief institutions." Congress had established them as a "permanent system of banks," and if they were "to endure for the benefit of the farmers" they had to "conduct their business on a sound basis at all times." In order to preserve the salability of their bonds, they had to "use substantially the same degree of care . . . that any well-managed, progressive commercial bank would exercise when making loans."<sup>27</sup> There was, moreover, little enthusiasm for establishing credit corporations. Businessmen considered them a poor and risky investment, bankers saw them as potential competitors, and depressed conditions made it difficult to raise the necessary capital.<sup>28</sup>

For "thin-credit" farmers the relief program had provided no employment and no credit. Unless some other form of farm financing was made available, their only hope was Red Cross relief. Yet, like other parts of the relief package, Red Cross aid was being offered in considerably smaller amounts than Hoover had expected. Whereas in 1927 the organization had raised and expended over

<sup>26</sup> *Public Papers, 1930*, 577; Hyde to Hoover, Oct. 10, 1930, Drought file, Hoover Papers; Warburton to M. C. Tarver, Sept. 20, 1930, box 6, Correspondence of the National Drought Relief Committee, 1930-32, Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture; Warburton to E. C. McInnis, Sept. 22, 1930, box 3, *ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> *Fourteenth Annual Report of the Federal Farm Loan Board for the Year Ended December 31, 1930* (Washington, 1931), 1-4; Morrill to Warburton, Sept. 17, 1930, box 4, Correspondence of the National Drought Relief Committee, 1930-32, Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture. The Hoover administration was well aware of the fact that the intermediate credit banks were not supplying the needed credit. The secretary of the NDRC, Extension Director C. W. Warburton, wrote Henry Robinson that "the very general opinion expressed by State Drought Relief Committees is to the effect that credit associations rediscounting their notes with the Intermediate Credit Banks will not in any large way meet the problem of financing farmers in the drought area during the coming winter and spring. Very considerable numbers of farmers in the drought States will have no security to offer other than a good reputation and a crop lien, and such security is not acceptable in any large way by the Intermediate Credit Banks. These are farmers who normally would be financed by local agencies and who, because of one, two or more years of crop failures coupled with low prices for crops, no longer have collateral to offer. The inability of these local agencies to extend credit has been very materially curtailed because of bank failures during the past several years throughout the States now affected by drought, inability of existing banks to obtain payment on loans, and other financial conditions. These are people who do not ask and should not be offered charity, and which constitute a class of desirable citizens." Warburton to Robinson, Oct. 27, 1930, box 8, *ibid.* See also Hyde to Puterbaugh, Sept. 29, 1930, box 3, *ibid.*; Warburton to J. H. Skinner, Sept. 17, 1930, Loans (Seed Grain) file, *ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Hyde to Skinner, Sept. 11, 1930, Drought file, Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture; Warburton to J. R. Hutcheson, Nov. 10, 1932, box 2, Correspondence of the National Drought Relief Committee, 1930-32, *ibid.*; Hyde to Hoover, Feb. 14, 1931, Drought file, Hoover Papers; Campbell B. Hodges to Patrick J. Hurley, Feb. 13, 1931, Red Cross file, *ibid.*

\$17 million for food, clothing, seed, and shelter, in 1930 it wanted to limit its expenditure to its \$5 million disaster reserve, and its leaders refused to undertake anything approaching the relief program that they had conducted during the flood. From August to December the only activity it pursued was to distribute seeds for fall plantings of vegetables and forage crops. In January, when it finally did begin a general feeding program, the individual food allotments were often well below what constituted a standard diet.<sup>29</sup>

Traditionally, the Red Cross had always refused to provide relief for unemployment or crop disasters. Although Hoover seemed unaware of it, it "came as something of a revolution" when the Red Cross acceded to presidential wishes and agreed that the severity of the drought necessitated a break with these established policies. Within the organization there were fears that the burden would prove too great and might lead inexorably into other unwanted relief activities. The flood, after all, had involved only 170 counties. The drought involved at least 1,000; and a relief program of the same scale would "dwarf by comparison" anything that the Red Cross had done since World War I, would cost a "staggering sum," and might, "temporarily at least, bankrupt the Red Cross." Support, moreover, would have to come from urban areas. Since large cities faced their own serious relief situations, the Red Cross doubted whether it could successfully raise funds unless it agreed to shoulder part of the urban unemployment burden. Participation on a major scale might mean its transformation from a disaster relief agency to an unemployment relief and welfare agency.<sup>30</sup>

Caught between these considerations and Hoover's insistence that the Red Cross play a major relief role, the organization's leaders opted for a "conservative" program that would minimize their own role and shift the burden of relief onto "governmental action" and the "local community." Expenditures were to be held to an "absolute minimum," relief was to be "localized" as much as possible, and "every effort" was to be put forth to avoid "a general relief program such as followed the Mississippi Valley flood." In September, Vice-chairman James L. Fieser wrote Hoover that the "outstanding need" was to place "pressure upon . . . [the] state committees to make certain that they do their utmost to develop local and state resources" and thereby relieve "pressure on Red Cross benevolence." Local chapters were also instructed to exhaust every possible channel of aid at the local level before turning to the national organization for financial assistance. As one disaster relief director put

<sup>29</sup> For a review of the Red Cross's relief work, see *Relief Work in the Drought of 1930-31: Official Report of Operations of the American National Red Cross (Covering Activities from August, 1930, to End of Fiscal Year, June 30, 1931)* (Washington, 1931). See also DeWitt Smith to J. Reddy, Sept. 10, 1930, General Plans and Policies file, Drought Relief, Records of the American Red Cross; James L. Fieser, "The Winter's Outlook," Reports and Statistics, General, file, *ibid.*; Warburton to Smith, Jan. 26, 1931, box 1, Correspondence of the National Drought Relief Committee, 1930-32, Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture.

<sup>30</sup> Smith to James L. Fieser, Aug. 24, 1930, General Plans and Policies file, Drought Relief, Records of the American Red Cross; Smith to Fieser, Sept. 6, 1930, Weekly Reports file, *ibid.*; Fieser, "Winter's Outlook."

it, "cash grants" from the national organization were "the last words on the last page of our dictionary."<sup>31</sup>

As a part of this strategy, Red Cross officials were anxious to minimize both the estimates of need and publicity concerning the organization's obligations and activities. Its estimates of how many people would need relief were always lower than those from "non-Red Cross sources." They varied from an "absolute minimum" of 107,000 families to figures as high as 251,567 families. But even as the numbers rose, the national headquarters kept insisting that if relief were administered "quietly," \$5 million would be sufficient. The total relief bill, Fieser stressed, would depend "upon the type of approach which is made to the situation. If the relief needs and other needs are handled quietly, it is evident to everyone that much less aid will be required than if the existence of relief funds were advertised." Red Cross officials wanted no part of any fund-raising efforts, even though the absence of such efforts would leave the "poor country people . . . out on the end of the limb." They refused to conduct surveys of need for fear that these would attract attention. When Hoover suggested that the organization might "place a strong worker in each of the afflicted states," Payne insisted that this would be "putting the Red Cross too much into the foreground, thus attracting unjustified calls for assistance."<sup>32</sup>

