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The Rhetoric of the Post-Presidency: Herbert Hoover's Campaign Against the New Deal, 1934–1936*

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For bottom-line thinkers, Herbert Hoover's campaign against the New Deal represents another failure in the Hoover legacy. Overwhelmed by Franklin Roosevelt in the 1932 presidential race, Hoover was unable to unite Republicans in 1936 and prevent the destruction of "true liberalism," his term for traditional political values. A closer examination of Hoover's post-presidential rhetoric provokes several larger questions for scholars. What is the role of the former chief executive in political debate? Does a "failed" presidency invite an ongoing historical apologia? How has the rise of the modern presidency altered the rhetorical status of the former president? In evaluating Hoover's campaign against the New Deal, this case study will examine the rhetorical dimensions of the post-presidency in American political debate. In order to assess Hoover's campaign, this essay will focus upon three topics. First, the historical situation will be reviewed with attention to Hoover's motivations in pursuing a national debate, basic themes in the former president's rhetoric, and his late recognition of the rhetorical presidency (including his adjustment of public speaking to the constraints of radio). Second, the political impact of Hoover's rhetoric will be assessed with regard to the 1936 presidential campaign. Third, the genre of the jeremiad will be examined to illuminate Hoover's discourse specifically, and more generally, address the rhetorical implications of the post-presidency.

Unlike the parliamentary system, in which former prime ministers continue to play important roles in policy-making, the American system affords no special status to former presidents. While scholars agree with Richard Neustadt's claim that the power of the president is the power to persuade, many might be uncomfortable granting such status to former executives. Indeed, recent leaders such as Dwight Eisenhower and Harry Truman lived many years, seemingly content to be out of the public eye. Yet, while the modern presidency has unique rhetorical dimensions, the role of the former president seems to be just as unique. Closer examination of Hoover's campaign against the New Deal should prove instructive in understanding the political and rhetorical functions of the post-presidency.¹

Repudiated by the electorate in 1932, Hoover returned to Palo Alto, California, in obvious silence and apparent retirement. He spent his days reading newspapers, working with the Hoover Library on War, Peace and Revolution at Stanford University, and privately fuming for becoming the incarnate symbol of the Depression. Six

weeks after the election, he wrote to a friend that “when the American people realize some ten years hence it was on November 8, 1932, that they surrendered the freedom of mind and spirit for which their ancestors had fought and agonized for over 300 years, they will, I hope, recollect that I at least tried to save them.”² Reporting that the former president was not writing a book, planning to go abroad, becoming a university president, or reentering politics, the *Literary Digest* portrayed an amiable Hoover, enjoying a well-earned retirement. In 1934 Hoover authored *The Challenge to Liberty*, a philosophical indictment of the world trend toward totalitarianism. The book evoked partisan reviews generally and failed to ignite public examination of the New Deal. Privately, Hoover believed that the book was for “the thinking people” who “through influence and transmittal of ideas, the country could be put right.”³ In February of 1935, Hoover broke his public silence and began a national speaking tour that continued until the Republican National Convention in June 1936. For many observers, the “New Hoover” was dynamic, witty, and incisive, the antithesis of the 1932 candidate for re-election. Although Hoover’s ego certainly was bruised by FDR, his motivations in speaking out appear to be deeper than vindication. Reviewing his reasons for returning to the political arena after two years is instructive.

At one level, Hoover considered himself the “titular head” of the Republican Party and hoped to maintain the party’s commitment to traditional Republican values. Two weeks after FDR’s inauguration, Hoover wrote to John O’Laughlin, his confidant in Washington, “Our fight is going to be to stop this move to gigantic Socialism of America. That is what is being done under the demagogic terms of ‘planned industry,’ etc. Correction of abuse has ever been a principle of Republicanism. But socialism never has been.” His pessimistic predictions for the nation grew darker as FDR pushed more programs through the Congress. Writing to William A. White in 1934, Hoover concluded, “If I was not scared before I certainly am now. . . . From every quarter I get echoes of great despair in the economic world, and it looks to me like the country was in for a sinking spell.”⁴

Hoover’s opposition to the New Deal was also motivated by his fear of the moral implications of New Deal liberalism. From his vantage, the character of the American people was at stake in the battle between “American Liberty” and “New Deal Collectivism.” After his first public speech against the New Deal, Hoover advised a friend, “I have concluded that I will not keep still any longer. . . . Everybody says it is not good politics, but I have not noticed any Republican in Washington or New York raising his voice in protest at the moral issue.”⁵ Americans needed to be awakened, Hoover believed, to the impending tragedy of turning over their individual liberty for temporary wealth. “He harbored great disappointment at how gullible Americans had proven when offered material salvation,” observed historian Joan Hoff Wilson.⁶

But did Hoover campaign in hopes of getting the Republican nomination for the presidency in 1936 in order to vindicate his reputation? Although Hoover never acknowledged that he wanted the nomination, biographer Richard Norton Smith believes that Hoover secretly hoped the party would draft him.⁷ But Hoover also appeared to be motivated by the moral questions he had raised. He endorsed ideological

purity as the only means to saving the country and, at the same time, he criticized the “me-too Republicans” who were willing to attach themselves to the political popularity of the New Deal.