The drought experience clearly reveals the enormous disparity between the nature of the Red Cross and Hoover's conception of it as a national insurance society dedicated to the principle of voluntarism and, because of its decentralized structure, able to respond quickly to distress at the local level. Hoover's confidence in it was so great that he believed it to be the "only agency" that could "actually find out" what the level of individual distress was and "relieve it." Yet its relief policies were not dictated by the level of need in the stricken area; they were dictated by how Red Cross leaders interpreted the needs and requirements of their organization. The Red Cross realized that its actions were limited to the "extent to which the public is prepared to support it financially," and it was convinced that the depressed conditions made liberal financial support impossible. The severity of the drought seemed to necessitate a large relief operation. But a massive relief program endangered the institution's financial stability and threatened to force a redefinition of its social purpose. Under these circumstances, it sought to limit the scope of its relief activities.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*; Payne to Hoover, Nov. 18, 1930, Information Sent to President Hoover file, *ibid.*; Bondy to Chapter Service Staff, Dec. 10, 1930, General Plans and Policies file, *ibid.*; A. L. Schafer, "Duties of the Governor's State Drought Relief Commission (as we see them now)," Aug. 1930, Committees and Conferences file, *ibid.*; Fieser to Hoover, Sept. 26, 1930, Red Cross file, Hoover Papers.

<sup>32</sup> "Report of National Drought Committee," p. 9; Fieser, "Winter's Outlook"; Smith to A. L. Schafer, Dec. 17, 1930, *ibid.*; A. L. Schafer, "Memorandum Concerning Conference between President Hoover and Judge Payne Concerning the Drought Situation," Aug. 18, 1930, Weekly Reports file, *ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> "Extract from Memorandum by Mr. Fieser Concerning Conference with the President"; Smith to Fieser, Sept. 6, 1930, *ibid.*; "Minutes of Meetings to Consider Drought Relief Program," Oct. 30, 1930, Conferences and Committees file, *ibid.*

The drought experience also reveals that the Red Cross practiced a highly constrained and controlled form of voluntarism, a form that contrasted sharply with Hoover's notion of the voluntary ideal. Like other private welfare agencies of the New Era, the Red Cross was dominated by a professional staff whose commitment to the organization was usually greater than its commitment to public needs. This staff was concerned with the perceived threats to the organization. Since the Red Cross Central Committee wanted to limit expenditures to \$500,000 until January 1, the national staff, despite "great pressure from several hundred counties to start a feeding program," stuck with the strategy of "localization" and refused all appeals until late December. As one relief director reported at the time, there was considerable evidence that "actual suffering from want of food and clothing" was much greater than the national leaders realized. But field representatives had "gone into their counties feeling that [the] National Headquarters would prefer to close its eyes to actual suffering just as long as possible."<sup>34</sup>

In operation, the Red Cross structure seemed as unresponsive to local needs as the kind of public bureaucracies that Hoover disdained. It was, to be sure, a voluntary order, staffed by private citizens and dependent on voluntary donations. But this did not mean that it was inherently freer, less bureaucratic, or more beneficent than any other large formal organization—public or private.

For the first time in his career, Hoover had organized a relief operation that was incapable of supplying substantive relief. Effective action, it seemed, would require either a drastic liberalization of federal credit or a drastic expansion of the Red Cross's relief efforts. Yet neither was forthcoming. What developed instead was a situation in which the administration was relying heavily on the Red Cross and on state and local resources, while the Red Cross was pushing the relief burden onto state and local resources and onto the national government.<sup>35</sup> As winter approached, the crucial question for the state committees was how new forms of aid might be secured.<sup>36</sup>

By late October, the Hoover administration was also moving toward the position that additional measures were needed. Over the winter, the president now felt, relief needs in the drought area and the cities might exceed the resources of the Red Cross and community chests by as much as \$150 million. Both he and his close adviser, Undersecretary of the Treasury Ogden Mills, believed that the mounting level of hardship posed a serious challenge to established relief practices. And they were particularly anxious about what the

<sup>34</sup> Roy Lubove, *The Professional Altruist: The Emergence of Social Work as a Career, 1880-1930* (Cambridge, 1965), 157-221. Fieser to D. H. Holbrook, Oct. 27, 1930, Community Chests and Councils file, Drought Relief, Records of the American Red Cross; Schafer to Fieser, Dec. 16, 1930, General Plans and Policies file, *ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> When drought-stricken farmers wrote to the National Drought Relief Committee or to the Department of Agriculture asking for assistance, Warburton generally responded: "If you and your family are in need of food and clothing, we are quite sure that the Red Cross will be able to take care of you." Warburton to R. W. Gilliland, Sept. 17, 1930, Correspondence of the National Drought Relief Committee, 1930-32, Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture.

<sup>36</sup> Harry F. Byrd to Warburton, Oct. 18, 1930, Drought file, *ibid.*; B. F. Thompson to Warburton, Oct. 15, 1930, box 3, Correspondence of the National Drought Relief Committee, 1930-32, *ibid.*; Hutcheson to Warburton, Sept. 26, 1930, box 2, *ibid.*

third session of the Seventy-first Congress might do when it convened on December 2. Clearly, there would be pressure for relief measures that might open the way to an "un-American" dole system.<sup>37</sup>

As noted previously, Hoover wanted if at all possible to avoid relief measures that required congressional approval. He viewed Congress as an obstructionist body, dominated by regional and economic interests. Any congressional program, he feared, would introduce, or at least set precedents for, the kind of statist measures that would injure the American system. To "lead Congress" away from such legislation it now seemed imperative that an alternative and more "constructive" initiative be undertaken. The result was a proposal by Mills calling for a nationwide drive to raise new relief funds.<sup>38</sup>

The proposed drive would have amounted to the largest peacetime voluntary relief effort ever conducted, and Hoover and Mills were confident that "unless there was something fundamentally wrong with the American system," it would succeed. For weeks Hoover met with community chest leaders, Red Cross leaders, and other officials. They discussed amounts ranging from \$15 million to \$200 million, and as discussions proceeded they veered between proposals that would have placed the campaign under the sole auspices of the Red Cross and those calling for a national committee made up of all the relief organizations involved in drought and unemployment relief. Out of the discussions an informal organization, consisting largely of community chest officials, finally emerged. But the envisioned drive never materialized.<sup>39</sup>

One obstacle was Red Cross attitudes. Although taking no formal position, the organization remained firmly opposed to the drive and to the idea of acting as a relief agency for the nation's unemployed. Community chest leaders also had doubts about the proposal. They feared that one large campaign would fail, leaving individual cities far short of their financial needs. Others were afraid that a large drive would stifle local initiative and dampen efforts by employers to maintain normal levels of wages and employment. And finally, the head of the newly created President's Emergency Committee for Employment,<sup>40</sup> Ar-

<sup>37</sup> Fieser to Jeffers, Oct. 22, 1930, Campaigns, Collections, and Contributions file, Drought Relief, Records of the American Red Cross; Fieser to Payne, Oct. 27, 1930, President's Emergency Committee for Employment file, *ibid.*; James L. Fieser, "Judge Payne's conferences at White House on drought relief and unemployment, October 23 and 28, 1930," Oct. 30, 1930, Campaigns, Collections, and Contributions file, *ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*; Henry L. Stimson Diary, Oct. 21, 1930 (Yale University Library, New Haven); On Hoover and Congress, see Jordan A. Schwarz, "Hoover and Congress: Politics, Personality, and Perspective in the Presidency," in *Hoover Presidency*, ed. Fausold and Mazuzan, 87-100.

<sup>39</sup> Fieser to Jeffers, Oct. 22, 1930, Campaigns, Collections, and Contributions file, Drought Relief, Records of the American Red Cross; James L. Fieser, "Drought Relief and Unemployment—President's Committee," Oct. 28, 1930, *ibid.*; Fieser to Mrs. Frank Hammar, Nov. 7, 1930, *ibid.*; Fieser to Bibb Graves, Nov. 13, 1930, *ibid.*; Allen T. Burns and C. M. Bookman, "National Committee on Unemployment and Drought Relief Funds," Oct. 27, 1930, Community Chests and Councils file, *ibid.*; Ogden Mills to Homer Folks, Nov. 1, 1930, Ogden Mills Papers (Library of Congress).

<sup>40</sup> The President's Emergency Committee for Employment (PECE) was established on October 17, 1930, and on October 21 Arthur Woods took charge of the organization. Its purpose was to organize city, county, and state unemployment organizations to cope with the mounting unemployment crisis. It was, then, a typical Hooverian organization. It is interesting to note that Woods and PECE staffers saw the drought as one of the most difficult and serious problems with

thur Woods, came to oppose the plan, arguing that the administration should seek to expand employment through public works, not to expand relief activities. Under the circumstances the idea had to be scrapped, and Hoover was forced to defend the American system by different means.<sup>41</sup>

In November, the administration reluctantly agreed to support an authorization for crop production loans. Support for such a measure had been growing among state relief committees for some time, several state members having advocated appropriations of up to \$125 million. James V. Aswell, a Louisiana congressman and the ranking minority member of the House Agriculture Committee, agreed to help. He and committee representatives settled on a figure of \$60 million as an "absolute minimum," and Secretary Hyde seemed amenable to this sum. When the state chairmen met in Washington on November 20, Hyde told them that there was "no question as to the need for Federal loans for seed, feed, and fertilizer" and assured them that Hoover was prepared to recommend the measure to Congress. On another point, however, Hyde was emphatic: he insisted that the loans be limited to the purpose of agricultural production and that farmers should not be permitted to use the loans for the purchase of food or other human necessities. It was essential, he said, to avoid "anything that even remotely resembles the dole," and he feared that if the loans provided for the purchase of food, then similar aid might have to be extended to urban areas. Shortly thereafter, Aswell, assuming that the administration was behind him, submitted a bill authorizing \$60 million in loans to the House Agriculture Committee. And Charles McNary, the chairman of the Senate Agriculture Committee, also believing that the administration supported the bill, agreed to sponsor the measure in the Senate.<sup>42</sup>

The November midterm elections brought Democratic electoral victories likely to strengthen antiadministration sentiment in the Seventy-second Congress. But when the lame duck session of the Seventy-first Congress convened, Sen. Joseph T. Robinson and six other Democratic leaders moved to stifle speculation that they intended to force Hoover to call a special session of the next Congress. They stated publicly that they would neither filibuster appropriations measures nor delay bills providing for the public's "general welfare." In addition, Robinson met with the president, and the press reported that the

which they had to deal. See Fred C. Croxton to James C. Lawrence, Dec. 6, 1930, President's Emergency Committee for Employment and President's Organization on Unemployment Relief Papers (Herbert Hoover Library), and Arthur G. Woods Diary, Nov. 19, Dec. 19, 1930, Jan. 28, Feb. 7, 1931 (Herbert Hoover Library). On PECE, see E. P. Hayes, *Activities of the President's Emergency Committee for Employment (October 17, 1930–August 19, 1931)* (Concord, N.H., 1936).

<sup>41</sup> Smith to Payne, Nov. 1, 1930, Campaigns, Collections, and Contributions file, Drought Relief, Records of the American Red Cross; Fieser to Payne, Nov. 14, 1930, Community Chests and Councils file, *ibid.*; Association of Community Chests and Councils, "Confidential Information to All Chests, Members of the Association," Jan. 31, 1931, *ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> Committee on Agriculture, *Drought and Storm Relief—Agricultural Experiment Station Work in Porto Rico*, 17–20; U.S. Congress, House, Committee on Agriculture, *Drought and Storm Relief*, 71 Cong., 3 sess., Dec. 5, 1930, pp. 66–73; "Report of National Drought Committee," pp. 17–18; *Congressional Record*, 71 Cong., 3 sess., Dec. 1, 1930, p. 7; *ibid.*, Dec. 15, 1930, p. 697; Fieser to Payne, "Confidential Memorandum," Nov. 21, 1930, Federal, National, and State Committees and Conferences file, Drought Relief, Records of the American Red Cross.



two agreed on drought relief measures.<sup>43</sup> It appeared that the session would be tranquil.

At this point, however, Hoover committed one of the gravest blunders of his presidency. Without consulting Secretary Hyde, the president asked Extension Director C. W. Warburton to draft a bill authorizing only \$25 million in loans and stipulating that none of the money could be spent for food.<sup>44</sup> The fear of a large budget deficit, of making unsound loans, and of establishing precedents for federal relief programs all seem to have been motivating factors.<sup>45</sup> In all likelihood, Warburton, who was also the secretary of the NDRC, encouraged Hoover's decision. Although the extension director had administered every loan authorization since 1923, he believed strongly that it was not the proper function of the Extension Service or the Department of Agriculture to carry out such an ad hoc credit program. On the basis of his previous experience in administering the loans, Warburton also believed that it was unnecessary to appropriate a sum as high as \$60 million. He was confident that if the authorization were limited to seed, feed, and fertilizer \$25 million would be adequate.<sup>46</sup>

Other important officials within the department, however, seriously doubted that \$25 million would meet the credit needs of the stricken farmers. When the bill was made public, Nils Olsen, the chief of the Bureau of Agricultural Economics (BAE), assigned two senior staff economists to estimate how large the loan authorization had to be to permit drought-stricken farmers to purchase supplies of only fertilizer, feed, and seed. The BAE economists provided Olsen with two different estimates, but their results—\$55,645,000 and \$61,755,000—were both more than twice the sum proposed by Hoover. Furthermore, while Warburton based his estimates largely on his "previous experience," these economists concluded that conditions were so much worse in 1930 that to determine the size of the authorization by relying on past authorizations was inappropriate. As they reported in their memorandum, the "double effect of reduced production and low prices" and the "near

<sup>43</sup> *New York Times*, Dec. 1, 1930, p. 1.