Friends and supporters encouraged Hoover to be the voice of virtue and traditional values in the debate over the New Deal. O’Laughlin advised the former president to avoid any public announcement regarding the nomination, because “little attention would be paid to any comments you might utter. Under present circumstances, your voice is listened to by even those opposed to you. . . . I believe you are rendering a great patriotic service in the course you are taking. I submit you should not depart from it.”⁸ Significantly, Hoover asserted his special status as a former president and refused to work with the Republican leadership in arranging his national speaking tour. His independence appeared important to the *Washington Star*: “The fact that the former President had struck out independently of other party leaders on the whole and was thus early exposing himself to the shafts of the opposition side was regarded by many as indicating that Mr. Hoover is not a candidate to succeed himself at this time.” Another political observer, David Lawrence, agreed that Hoover “will not be the candidate of his party in 1936 and the more this decision becomes apparent the greater will be his influence with his own following.” In fact, the former president’s decision to speak out after more than two years “will be construed as a signal to his fellow Republicans to become militant in their cause. . . . Mr. Hoover’s statement of principles will tend to hold the Republican forces together by crystalizing the issues.”⁹

Hoover’s status helped command public attention, especially among Republican followers unsure of who to support for the Republican nomination in 1936. Writing in the *Washington Star*, G. Gould Lincoln reported that of all the leading Republicans in the country, “what Mr. Hoover says will be given a wider hearing in the country than anything said by any of the Republicans whose names have so far been prominently mentioned in connection with the nomination.” Moreover, Hoover was committed to offering an ideologically distinct alternative to the New Deal, no matter what the political consequences. According to Lincoln, “There is reason to believe that Mr. Hoover considers it important for the Republican party to take a position on ‘principle’ and to go down fighting for principle, if necessary in the 1936 election.”¹⁰ Hoover’s associate in Washington, O’Laughlin, also encouraged the former president to assert his authority among the nation’s Republicans: “You really are the one republican voice to which attention will be paid, and you would usher in the meeting of the Committee with an unmistakable note that would be impressive. You will be charged with playing politics, and there will be further reports that you are demonstrating that you are a candidate for the nomination. But this is of small consequence.”¹¹

Earlier that year, in a candid letter to his close friend, Kansas editor William A. White, Hoover detailed the rhetorical strategy that Republicans would have to follow if they were ever going to regain power. First, the Republicans must “staunchly assert that the depression was world-wide, was born of war; that recovery was won in the summer of 1932; that it was set back by the election of Mr. Roosevelt . . . that all

the rest of the world has recovered while we continue to wallow.” Second, Hoover argued that Republicans must provide a “detailed blast” of the “relief, waste, politics, and corruption” of the New Deal. “Point out that it can lead nowhere but to Facism or Socialism,” he continued. “If we are to restore true Liberalism in this country we must first stimulate the emotional groups to understand where this stuff leads.”¹²

Speaking publicly against the New Deal in February, 1935, Hoover began a national crusade that included an average of one major speech every month until the Republican convention of 1936. He used the speeches to attack specific New Deal programs and took his speaking tour to every region of the nation. The campaign provoked a flurry of magazine and newspaper articles extolling the “New Hoover.” Tailoring his speeches for a nation-wide radio audience, he appeared to have finally understood the significance of the rhetorical presidency. Examining press reaction to Hoover’s oratory illustrates the evolving image of the former president.

The “New Hoover” amazed the nation’s editors and reporters. The *St. Louis Post Dispatch* declared that the “Hoover of previous occasions was pretty sad. His sentences were trans-Atlantic flights. They were larded with statistics. They trudged stolidly through the terminology of market reports. They were dignifiedly dull.” Part of the former president’s new-found rhetorical prowess came from his use of wit and sarcasm. The paper concluded that Mr. Hoover had “shaken off his rhetorical shroud and bedecked his thought in bright, colorful attire. True, then was alarm enough to make the anxious fondle their fears. But this talk wasn’t a Jeremiad. It was, rather, a Tom and Jere-miad. And, therefore, so much easier to take.” Hoover’s wit was so unusual, that Senator George Norris of Nebraska announced that Hoover was “trying to become a second Will Rogers.”¹³ Byron Price, bureau chief of the Washington, D.C. Associated Press, was “surprised” by the changes in Hoover:

He departed so widely from the moods and mannerisms of the ‘old Hoover’ that few would have guessed it was the former President speaking. If he had shown evidence of change before, he accomplished on this occasion the impression of a complete transformation. . . . It is hard for those who knew the weary, deadly-serious Hoover of the White House to reconcile their memories with what now is presented to their sight and hearing.¹⁴

Part of the “New Hoover” resulted in the former president’s ability to understand and use radio to his advantage. Reporters were impressed by his improved radio manner. The *Chicago Chronicle* announced that “Herbert Hoover has acquired one phase of the New Deal—the radio techniques of his successor,” while the *New York World Telegram* claimed that as a radio speaker, Hoover “used to be dull and lifeless, his addresses punctuated by bursts of oratorical excitement he obviously did not feel. Warm admirers used to make apologies. They need apologize no longer.” Columnist Howard Vincent O’Brien of the *Chicago Daily News* praised the “new and refurbished Mr. Hoover.” According to O’Brien, “He puts on a good show, now—good enough, indeed, to merit comparison with the Master of Fireside Chat himself. Gone are the dull compilations of figures with which, once, he sought to sway the multitude. Gone are the somber fretfulness, the austere alarums, the petulant defensiveness. A new figure emerges—suave, humorous, caustically effective.”¹⁵

Certainly Hoover's understanding of the rhetorical presidency helped him as he crossed the nation. He prepared his speeches with the radio audience in mind, turning to a prearranged conclusion when his network speaking time was ending.¹⁶ He attacked New Deal programs each month, in a national speaking tour that logged 45,000 miles, covered 28 states, and crossed the continent at least fourteen times in a year and a half.¹⁷