<sup>44</sup> Nils A. Olsen Diary, Dec. 9, 1930 (Iowa State University Library, Ames). Nils A. Olsen was the chief of the Bureau of Agricultural Economics. He recorded that Arthur M. Hyde "could not understand why Warburton had gone up and advocated 25 million and how the bill had gotten into the hands of [Gilbert Nelson] Haugen" (chairman of the House Agriculture Committee). Hyde later told Olsen, "The President of these United States requested our friend, Mr. Warburton, to support a sum of 25 millions, to draft a bill covering that item, eliminating food, and to place it in the hands of the Chairman of the Committee on Agriculture. So when the President of the United States wants a thing done, it must be done."

<sup>45</sup> Hoover continued to dislike making loans on nothing more than a crop lien; at the same time, he was extremely concerned about minimizing federal expenditures. See his statements in *Public Papers*, 1930, 517, 541–42. The administration also vigorously opposed the food provision. Hyde led the fight on this issue. For his fear that if it were included in the bill, then similar aid would have to be extended to unemployed workers in large cities, see Committee on Agriculture, *Drought and Storm Relief*, 56–60; Hyde to Clarence Roberts, Jan. 22, 1931, Loans (Seed) file, Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture; and Hyde to McCord, Dec. 18, 1930, Loans (Seed Grain) file, *ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> Warburton to Carl Williams, Oct. 7, 1930, Loans (Seed Grain) file, Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture; Warburton to Hyde, Dec. 16, 1930, *ibid.*; Warburton to Thompson, Dec. 13, 1930, box 3, Correspondence of the National Drought Relief Committee, 1930–32, *ibid.*; Warburton to H. G. Hastings, March 24, 1931, box 8, *ibid.*

break-down in the existing short-term credit facilities for farmers'' meant that the credit situation was ''materially different from that existing when previous seed grain loan legislation has been enacted.'' On December 8, Olsen submitted the two estimates to Hyde along with the statement: ''it seems that a substantially larger amount than the twenty-five million dollars would be required to cover the production credit needs of the drought stricken farmers.'' Hyde, however, refused to pursue the issue and, in his unswerving loyalty to Hoover, stood steadfastly by the new bill.<sup>47</sup>

When the new bill was submitted to Congress, a furious Aswell charged the Agriculture Department and the administration with ''the cheapest, political, pinhead action I have ever had thrust in my face.'' <sup>48</sup> The action precipitated a debate over drought relief that was to continue for two-and-one-half months, one that aligned stunned congressmen from the drought states against administration supporters. Technically, it was a debate over whether to appropriate \$25 million or \$60 million and whether to permit recipients of the loans to purchase food. Its ramifications, however, were much more far-reaching. At a time when the nation's private relief agencies and its heritage of local relief work were being severely tested, the loan bill controversy was also a debate over the ability of the nation's traditional relief policies to cope with the large burdens they were facing.<sup>49</sup>

Supporters of the Hoover bill usually employed two general lines of defense, the first of which relied upon ''expert'' assurances, such as those of Warburton and Payne, that the administration's program would provide adequate relief. Warburton told congressional committees that if the loans were limited to seed, feed, and fertilizer \$25 million would be sufficient. There was, he said, always a ''great deal of hysteria'' about the inability of local financial institutions to provide credit, and for this reason one had to discount the estimates made by the state relief committees. Payne assured Congress that the Red Cross had adequate resources to aid all drought sufferers. And Hoover's own judgment, given his reputation as a master of relief operations, was not to be discounted. As his supporters saw it, the combined expertise of Hoover, Warburton, and Payne constituted the ''finest trained judgment in matters of relief'' that the nation had ever possessed.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>47</sup> Fred L. Garlock to N. A. Olsen, Dec. 8, 1930, Resolutions—S.J.211—file, *ibid.*; Norman J. Wall to Olsen, Dec. 8, 1930, *ibid.*; Olsen to Hyde, Dec. 8, 1930, *ibid.* On Hyde's loyalty to Hoover, see Olsen Diary, Jan. 8, Jan. 12, 1931.

<sup>48</sup> Committee on Agriculture, *Drought and Storm Relief—Agricultural Experiment Station Work in Porto Rico*, 20.

<sup>49</sup> Although it attracted far more attention than the relief proposals put forth by Robert Wagner and Robert LaFollette, Jr., the drought debate has often been overlooked by historians. It is not mentioned in Jordan Schwarz, *The Interregnum of Despair: Hoover, Congress, and the Depression* (Urbana, Ill., 1970), and Albert U. Romasco, *The Poverty of Abundance: Hoover, the Nation, the Depression* (New York, 1965). For contemporary comments on the debate, see ''Anarchy and the Red Cross,'' *Nation*, CXXXII (Feb. 11, 1931), 144; ''Behind the Red Cross Battle,'' *New Republic*, LXV (Jan. 28, 1931), 284–86; ''Turning Men into Mules,'' *New York Herald Tribune*, Dec. 18, 1930, p. 18; *ibid.*, Jan. 17, 1931, p. 10; *New York Times*, Jan. 17, 1931, p. 16.

<sup>50</sup> For Warburton's statements, see U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Agriculture and Forestry, *Relief for Drought Stricken Areas*, 71 Cong., 3 sess., Dec. 5, 1930, pp. 45, 38–52; Committee on Agriculture, *Drought and Storm Relief—Agricultural Experiment Station in Porto Rico*, 4–13;

The second line of defense was to argue that the Aswell bill threatened traditional American relief policies. If passed, the argument ran, the \$60 million authorization and the food provision would impede local action, usurp private responsibility, establish dangerous precedents for a dole system, and impair the work of the Red Cross. The food provision, in particular, so House Majority Leader John Q. Tilson argued, was of a "revolutionary character." It would mean granting similar aid to unemployed workers, thus "in effect dispensing charity and disguising it by calling it a loan," rather than handling the problem through America's "great insurance company," the Red Cross.<sup>51</sup> In addition, such an appropriation would place the burden of relief on the federal government at a time when the budget was undergoing a severe strain. It would do all of these things unnecessarily. If supplemented by Red Cross, local, and state aid, \$25 million would be sufficient.<sup>52</sup>

By contrast, the congressmen from the drought states lashed out at Hoover's bill, denouncing it as hopelessly insufficient, insisting that loans were the best kind of relief, and denying that the food provision broke with any established relief policies. Their own states, they argued, had done their "level best" to meet their relief needs, but local resources were simply not enough. This had been attested to, after all, by Hoover's own committee system. The Aswell bill, they also noted, was an authorization, not an appropriation. If less than \$60 million were needed, the surplus could be returned to the Treasury. Nor were they impressed with pleas of budget constraints, particularly in view of the hundreds of millions of dollars being granted as shipping and railroad subsidies and in view of the fact that the Treasury had just returned \$16 million in taxes to a single estate. The aid they were asking was not only small in amount but, unlike some forms of aid, would eventually be repaid with interest and find its way back into federal coffers.<sup>53</sup>

Food provisions, as Hoover's critics saw it, were also essential. There was no "use of feeding the mules and the chickens and livestock" while "starving the people to death." Nor could one hope for anything approaching adequate relief from Red Cross funds. In his state alone, Sen. Thaddeus Caraway of Arkansas pointed out, 250,000 people were in need of assistance, which meant that, even if no aid went to other states, the Red Cross's remaining \$4.5 million would provide each of the needy with only eighteen dollars for two months. Payne, it was noted, seemed to have no idea of the number of people needing

Committee on Agriculture, *Drought and Storm Relief*, 71-74. For John Barton Payne's testimony, see U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Appropriations, *Drought Relief and Unemployment—LaFollette Resolution*, 71 Cong., 3 sess., Jan. 6, 1931, pp. 8-29. For the congressional debate, see *Congressional Record*, 71 Cong., 3 sess., Dec. 18, 1930, p. 1054; *ibid.*, Dec. 12, 1930, p. 629; *ibid.*, Dec. 15, 1930, pp. 696, 752, 754, 766; *ibid.*, Dec. 17, 1930, pp. 981-83; *ibid.*, Dec. 18, 1930, pp. 1055-56.

<sup>51</sup> *Congressional Record*, 71 Cong., 3 sess., Dec. 12, 1930, pp. 628-29; *ibid.*, Dec. 15, 1930, pp. 754, 766; *ibid.*, Dec. 17, 1930, pp. 981-83, 971, 977.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, Dec. 15, 1930, pp. 751-52, 754; *ibid.*, Dec. 16, 1930, p. 895; *ibid.*, Dec. 17, 1930, p. 995.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, Dec. 9, 1930, pp. 374, 393-99; *ibid.*, Dec. 16, 1930, pp. 895-96, *ibid.*, Dec. 17, 1930, pp. 974-76, 986-90; *ibid.*, Jan. 6, 1931, pp. 1484-85; *ibid.*, Jan. 16, 1930, p. 2363; *ibid.*, Jan. 17, 1930, p. 2441; Committee on Agriculture, *Drought and Storm Relief—Agricultural Experiment Station Work in Porto Rico*, 49. Similar statements may be found in the congressional hearings already cited.

assistance, and he had no surveys or other hard data to back up the confident assurances he was making.<sup>54</sup>

In the eyes of the drought bloc, moreover, relief loans were clearly superior to Red Cross assistance. Previous loans, it was pointed out, had been repaid at levels of 80 percent or higher. The goal, as it had been in the past, should remain one of helping people through a calamity over which they had no control, thus sparing them the humiliation of accepting charity—or what amounted to the same thing, Red Cross relief. As Joseph T. Robinson put it, “a man who is honest, who is capable, who is diligent, who is proud, . . . ought not to be degraded by being required to take charity for himself and have credit advanced for his mule or his horse.”<sup>55</sup>

Nor was there anything inherently un-American or revolutionary about the food provision. It provided, so the drought bloc insisted again and again, for loans rather than doles, for credit relief not unemployment relief. It was in line with dozens of actions, dating back to 1803, in which Congress had assisted disaster victims by appropriating funds for food, clothing, and other forms of aid and with the more recent appropriations—proposed and supported by Hoover—of millions of dollars for the relief of Europe and Russia. It seemed to be “right,” Joseph T. Robinson remarked, “to go into the Treasury of the United States to feed those in distress in foreign counties, but from some mysterious and inexplicable process of reasoning, it [was] wrong to give to our own citizens relief from funds which they have contributed to the Treasury of the United States.” Perhaps the best way to secure food for the distressed, Sen. Alben Barkley added, “would be to move them to China and Russia.”<sup>56</sup>

In the Senate the drought bloc easily carried the day. Not only did Republican progressives actively support the more generous bill, but Senator McNary remained firmly committed to the \$60 million appropriation and the food provision, and other Republican senators refused to attack or even vote against their respected colleague. In the House, however, the administration forces were stronger, and after the House Committee on Agriculture increased the loan authorization by \$5 million, the House passed a bill that called for \$30 million in loans and no food provision. Immediately prior to the Christmas break a conference committee agreed to split the difference on the loan authorization and to drop the food provision.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>54</sup> Committee on Agriculture and Forestry, *Relief for Drought Stricken Areas*, 53; *Congressional Record*, 71 Cong., 3 sess., Jan. 7, 1931, p. 1538. Payne readily admitted that the Red Cross could not estimate the actual financial requirements of the relief effort. See Committee on Appropriations, *Drought Relief and Unemployment—LaFollette Resolution*, 10. See also U.S. Congress, House, Committee on Appropriations, *Senate Amendments to the Interior Department Appropriation Bill for 1932 (H.R. 14675)*, 71 Cong., 3 sess., Jan. 28, 1931, pp. 161–62.

<sup>55</sup> *Congressional Record*, 71 Cong., 3 sess., Dec. 9, 1930, pp. 375, 395; *ibid.*, Dec. 15, 1930, pp. 755–56; *ibid.*, Jan. 5, 1931, p. 1368; *ibid.*, Jan. 14, 1931, pp. 2127–28, 2131; Committee on Agriculture and Forestry, *Relief for Drought Stricken Areas*, 12.

<sup>56</sup> *Congressional Record*, 71 Cong., 3 sess., Dec. 9, 1930, p. 398; *ibid.*, Dec. 15, 1930, p. 763; *ibid.*, Dec. 17, 1930, pp. 975, 990, 994; *ibid.*, Jan. 14, 1931, pp. 2143–45; Paul U. Kellogg, “Drought and the Red Cross,” *Survey*, LXV (Feb. 15, 1931), 572.

<sup>57</sup> *Congressional Record*, 71 Cong., 3 sess., Dec. 9, 1930, pp. 393–94; *ibid.*, Dec. 15, 1930, p. 697; *Congressional Digest*, 10 (Jan. 1931), 28; *ibid.* (Feb. 1931), 59.