Themes in Hoover's Discourse

On March 22, 1935, Hoover addressed a letter to a group of California Young Republicans, discussing the party's responsibility to the nation. This document became the opening salvo in Hoover's crusade against the New Deal. Arguing that the Republican Party faced its greatest responsibility since the Civil War, Hoover declared that the party must "furnish the rallying point for all those who believe in these principles and are determined to defeat those who are responsible for their daily jeopardy." Americans faced two paths in 1936: maintaining a "system of orderly liberty, under constitutionally conducted government, or of rejecting it in favor of the newly created system of regimentation and bureaucratic domination." Hoover argued that FDR had repudiated solemn obligations of government: the government had been centralized under an enormous bureaucracy; monopolistic practices were organized with government approval; class conflicts had been provoked, and government was now competing with private citizens in business. The Republican Party, he charged, had a duty to offer the public a distinct alternative to New Deal liberalism. The objective of American life, he believed, was to "upbuild and protect the family and the home, whether farmer, worker, or business man. That is the unit of American life. It is the moral and spiritual as well as the economic unit."¹⁸ With release of this letter to the press, Hoover initiated his campaign to explain the dangers of the New Deal to an unsuspecting public. Looking for common themes, appeals, and arguments in Hoover's rhetoric, one finds several clusters of arguments. While he specifically attacked FDR and attempted to dispute New Deal programs, much of Hoover's oratory centered upon the spiritual and moral dimensions of American political institutions. Morality and politics were different sides of the same coin; if one were faulty then so too would be the other side. He discussed often the special character of the American people that had been shaped by the nation's "American System of Liberty." The New Deal and its push toward centralization seemed incompatible with Hoover's conception of liberty. His public speeches reveal several major themes designed to create a groundswell of protest against the New Deal.

Throughout his campaign, Hoover argued that the New Deal would foster the political philosophies that were crushing liberty and freedom in Europe. While he never called FDR a communist or a fascist, he claimed that the New Deal imitated the political agenda that had spread throughout Europe after World War I. Speaking in St. Louis, Hoover charged:

We have executive orders, propaganda, and threats substituted for specific laws. We have seen the color of despotism in the creation of a huge bureaucracy. We have seen the color of Fascism in the attempt to impose government directed

monopolies. We have seen the color of Socialism by government in business competition with citizens.¹⁹

For Hoover, the 1936 presidential campaign centered on two major issues, economic policy and destruction of individual liberty. The debate over the New Deal, he announced, had separated itself into two great battle fronts: the “insidious expansion of government over the lives of the people” and the “spending, debt, currency, and credit policies of the government”²⁰

In March, 1936, Hoover explained his conception of the “American System of Liberty” to the Young Republican League of Colorado. He noted that his years living abroad in Asia and Europe gave him a unique perspective on political matters: “I saw the squalor of Asia, the frozen class barriers of Europe. I was not a tourist. I was associated in their working lives and problems. I had to deal with their social systems and governments. And everywhere to the common people America was the hope of the world. Every yearly homecoming was again to me a proof of the glory of America.” In defining the “American System of Liberty,” Hoover admitted that while other political philosophies promoted liberty, the American system grew from a “great” and “unique” ideal, “that there shall be an opportunity in life, and equal opportunity for every boy and girl, every man and woman. It holds that they have the chance to rise to any position to which their character and ability may entitle them.”²¹ In other words, America was a land of opportunity, where all citizens could pursue a successful and free life.

Hoover’s background helps explain his adherence to the ideal of pulling oneself up from the bottom. His confidence in the American System, observed Richard Hofstadter, “owes a good deal to the circumstances of his early career. He is a self-made man out of ancient American mythology, whose early life story would have delighted Abraham Lincoln.”²² The values of the American system were obvious to Hoover, no matter what political label one wanted to attach to them. In the Colorado address, he challenged the audience: “If belief in the old-fashioned virtues of self-reliance, thrift, government economy, of a balanced budget, of a stable currency, of fidelity of government to its obligations is reactionary, then you should be a reactionary.”²³ In this manner, Hoover merged the American sense of being a select people, on an errand from God, with the economic philosophy that had guided the United States during his lifetime. His faith in free enterprise, individualism, substantial laissez-faire, and material wealth were, according to Hofstadter, “dominant in the American tradition.” The political values he championed “were precisely the same ideas that in the remoter past of the nineteenth century and the more immediate past of the New Era had an almost irresistible lure for the majority of Americans.”²⁴

Hoover’s experience overseas as an engineer and later as the director of the food relief program that helped save Europe from starvation after World War I, greatly affected his vision of America’s position in the world. His presence during the great political upheaval in Europe after the war magnified his faith in the blessings of the “American System of Liberty.” In his Colorado address, the former president traced the “tactics and techniques in European countries by which Liberty has been dethroned and dictatorship erected by men greedy for power.” Such despots begin with great

promises, demand “violent action against human ills” and then shout new and destructive slogans to “inflame the people.” With hate implanted in the people, these dictators demand emergency measures to save the country. Honest debate is eliminated, legislatures become rubber stamps, and with the “suppression of freedom of speech, freedom of worship, of the courts, and all other freedoms” the nation is “goose-stepped in a march back to the Middle Ages.”²⁵ Whether Democrats know it or not, concluded Hoover, “The New Deal has imitated the intellectual and vocal technique of typical European revolution. . . . But America has not reached these final stages. Thanks to a people of a great heritage, to the press and the radio, free speech still lives in America.”²⁶

Throughout his campaign, Hoover defined American liberties as spiritual blessings bestowed by a divine creator. This moral dimension of political philosophy transcended all other issues in the campaign. Indeed, the former president believed that his debate with the New Deal and FDR represented a choice between good and evil. Hoover unabashedly proclaimed the gospel of Americanism, speaking of America’s special mission in the world. Americans had learned of the “spiritual right of men” he observed. “Behind them is the conception which is the highest development of the Christian faith—the conception of individual freedom with brotherhood. From them is the fullest flowering of individual human personality.” Recalling the old-fashioned values learned in his boyhood in rural Iowa, Hoover observed that “I learned that money does not grow on trees; it must be earned. . . . I learned that the keeping of financial promises is the first obligation of an honorable man. And I learned that the man who borrows without intent to repay is headed for bankruptcy or disgrace of crime. These may be platitudes, but they are still truths.”²⁷ More importantly for Hoover, the simple truths of his childhood led him to success in private and public life. The interdependence between Christian values and American political traditions were obvious and enduring. Tampering with fundamental values for temporary relief was sacrilege to the former president.