When Congress reconvened, however, Caraway promptly introduced an amendment to add \$15 million for food loans to the \$45 million agreed to for crop loans. The Senate quickly approved the amendment, but in the House action on it was stalled for nearly a week by a proposal that confirmed the Hoover administration's worst fears. Fiorella LaGuardia of New York proposed that the food loan authorization be raised to \$30 million and made applicable to all sectors of the nation, rural and urban. His people too, he said, needed "rescue," and those who favored food relief for rural areas could not "in conscience, in good morals, or in law deny the same relief to the unfortunates of the cities." For a time LaGuardia captured the nation's headlines. But he found no strong support for his measure and soon relented. The House then rejected the Caraway amendment, and both houses finally agreed to the conference committee bill.<sup>58</sup> The figure, it seemed, would be \$45 million, none of which could be lent for food purchases.

In the midst of these congressional skirmishes, an incident occurred in Arkansas that sharply dramatized the debate over the Red Cross. On January 5, 1931, the nation's newspapers carried stories of a food riot in England, Arkansas, a small town about twenty miles south of Little Rock. First reports indicated that some four to five hundred people of both races had broken into local stores in a desperate attempt to feed their families. These reports, however, turned out to be greatly exaggerated. Only forty people were directly involved, and there had been no actual violence or destruction. The incident was touched off when the local Red Cross chapter ran out of printed application blanks and decided to stop issuing requisitions. This angered the people who had yet to receive aid, and it was this group that threatened to march on local stores to obtain the needed food. A riot was not inconceivable. But cooler heads prevailed, and food was distributed without the forms.<sup>59</sup>

Nothing in this incident supported Hoover's conception of the Red Cross as an agency that administered aid with a "sympathetic hand and local understanding." Rather, the affair revealed the Red Cross as far from immune to the bureaucratic rigidities and arbitrary methods that large public organizations supposedly exhibited. Even the process of receiving Red Cross aid was bureaucratic. Applicants had to fill out lengthy forms that asked for a detailed statement of the individual's sources of income and property and for a minimum of three references proving need and residency.<sup>60</sup>

On January 6, in the wake of the Arkansas turmoil, Payne again reassured a Senate committee that the Red Cross could meet all relief needs with its pres-

<sup>58</sup> *Congressional Digest*, 10 (Feb. 1931), 59; *Congressional Record*, 71 Cong., 3 sess., Jan. 9, 1931, pp. 1885-86; *ibid.*, Jan. 13, 1931, pp. 2081, 2083, 2087, 2090; *ibid.*, Jan. 15, 1931, p. 2297.

<sup>59</sup> J. F. Lucey to Frank Pane, Jan. 8, 1931, Unemployment file, PECE Correspondence, Hoover Papers; Lucey press statement, Jan. 16, 1931, *ibid.* The best published account of the incident is Cowley, "Drought and the Dole," 94-95.

<sup>60</sup> Committee on Appropriations, *Senate Amendments to the Interior Department Appropriation Bill for 1932 (H.R. 14675)*, 156-57; Cowley, "Drought and the Dole," 98; A. L. Schafer, "When Hunger Followed Drought," *Survey*, LXV (March 1, 1931), 581-83. Other sources reported that the England incident was one of four similar incidents. See T. Roy Reid to Warburton, Jan. 22, 1931, Red Cross file, Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture; *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, Jan 5, 1931, pp. 1, 3.

ent resources. Even as he testified, however, the Red Cross was being deluged with requests for expanded feeding programs. One field representative reported that "the size of the task . . . is growing by leaps and bounds. Estimates become obsolete a few days after they are prepared. . . . The job reminds one of a snowball rolling down a hill. No one can tell how large it will be by the time it reaches the bottom." Realizing that its disaster reserve would soon be depleted, the Red Cross did an abrupt about-face and, on January 10, initiated a \$10 million drive for drought relief.<sup>61</sup>

The Red Cross's sudden reversal did little to allay the suspicions of the congressmen from the drought states. When Payne refused to state that the added \$10 million would provide for more generous food allotments, the drought bloc insisted that further governmental action was needed. Since it appeared futile to try to pass another loan bill, Joseph T. Robinson put forth an entirely new relief scheme. On January 14, he proposed that the federal government give \$25 million to the Red Cross, which could be used to relieve distress in both rural and urban areas.<sup>62</sup>

Of all the drought proposals, this one was least likely to win Hoover's support or acquiescence, and, in fact, he seemed to view it as the most dangerous scheme yet put forth. Writing in his diary, Secretary of State Henry Stimson recorded that for Hoover, "the issue comes down to fundamentals. . . . if Congress makes this precedent of donating money to the Red Cross for charity, it will be the beginning of the dole in this country and will also mean the end of the wonderful activities of the Red Cross." The president, Stimson happily added, was "full of fight" over the issue.<sup>63</sup>

On January 18, in an attempt to spur donations to the Red Cross drive and thus head off the Robinson proposal, Hoover appointed fifty-seven prominent American leaders—with Calvin Coolidge as honorary chairman—to a national committee that was to help direct the Red Cross campaign drive. In his public statement the president said that meeting relief needs through the Red Cross was the "American way." It was, he insisted, "essential that we should maintain the sound American tradition and spirit of voluntary aid in such emergency and should not undermine that spirit which has made our Red Cross the outstanding guardian of our people in time of disaster."<sup>64</sup> In conjunction with the president's statement, the Red Cross, which wanted no part of any urban relief work, also quickly declared that it would not accept the \$25 million allocation. The \$10 million, Payne told Congress, would, once it was collected, "meet the needs of the drought situation."<sup>65</sup>

In Congress the debates over the Robinson proposal were filled with applause and charged with emotion. Opponents of the measure feared that it

<sup>61</sup> Committee on Appropriations, *Drought Relief and Unemployment—LaFollette Resolution*, 9–15; William Baxter to Smith, Jan. 31, 1931, Semi-Monthly Reports file, Drought Relief, Records of the American Red Cross; *Public Papers, 1931*, 17–19.

<sup>62</sup> *Congressional Record*, 71 Cong., 3 sess., Jan. 16, 1931, pp. 2359–61; *ibid.*, Jan. 14, 1931, p. 2147.

<sup>63</sup> Stimson Diary, Jan. 16, 1931.

<sup>64</sup> *Public Papers, 1931*, 28.