Rejecting the New Deal’s expansion of relief programs at the federal level, Hoover claimed that Americans would always take care of those individuals less fortunate than themselves. Speaking in St. Louis, he noted, “There is no disagreement upon the public obligation to relieve distress which flows from national calamity. The support of that comes from the conscience of a people. It comes from their fidelity to the Sermon on the Mount. The American people know that the genuine sufferers on relief are not slackers.” True relief would come from a productive and honest job, not some temporary make-work projects. The “great sociological experiments” conducted in the name of relief in the New Deal resulted in a “million confusions and fears.” The New Deal’s system of public welfare, had “impaired self-reliance and morals both in individuals and in local government. The poison of politics is mixed with the bread of the helpless.” For Hoover, America was founded upon individual liberty and opportunity. Recalling when “American Liberty was first proclaimed,” the former president concluded, “After Christianity, that was the greatest light which has ever flashed over the human horizon”²⁸ Matters of faith and politics were interconnected in Hoover’s world view; economic and social rewards

could not be understood apart from “things of the spirit.” Indeed, he wrote in 1923, “And in proportion as each individual increases his own store of sprituality, in that proportion increases the idealism of democracy.”²⁹

Because the New Deal represented such a profound change in governing, the former president claimed that only the Republican Party could offer the nation any hope of salvation. Speaking to the Republican Women of Pennsylvania, Hoover asserted that the “Republican Party is the only available instrumentality through which an aroused people can act. The Democratic Party is imprisoned by the New Deal. We should dismiss all factional issues and invite those Democrats who feel as we do to join us in faith that we have but one purpose—that is to place the republic on the road to safety.” Rather than simply offering a different agenda than the Democrats, the Republicans were charged with preventing the moral destruction of the United States. The party must accept “tasks beyond economic and social regeneration,” argued Hoover. “There are tasks of moral regeneration. The Republican Party was born to meet a moral issue.” Hoover believed that the character of the American people, defined by values such as “work, thrift, piety, truth, honesty, honor,” was more important than any material riches. And in understanding the relationship between these values and individual character, Hoover concluded that the “first standard bearer of these virtues must be its government and public officials. But there is apparently a New Deal in virtue.”³⁰

In a related theme, Hoover insisted that the New Deal programs would eventually destroy America’s hard-earned liberty. He believed that the New Deal advanced an anti-progress world view that denied America’s mission and substituted centralized decision-making for American individualism. Speaking in New York in November, 1935, Hoover noted that the New Deal’s “national planning” included the political management of “money, credit, farming, industry, morals, and the more abundant life.” Judging the administration’s works, rather than its words, Hoover identified the New Deal’s ultimate result: “to limit competition and restrict production—the essence of monopoly. They have given us planned scarcity—upon which civilization always degenerates—in place of economic plenty, upon which America has grown great.”³¹

Beside destroying the character of the nation’s people through a faulty economic system, the New Deal fostered both fear and antagonism. In the President’s State of the Union Address, noted Hoover, FDR had found the nation alive with “money-changers,” “dishonest speculators,” and “economic autocrats.” These symbols disturbed Hoover, who called such rhetoric “a call to class war, a red herring across the trail of failure, an implication that all opponents are defenders of evil.”³²

The “planned scarcity” of the new Deal outraged Hoover. The New Dealers told the country that “we were hungry because we had too much food and the way to repletion was through scarcity.” The solution to the depression was to be found in the nation’s tradition of economic plenty. The Republican Party must “pledge itself to reverse the whole New Deal planned scarcity into an economy of plenty. . . . The notion that we get richer and more prosperous by producing less is about as progressive as a slow-motion film run backwards.”³³

Another major theme running throughout Hoover's discourse reflected an effort to vindicate his administration. He argued that America "was shaking itself clear of the depression, under its Republican Administration, June–July, 1932. The whole world started forward. Prosperity had actually swung around the corner and was on its way up the street of national life when it encountered the change in national policies. After Mr. Roosevelt's election in 1932 we alone of all great nations were set back. Most other nations continued forward." Hoover maintained that FDR's campaign in 1932 was "based upon the implication that the depression was caused by me personally. That is a great compliment to the energies and capacities of one man." In fact, Hoover attempted to demonstrate that the economic cycle, even with ups and downs, would eventually correct itself if left to its natural state. "Depressions are not new in human history," He proclaimed. "All of them are preceded by wars or by inflation or booms with sprees of speculative greed. . . . No government can legislate them away the morning after more than it can legislate away the effect of a tornado—not even the New Deal."³⁴

Hoover's campaign against the New Deal centered upon several common themes in 1935 and 1936. He claimed that new philosophies threatened America's System of Liberty. To support this argument, he cited the "hurricane of revolutions" in Europe that destroyed liberty in an attempt to bring about financial security. Another common theme was that American liberties were spiritual and moral in nature and could not be separated from the kind of political system the country condoned. In line with this thinking, Hoover suggested that only the Republican Party offered hope for restoring the political and spiritual needs of the nation. A third common theme in Hoover's rhetoric was that the New Deal would eventually destroy the nation's liberties. He believed that the New Deal fostered an anti-progress philosophy which denied America's unique sense of mission. Lastly, Hoover attempted to vindicate his administration by arguing that economic cycles are difficult to change. He claimed that his policies were working in 1932 and would have led to prosperity if the New Deal architects had not frightened the nation.

The Political Impact of Hoover's Campaign

Hoover's concerted campaign to awaken the public to the dangers of national regimentation failed to provoke widespread disaffection with the New Deal. However, looking closely at the political debate in 1935 and 1936, it appears that the former president's speaking tour influenced national opinion leaders and members of the Republican Party. The political impact of Hoover's rhetoric, while not the stuff of electoral victory, still appears to be important.

Hoover perceived the 1936 campaign as a national referendum on the New Deal. As a result, he tried to change the debate from that of policy issues to that of ideology. In other words, the voters were presented two distinct political philosophies, an uncommon circumstance in many presidential elections. In campaigning against the New Deal, Hoover strongly asserted his role as titular head of the Republican Party and tried to wield influence on the party's platform. In October, 1935, the *Washington Star* reported that the "very fact that Mr. Hoover is saying nothing about his own

possible candidacy for the presidential nomination, while at the same time he is active, strengthens his hand in the fight which is to come over the platform of the G.O.P. and the issues which are to be made.”³⁵ In defining the debate as being between two polarized political philosophies, Hoover was able to give Republican editorials a fresh perspective to question the New Deal. The *Arizona Star* for example called Hoover’s initial indictment of the New Deal a “splendid and timely restatement of American ideals, and a clear and frank definition of the great issue that is slowly maturing for decision by the American people” In questioning the administration, the paper simply reiterated Hoover’s arguments, in one example, demanding that, “Thrift and work have been stigmatized with shame. There stands the record. Only poverty and insecurity can come from scarcity. Plenty and security can come only from abundance.” In another example, the anti-New Deal *Chicago Daily Tribune* praised Hoover for raising the important questions. Mr. Hoover’s most memorable service to the United States is “plainly foreshadowed,” claimed the *Tribune*. “He will throw himself into the fight on behalf of the Republican nominee and his influence will be second to none, for his word carries great weight with the millions who voted for him and other millions who wish they had.”³⁶

Many observers suggested that Hoover’s status as a former president and titular leader of the Republicans granted him a special place in the national political debate. *The Washington Post* noted that Hoover’s rhetoric has a “weight and authority which raises it above the level of mere partisan attack upon political opponents. . . . His treatment is not distorted, nor his conclusions affected by considerations of political expediency.” Comparing Hoover to Woodrow Wilson, the *Post* concluded that Wilson, if he had remained in good health, “would have been able to contribute much to the clarification of thought on public questions, even though out of office.” In the same manner, Hoover might also serve as a voice above political expediency. Another pro-Republican newspaper, the *Ohio State Journal*, praised Hoover’s insistence that the Republican Party make the election an ideological crusade. Every time Hoover speaks, the newspaper suggested, “he contributes something very important to the Republican textbook. . . . his sane and timely observations will do a great deal toward making easier the task of writing the Republican platform and setting a creed for him who is nominated the party’s candidate for president.” And influential editor William A. White, noted that while Hoover “is not the inevitable candidate of the Republican party,” the former president cannot be ignored. In blasting New Deal liberalism, White insisted, Hoover is “clearing the way for the Republican nominee to go straight to victory.”³⁷

Many newspapers praised Hoover as a political prophet but rejected Hoover as a candidate. The *Columbus Evening Dispatch* announced that, unlike many other critics of the New Deal, Hoover’s “position has not been determined merely by reason of the fact that he might deem it expedient now to be in opposition of the new deal. . . . So forceful is the weight of his argument and so clear are the definitions of the issues, that, whether they have any predisposed inclination to hear him or not, people must listen.”³⁸

In raising the debate to an ideological level, Hoover warned Republican regulars

to resist efforts to imitate the New Deal. After his first speech, *The Washington Post* concluded that Hoover's message "is plainly addressed to Republicans. The strategy is to solidify the Republican ranks rather than to convert Democrats. It is important because at the moment all sorts of plans for dividing or 'liberalizing' the Republican party have been under discussion. . . . Mr. Hoover's statement of principles will tend to hold the Republican forces together by crystallizing the issues." Although the *Star* claimed that Hoover's candidacy in 1936 was highly unlikely, the paper pointed out that in the volatile atmosphere of 1935, Hoover remained a force to be reckoned with. Recalling that Hoover received over 13 million votes in 1932, the paper observed that if Huey Long, Father Coughlin, and Dr. Townsend took votes away from the Democratic candidate in 1936, a bloc of 13 million votes could win the general election.³⁹

In an attempt to maintain public attention for his crusade, Hoover defined the debate as being between himself and FDR. Rather than labeling Hoover's indictments of the New Deal as the rhetoric of a presidential hopeful, the press tended to present the former president's accusations as the views of Roosevelt's peer. As a result, some opinion leaders reported that the nation was in for another Lincoln-Douglas debate, this time with Hoover and Roosevelt as the participants. In this fashion, the ability to address Roosevelt as an equal helped Hoover maintain public attention. Several examples illustrate this factor. The *San Francisco Chronicle* proclaimed in its headline, "Hoover-Roosevelt Debate Grows Still More Direct." Noting that Hoover had presented his third major speech against the New Deal in St. Louis, the editorial concluded, "Herbert Hoover openly made it a personal debate between himself and Mr. Roosevelt, and flung at the Administration an avalanche of facts which it can not ignore." More important, the newspaper urged FDR to respond directly to the attacks: "The facts presented by Mr. Hoover must be accepted or refuted, and his proposals must be subject to the scrutiny he invites. The debate is on, and it challenges reply. Let it be hoped that reply will be more than pleasant platitudes and cheerful generalities." The *Minneapolis Tribune* agreed, "The time has passed when President Roosevelt can lightly dismiss his relief critics, as he recently did at Atlanta, as those who are trying to tell him 'how to let the needy starve.' This is simply dodging the issue. . . . We believe that Mr. Hoover's address deserves specific answers and not innuendoes which brand the former president, and those who stand on common ground with him, as the grim apostles of starvation."⁴⁰

Although Hoover received little enthusiasm regarding his candidacy in 1936, he succeeded in shaping the political debate in the early stages of the campaign. More important, he attempted to convince the voting public that the New Deal represented a false remedy that could have dangerous side-effects if fully implemented. In this manner, Hoover infused an ideological element into the campaign that suggested it would be better to lose by standing on principle than winning through expediency. Because of FDR's landslide reelection in 1936, few scholars have examined Hoover's crusade. The rhetorical aspects of the campaign however may yield insight regarding the political status and function of the American post-presidency.