<sup>65</sup> Committee on Appropriations, *Senate Amendments to the Interior Department Appropriation Bill for 1932 (H.R. 14675)*, 95.

would be the "deathblow to the Red Cross as a voluntary charitable institution." In the future that agency would be transformed into another "government bureau, with all that this implies," and with its passing the whole future of philanthropic relief and local self-help would be endangered. Already, it was noted, the Red Cross was having more fund-raising difficulty than in any of its previous drives, a difficulty that could be attributed in large measure to the Robinson proposal. Somehow, such analysts seemed to overlook the depressed conditions that were surely more responsible.<sup>66</sup>

On the other side, the drought bloc continued to deny that the Red Cross was caring for those in need. The organization, they maintained, was spending only six and two-thirds cents per day for each person. But again, their impassioned pleas were of no avail. Although the Robinson proposal passed the Senate, it was defeated in the House. The administration had won another round, but by this time the embittered and frustrated drought bloc and their progressive Republican supporters were furious with Hoover and were moving to force an extra session of Congress.<sup>67</sup>

On February 3, Hoover responded to his critics in perhaps his most important statement on relief issues during his term of office. The issue, he said, was not whether people would go hungry; it was "solely a question" of how hunger would be prevented. Would the "American people . . . maintain the spirit of charity and mutual self-help through voluntary giving and the responsibility of local government," or would "appropriations out of the Federal Treasury" be used to finance relief? His own "conviction" was "that if we break down this sense of responsibility of individual generosity to individual and mutual self-help," it would strike "at the roots of self-government" and would be a great blow to "American ideals and American institutions." The "opening of the doors of the Federal Treasury" would "stifle [voluntary] giving" and "destroy far more resources" than the Robinson proposal could provide.

There were, he insisted, fundamental distinctions to be made between American conditions and those in the distressed nations of Europe after the war. Those nations had been "so disorganized by war and anarchy that self-help was impossible." In the United States, however, this kind of "paralysis" did not exist, and hence there was every reason to believe that the American people had "the resources, the initiative, the courage, the stamina and kindness of spirit to meet this situation in the way they have met their problems over generations." When this was no longer the case, he would then support federal aid. But, given the nature of the American people, he doubted that this day would ever come and was convinced that it was nowhere near at hand. Offering another letter from Payne as evidence, he insisted that the Red Cross had effectively handled the situation and would continue to do so.<sup>68</sup>

In the view of the president's supporters, the statement was a precise and accurate analysis of the conflict and an able defense of the administration posi-

<sup>66</sup> *Congressional Record*, 71 Cong., 3 sess., Jan. 30, 1931, pp. 3657, 3639-51; *ibid.*, Jan. 17, 1931, pp. 2430, 2438-40; *ibid.*, Jan. 19, 1931, p. 2535.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, Jan. 16, 1931, pp. 2361-62, 2359; *ibid.*, Jan. 17, 1931, pp. 2441-42; *ibid.*, Jan. 19, 1931, pp. 2550-51; *ibid.*, Jan. 30, 1931, pp. 3577, 3641, 3660-67; *ibid.*, Feb. 2, 1931, pp. 3748, 3760.

<sup>68</sup> *Public Papers*, 1931, 54-58.

tion. But clearly, Hoover was not being entirely honest or candid. The dispute had originated solely because his relief measures had been insufficient, a state of affairs that he himself had recognized when contemplating the October proposal for a large fund-raising drive. His statements about the adequacy of Red Cross relief also conflicted sharply with surveys of county agents, who found that the "Red Cross allotments were entirely inadequate."<sup>69</sup> And his argument that the agencies of self-help had not broken down in the United States conflicted with his earlier belief that Arkansas and other South Central states would be unable to provide much local assistance.

The congressional battle also prompted Hoover to draft a curious and extremely bitter letter in which he maligned the motives of the southern Democratic senators. In the letter, which he apparently hoped a prominent southerner would submit to a newspaper as a letter to the editor, Hoover wrote that the "old patrician civilization" controlled southern Democratic congressmen and also held southern tenants in virtual peonage. If relief were provided through the Red Cross, it would go directly to the tenants and allow them to pay off their debts, which would in turn allow them to leave the plantations. Therefore, he concluded, the "whole object" of the southern Democrats was "to get the government to loan money to planters so that they can continue to hold these people in peonage; or alternatively, they want to get the government money distributed by the Red Cross so that they can dictate to the Red Cross to whom it should be distributed by building backfires and persecutions of the organization." The letter went on to say:

If Mr. Hoover was to tell the story that he must so well know from his experience in the Mississippi flood with these problems, and connect it up with what he has been trying to do for the relief of the common people of the South, he would electrify the North and . . . paralyze these democratic senators. On the other hand, I imagine that he is guided by a wish not to create bitterness and division in the country, and therefore he is allowing a great line of defense for himself go to default.<sup>70</sup>

The letter—evidently never published—was an unfounded and unreasonable attack. It was true that southern planters were often an obstacle to relief and that the southern Democratic senators had no intention of proposing measures that would threaten the southern class structure. But Red Cross allotments were so small that tenants could not possibly have paid off debts accrued over several years.

Meanwhile, Hoover's congressional critics were still committed to securing additional drought relief legislation. Wanting no part of an extra session, McNary and Senate Majority Leader James E. Watson began to press Hoover for some sort of compromise. Important leaders from the drought region also began to push for further action. Utilities magnate Harvey C. Couch, the

<sup>69</sup> Reid to Warburton, Jan. 22, 1931, Red Cross file, Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture. When Warburton conducted a confidential survey of county agricultural agents in Arkansas and other states to determine the adequacy of Red Cross rations, he was "surprised at the statement made by practically all of these telegrams, to the effect that the rations given out by the Red Cross is considerably less than that normally given by plantation owners." Warburton to Smith, Jan. 26, 1931, box 1, Correspondence of the National Drought Relief Committee, 1930–32, *ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> Herbert Hoover, Feb. 6, 1931, Number 1474, Public Statements file, Hoover Papers.



chairman of the Arkansas Drought Relief Committee, wired Hoover that the situation in Arkansas was "delicate and critical," and Hoover immediately asked Couch to come to Washington. Shortly thereafter, a compromise bill that all sides agreed to was proposed and passed. After two months of bitter wrangling the issue of drought relief was finally put to rest.<sup>71</sup>

The compromise bill provided for \$20 million, half earmarked for "rehabilitation" loans for individual farmers and the other half for loans to groups trying to organize agricultural credit corporations. As part of the compromise, Hoover finally made concessions on the food issue. He agreed that the rehabilitation loans could be used for the purchase of food, provided such purchases were part of a larger scheme designed to get the farmer back into production.<sup>72</sup>

Despite Hoover's concessions, the measure did little for those in the most dire straits. Both sets of loans were intended solely for those farmers who had security other than a crop lien but were unable to secure a loan from a local financial institution because of the breakdown of the financial machinery. For those who could offer no security, Hoover continued to insist that the Red Cross was providing "adequate care." To extend further loans to this group of farmers would be "mere camouflage for charity."<sup>73</sup>

What the compromise really revealed was Hoover's dogged refusal to adjust his relief program in the face of its overwhelming failure to provide relief. The attempt, once again, to establish lines of credit through the intermediate credit banks is especially revealing. For the local capital that bankers and businessmen had refused to supply, he would now substitute governmental capital, hoping in this way to secure the agricultural credit corporations that would meet economic needs and to strengthen local communitarianism. He seemed unwilling to concede that the problem stemmed less from a lack of capital or organization than from the lack of acceptable security on the part of those seeking loans.