The Jeremiad and the Post-Presidency

Historically, the post-presidency has not been afforded any legitimacy in the political process. Although some have searched for an official function for the former chief executive (such as a permanent office of Senator at Large), most observers would reject creation of any position of authority. While most early presidents retired quietly, several remained active in political affairs. John Quincy Adams served eight terms in the House of Representatives; John Tyler chaired the Washington Peace Conference in 1861; Martin Van Buren, Millard Fillmore, Grover Cleveland, and Theodore Roosevelt all ran for the presidency after leaving office.

The post-presidency appears to have a unique set of rhetorical constraints that resemble those constraints typically associated with the presidency. Although the title of “elder statesman” has been used to characterize the status of the former president, this label minimizes several important distinctions. First, the former president speaks as the peer of current president, the only political figure in the nation to have shared that immense power. Second, the former president has a proven constituency; even when repudiated at the polls, he still retains a certain degree of political power. Third, the former president has a unique ethos (which has grown in stature during the twentieth century with the rise of the president as the nation’s major news-maker). Few Americans in private life achieve the unique mixture of political power, name recognition, and social standing. As Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. recently observed, “No one has greater access than ex-Presidents to every forum; no one has greater opportunity to command every channel of public influence.”⁴¹ Fourth, former presidents can address national audiences on important topics as non-candidates. In this manner, they can present a non-partisan world view without being perceived as testing the political waters. Washington’s warning of “entangling alliances” and Eisenhower’s condemnation of the “military-industrial complex” represent two noted examples of a retiring president rising above partisanship. These factors suggest that former presidents do have a unique rhetorical status in political debate. Examining Hoover’s campaign may help illuminate the rhetorical function of the post-presidency more fully.

Hoover’s speeches in 1935 and 1936 resemble in many respects the jeremiad, a well-established rhetorical form that has persisted in America since the arrival of the Puritans in the seventeenth century. Sacvan Bercovitch notes that the jeremiads were “political sermons” that were used to “demonstrate (rhetorically) that, within their church-state, theology was wedded to politics and politics to the progress of the Kingdom of God.” According to Bercovitch, the Puritans adapted a European jeremiad to the special demands of settling the New World and developed a “political sermon” that was offered at every public occasion.⁴² The jeremiad has endured in America and has been transformed to meet the needs of a modern society. Kurt Ritter notes that the jeremiad has several essential features, including: 1.) a general theme of sin-repentance-reform; 2.) the application of religious doctrine to secular affairs; 3.) an assumption that Puritans were God’s chosen people; and 4.) a minister who spoke as a scolding prophet.⁴³ Ritter has employed the jeremiad to illuminate the rhetoric of presidential nomination acceptance addresses; Ronald Carpenter has used

the form to analyze the rhetoric of historians; and Richard L. Johannesen has examined Ronald Reagan's "economic jeremiad."⁴⁴ Before addressing the rhetorical dimensions of the post-presidency in general terms, it will be useful to assess Hoover's use of the jeremiad.

Stephen E. Lucas writes that it is important to "distinguish between placing a text in a general rhetorical tradition and claiming that the text was modeled on a specific antecedent genre." The former, Lucas continues, can be "substantiated simply on the basis of situational, structural, thematic, or stylistic consonance between the text in question and other texts within the tradition."⁴⁵ In the case of Hoover's jeremiad, it would be difficult to identify how a "specific antecedent genre" may have influenced his rhetoric. Although Hoover grew up in a Quaker family and spoke reverently of spiritual values in a political context, one cannot easily identify rhetorical models in his background. On the other hand, the jeremiads of the eighteenth century, which "established the typology of America's mission," must have influenced Hoover. American leaders in the seventeenth century changed the function of the jeremiad writes Bercovitch. They "incorporated Bible history into the American experience—they substituted a regional for a biblical past, consecrated the American present as a movement from promise to fulfillment, and translated fulfillment from its meaning within the closed system of sacred history into a metaphor for limitless secular improvement."⁴⁶ And this goal of "limitless secular improvement" served as the cornerstone of Hoover's faith in "rugged individualism."

Although the various speeches in Hoover's campaign resemble the jeremiad it will be useful to examine the most important speech in the tour, his address to the Republican National Convention on June 10, 1936. Several factors make this presentation the culmination of the entire campaign. The speech provided Hoover his most enthusiastic and endearing audience and it reaffirmed an American political ritual, the granting of wisdom by the party's most prominent members. Moreover, the speech would be the highlight of Hoover's crusade, guaranteeing his largest national audience; the Republican candidate would assume the central focus of the public eye after the convention. Finally, Hoover appeared to maintain hope that a deadlocked Republican convention would turn to him to lead the battle against FDR. According to Smith, Hoover put his fullest effort into the address in hopes of gaining the vote of the convention.⁴⁷ As a result, the convention address was the highlight of Hoover's crusade and clearly distinguished the philosophy of the Republican Party from that of the Democratic New Deal. Careful examination of this speech places it within the rhetorical tradition of the jeremiad.

The jeremiad has persisted in American rhetoric as a means helping leaders define the past and the present. According to Ritter, the jeremiad helps Americans adjust political actions of the present with those of the past and in so doing, helps promote social cohesion.⁴⁸ In the course of linking America's past with the present, the jeremiad also affirms the belief that Americans are a special people, chosen for a divine mission. Although the modern jeremiad has become the property of the politician, the address still retains a religious tone, which make it unique in political debate. As a result, the jeremiad still functions as a "political sermon." Ritter notes

that the modern jeremiad remains intact in many ways. It suggests that Americans have deviated from the American Dream and that their present suffering is a sign of infidelity to the sacred past. There is a sense of urgency as the address becomes a warning to repent and redeem the nation. In addition, the speaker assumes the role of a scolding prophet, a person who appears as a “voice in the wilderness” but who is also a part of the larger community.⁴⁹ From this description, Hoover’s convention speech clearly functioned as a jeremiad. For example, a sense of urgency pervaded the address.