Of the \$20,000,000 authorized under the compromise act, only \$5,430,783 was extended in rehabilitation loans and only \$1,327,000 in loans to develop agricultural credit corporations. In addition, the Department of Agriculture used \$39,716,797 of the earlier \$45,000,000 authorization. From this came a total of 279,566 crop production loans, most of them for such pitifully small amounts as \$100 to \$150.<sup>74</sup> Over the winter months the Red Cross also sup-

<sup>71</sup> *New York Times*, Feb. 5, 1931, pp. 1, 12; Harvey C. Couch to Lawrence Richey, Feb. 2, 1931, Red Cross file, Hoover Papers; Hoover to Couch, Feb. 2, 1931, *ibid*.

<sup>72</sup> United States Department of Agriculture, *Yearbook of Agriculture*, 1932, 44-46; *New York Times*, Feb. 7, 1931, p. 1; C. W. Warburton, "The Progress of Drought Relief," April 3, 1931, Drought file, Hoover Papers.

<sup>73</sup> Hoover put forth his view of the compromise in various drafts of a letter that he prepared for Hyde to send to Will R. Wood, the chairman of the House Appropriations Committee. For a copy of Hyde's letter, which was immediately issued as a press release, see Hyde to Will R. Wood, Feb. 7, 1931, Loans (Seed) file, Records of the Office of the Secretary of Agriculture. For Hoover's drafts, see untitled press release, Feb. 1931, Drought file, Hoover Papers.

<sup>74</sup> United States Department of Agriculture, *Yearbook of Agriculture*, 1932, 49. Previous loans had averaged \$250 or higher. See U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Appropriations, *Relief for Farmers in Drought or Flood and Storm Stricken Areas*, 71 Cong., 3 sess., Jan. 5, 1931, p. 14. Only a few weeks after the Department of Agriculture began to make the crop production loans, Hyde was extremely concerned that the authorization would prove insufficient. See Stimson Diary, March 17, 1931.

plied food to 585,192 families. In terms of its announced goals the fund-raising drive was a success, and eventually the feeding program became larger than any previous peacetime relief effort. Its officials, however, continued to see themselves as the victims of the congressional debate and its "free advertising." They continued to believe that if operations had proceeded "quietly," the \$5,000,000 would have been adequate. And they seem never to have realized that localizing relief would have meant only an increased level of distress and suffering, not greater reliance on local resources.<sup>75</sup>

Recent reassessments of Hoover have portrayed his handling of the drought in ways that cannot withstand critical analysis. In his recent biography, David Burner blamed the drought fiasco on Payne and the Red Cross. "Had it acted swiftly and energetically," Burner argued, "much suffering and subsequent damage to Hoover's reputation for being a great humanitarian might have been averted."<sup>76</sup> Such an argument distorts the entire controversy. Hoover was well aware of Red Cross relief policies. This being the case, it was his stubborn refusal to readjust his own relief program, to endorse the \$60 million bill, and to support the food provision that endangered his humanitarian reputation.

One must also take issue with William Appleman Williams, who has conceded that Hoover should have provided direct assistance but has argued that the president correctly "perceived the outlines" of an "inferno" of "bureaucratic statism that would devalue the human beings it claimed to save; that there would be imperialism in the name of welfare; and that there would be violence in the name of peace."<sup>77</sup> Hoover may have perceived such developments. But at least in the case of the drought, his alternatives were not necessarily less bureaucratic or less imperialistic. And they left an "inferno" of ill-fed people.

If the drought experience often reveals Hoover at his worst, it does not reveal, as Elliot A. Rosen has recently argued, that Hoover's "American system" was "intended to preserve individualism and nineteenth century antistatist, laissez faire attitudes."<sup>78</sup> Nor was the battle over relief a conflict that revolved around federal relief versus private relief or collectivism versus individualism.<sup>79</sup> Rather, the Hooverian system should be seen as a form of collective action, and the relief controversy should be seen as a conflict between two types of collectivism: one relying on informal, voluntary, and decentralized methods and the other on more formal legislative methods. Hoover, of course, saw his form of collectivism as the one system that could avoid the creation of a coercive governmental monolith and remain compatible with individual responsibility and democratic government. As the drought experience makes clear, however, his perceptions rested on a highly idealized

<sup>75</sup> *Relief Work in the Drought of 1930-31*, appendix X; Fieser to Payne, Dec. 16, 1930, Campaigns, Collections, and Contributions file, Drought Relief, Records of the American Red Cross; Fieser to Payne, Jan. 22, 1931, Information Sent to President Hoover file, *ibid*.

<sup>76</sup> Burner, *Herbert Hoover*, 263.

<sup>77</sup> William Appleman Williams's comment is in Cowley, "Drought and the Dole," 99.

<sup>78</sup> Elliot A. Rosen, *Hoover, Roosevelt, and the Brains Trust: From Depression to New Deal* (New York, 1977), 419.

<sup>79</sup> Woodruff, "Great Southern Drought of 1930," 247.

view of voluntary organizations. He seemed to equate "private" with "democratic" and "public" with "bureaucratic," usually failing to see that the imperatives of a modern organizational society had rendered many of the distinctions between private voluntary organizations and public agencies meaningless.<sup>80</sup>

Hoover's handling of the drought must certainly be seen as one of the sadder episodes of his public career and his presidency. Instead of adding to his image as a humanitarian progressive, it helped to establish the image of Hoover as a callous ultraconservative. Derisive critics referred to rabbits as "Hoover hogs," and Democratic propagandists would continue to make much of his alleged willingness to feed livestock while allowing humans to starve. The damage to his reputation was in part the product of his inflexibility, his refusal to admit failure, and his lack of political acumen. His arguments that Red Cross handouts were not charity and that government loans for food were tantamount to a dole made little sense and were wholly unconvincing. His decision to oppose the \$60 million bill, even though the figure came from his own relief organization, was a major mistake. And his obsession with the supposed benefits of proper organization blinded him to the desperate plight of thousands of Americans. He had hoped for a quiet, peaceful session of Congress. Ironically, he himself was responsible for most of the turmoil.<sup>81</sup>

<sup>80</sup> For an excellent discussion of the concept of voluntarism in American thought and of the growth of formal private welfare institutions in the twentieth century, see Roy Lubove, *The Struggle for Social Security, 1900-1935* (Cambridge, 1968), 1-24, 116-17.

<sup>81</sup> On "Hoover hogs," see "Arkansas's Fight for Life," 5. It was also widely reported that many victims of the drought were subsisting on turnips, walnuts, and parched corn. See *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, Jan. 6, 1931, p. 6. In his private correspondence Senator McNary attributed the congressional battle to Hoover's political ineptitude and his needlessly dogmatic positions. He wrote his brother: "if the engineer . . . had more political acumen, mole hills would not be viewed as mountains and tempests would take place at sea rather than in the teapot." Charles McNary to John McNary, Dec. 17, 1930, Charles McNary papers (Library of Congress).