Hoover opened by noting that in “this room rests the greatest responsibility that has come to a body of Americans in three generations.” He argued that the Republican convention was in reality a “convention of Americans to determine the fate of those ideals for which this nation was founded. That far transcends all partisanship.” Hence, he redefined the inherent partisanship of a nominating convention as a meeting of the faithful, hoping to address broader concerns. Less than a minute into the speech, Hoover attacked the evil philosophy which the chosen people had to grapple with: New Deal liberalism. After devoting four years of research toward understanding the New Deal, Hoover concluded it was one of two systems. Either, it has no philosophy and is “sheer opportunism” that combines a spoils system, greed for power, and reckless adventure (“the most charitable view”) or it is an attempt to infect the people by a “mixture of European ideas, flavored with our native predilection to get something for nothing.”⁵⁰ Hoover’s warning was clear: continued support for the New Deal could bring the same results that were destroying liberty in Europe. More important, the enemy achieved power through an insidious philosophy, not force or coercion. The “Socialist and Fascist dictatorships” of central Europe, Hoover argued, destroyed liberty with promise and hate, not with guns and armies. “They offered the mirage of Utopia to those in distress,” he charged. “They flung the poison of class hatred.” Pointing to his first campaign against Roosevelt in 1932, Hoover argued, “You may recall the promises of the abundant life, the propaganda of hate.” If there are any examples of European collectivism “that the New Deal has not imitated,” continued Hoover, “it must have been an oversight.” But important American institutions, a free press, a strong Supreme Court, and the Constitution itself, had stopped the onslaught of collectivism—for the present. What plans did the New Dealers have for a second term: “When we examine the speeches of Tugwell, Wallace, Ickes, and others, we see little indication of repentance.”⁵¹

For 150 years, the “American System of Liberty” had delivered an abundant life to those in America. “We had triumphed in this long climb of mankind toward plenty that we had reached Mount Pisgah, where we looked over the promised land of abolished poverty,” noted Hoover. But then evil struck: “Then came the little prophets of the New Deal. They announce the striking solution that the way out is to produce less and to increase prices so people can buy less.”⁵² The inherent good of the American people would be degraded by “repeated violation of morals and honor in government. . . . When the standards of honor and morals fail in government, they will fail in a people.”⁵³ Not only did FDR fail to provide moral leadership, he had violated the basic tenets of faith. Noting that “moral laws” are written in a “Great

Book," Hoover declared, "For the first time in the history of America we have heard the gospel of class hatred preached from the White House. That is human poison far more deadly than fear. Every reader of history knows that is the final rock upon which all democracies have been wrecked."⁵⁴

Hoover proclaimed that human accomplishment and change are welcome in the American system, but that "change which destroys the safeguards of free men and women are only apples of Sodom."⁵⁵ In order to save the country from a planned society and a dictatorship, Americans needed to return to their fundamental values: "There are some principles which came into the universe along with the shooting stars of which worlds are made, and they have always gravitation, the existence of God, and the ceaseless struggle of humankind to be free." Such principles, Hoover argued, are not negotiable. In the nineteenth century, the Whig Party "temporized, compromised upon the issue of slavery for the black man. That party disappeared. It deserved to disappear." There are issues bigger than payrolls, economics, and materialism at stake in this election, charged Hoover, "Fundamental American liberties are at stake." The American people had the choice, one path supported the moral and spiritual values inherent in the American tradition; the other path supported a planned economy and national regimentation. Hoover ended his speech at a high pitch: "Republicans and fellow-Americans! This is your call. Stop the retreat. . . . Stop the retreat, and turning the eyes of your fellow Americans to the sunlight of freedom, lead the attack to retake, recapture, and remain the citadels of liberty. Thus can America be preserved. . . . And thus you will win the gratitude of posterity and the blessings of Almighty God."⁵⁶

Karlynn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson recently noted that analysis of rhetorical genres "aims at understanding rhetorical practice over time by discerning recurrent patterns that reflect the rules practitioners follow. Such rules reflect culturally recognized motives, they define rhetorical situations, and they mark audience expectations. In other words, genres are jointly constructed by rhetors and audiences out of shared cultural knowledge."⁵⁷ In this particular case study, it appears that Hoover employed a form of the jeremiad in his campaign to warn the American people of the dangers of the New Deal. His failure to inspire even his own party may lead to questions about his effectiveness. Significantly, Hoover's jeremiad was based on various situational factors, one of the most important being his status as a former president.

Can the jeremiad be seen as a recurring rhetorical form, a genre, that is associated with a specific political status, such as the post-presidency? Just as inaugural speeches are associated with a particular office, it would seem that the rhetoric of former presidents also may evolve out of shared cultural and political circumstances. Certainly audiences perceive former presidents differently than other political figures, and do so, it would seem, because of the quasi-religious dimensions of the presidency. Not only did this person once speak as the single voice of the country, but he also assumed the role of the "national teacher"⁵⁸ and the "national minister."⁵⁹ As a result, audiences and rhetors may "jointly construct" a rhetorical situation unique to the post-presidency. It would appear that no other individual in modern America could assume

the role of a national Jeremiah. Only former presidents can present a “political sermon” at a national level and “wed politics with the Kingdom of God.” While the rhetoric of ex-presidents may show little of the religious trappings of the traditional jeremiad, their books, essays, and speeches can address ideological issues inherent in the political process. Religious leaders are constrained by their commitment to their denomination, business leaders by their private sector concerns; only the former president can speak as a prophet from the political wilderness who is urging the people to “get right” with their fundamental values and institutions. Moreover, the post-presidency has gone through one major change in the twentieth century: through the Former Presidents Act of 1958, the ex-president has an official political function. With annual pensions, Secret Service protection, and the ability to create a presidential library, former presidents have been elevated to a special status.⁶⁰ With the institution-ization of the post-presidency, America has created a lasting and national forum for ex-presidents to address major concerns. Because of this, ex-presidents may continue to employ the jeremiad to help America retain its sense of mission and political values. Although Hoover did not receive the benefits afforded to modern executives, his wealth and status allowed him to devote the rest of life to saving the American political system. And in this manner, the jeremiad appears to be one method of understanding the rhetorical function of the former president in American politics.

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Notes

1. For an analysis of the rhetorical presidency, see James W. Ceaser, Glen E. Thurrow, Jeffrey Tulis, and Joseph M. Bessette, “The Rise of the Rhetorical Presidency,” in *Rethinking the Rhetorical Presidency* ed. Thomas E. Cronin (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1982), pp. 233–251. Also see Richard E. Neustadt, *Presidential Power: The Exercise of Leadership* (New York: John Wiley, 1976).
2. Hoover quoted in Richard Norton Smith, *An Uncommon Man: The Triumph of Herbert Hoover* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984), p. 195.
3. “How the Former President Spends His Time,” *Literary Digest*, 5 August 1933, p. 34. Hoover quoted in Joan Hoff Wilson, *Herbert Hoover: Forgotten Progressive* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1975), p. 215.
4. Letter from Herbert Hoover to William A. White, 11 May 1934, Herbert Hoover Papers (hereafter HHP), Hoover Presidential Library, West Branch, Iowa, Box 553. Hoover quoted in Wilson, p. 212.
5. Hoover quoted in Smith, p. 206.
6. Wilson, p. 215.
7. See Smith, pp. 209–214 for an analysis of Hoover’s private motives in pursuing the Republican presidential nomination in 1936.
8. Letter from John O’Laughlin to Herbert Hoover, 21 April 1935, HHP, Box 457.
9. Theodore C. Wallen, “Hoover’s Letter Livens Campaign,” *Washington Star*, 24 March 1935; David Lawrence, “Hoover As ’36 Possibility,” *Washington Star*, 24 March 1935 (both HHP, Box 162).
10. G. Gould Lincoln, “Hoover’s Mystery Role Helps Him Crystalize G.O.P. Policy,” *Washington Star*, 15 October 1935, HHP.
11. Letter from John O’Laughlin to Herbert Hoover, 30 November 1935, HHP, Box 457B.
12. Letter from Herbert Hoover to William A. White, 10 May 1935, HHP, Box 553.

13. "A New Hoover," *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, 20 November 1935, HHP, Box 165. *Washington Star*, 17 January 1936, HHP, Box 166.
14. Byron Price, "He 'Wisecracks' Pungently; Dispense With Statistics; That's Hoover, 1936 Model," *Associated Press Dispatch*, February 1936, HHP, Box 168.
15. *Chicago Chronicle*, 21 December 1935, HHP, Box 166. Alton Cook, *New York Telegram*, 17 December 1935, HHP, Box 166. Howard Vincent O'Brien, "All Things Considered," *Chicago Daily News*, 16 April 1936, HHP, Box 170.
16. In several of his early speeches, Hoover was cut off by the radio networks before he had completed the address. In his files is a typed insert that reminded him to conclude the speech for the radio audience before air-time ran out: "I need to interrupt to state that the time so generously extended to me by the Columbia Broadcast System has expired. I shall be continuing this address but to the radio audience may I say there are other questions of morals in government, questions of public trust. . . . in which there must be complete regeneration." 14 May 1936, speech in Philadelphia, HHP, Box 171. Hoover told a group of reporters that in the past, "you could go around the country making the same speech at each town. This way you could polish up the speech as you went along. But now with the radio speech-making is hard work. A speech is good only once—because the public is quick to detect repetition. I do a lot of research and spend two or three weeks on each of my speeches." Public Statement File, #2284, HHP, 7 April 1936.
17. "Hoover's New Deal 'Remedies,'" *Literary Digest*, 23 November 1935, p. 5.
18. Herbert Hoover, "Responsibility of the Republican Party to the Nation," 22 March 1935, *Addressess Upon the American Road, 1933–1938* (New York: Scribners, 1938), pp. 40–44.
19. Herbert Hoover, "The New Deal Further Explored," speech presented in St. Louis, Missouri, 16 December 1935, *American Ideals Versus the New Deal* (New York: Scribners, n.d.), p. 36.
20. St. Louis speech, p. 36.
21. Herbert Hoover, "The Choice for Youth," *American Ideals Versus the New Deal*, speech presented in Colorado Springs, Colorado, 7 March 1936, p. 65; p. 66.
22. Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition* (New York: Random House, 1948), p. 372.
23. Colorado Springs speech, pp. 72–73.
24. Hofstadter, p. 372.
25. Colorado Springs speech, p. 64
26. Colorado Springs speech, p. 64.
27. Herbert Hoover, "The Bill of Rights," speech presented in San Diego, California on 17 September 1935, p. 14; "The Expenditures Imposed on the People," speech presented in New York City on 16 November 1935, p. 33 (both printed in *American Ideals*).
28. St. Louis speech, p. 39. "The Confused State of the Union," speech presented in Portland, Oregon, 12 February 1936, p. 59. "The Obligations of the Republican Party to the Nation," speech presented in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 14 May 1936, p. 87 (both printed in *American Ideals*).
29. Herbert Hoover, *American Idealism* (New York: Doubleday, 1923), pp. 26–27.
30. Philadelphia speech, p. 86; p. 92; p. 92.
31. New York City speech, p. 27; p. 29.
32. Portland speech, p. 56.
33. St. Louis speech, p. 42. Philadelphia speech, p. 89.
34. Herbert Hoover, "Has the New Deal Solved Our National Problems?" speech presented in Fort Wayne, Indiana, 4 April 1936, p. 75; p. 78; (printed in *American Ideals*).
35. Lincoln, *Washington Star*, 15 October 1935.
36. "Mr. Hoover's Recent Letter," *Arizona Star*, 26 March 1935, HHP, Box 162. "The New Hoover," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 19 November 1935, HHP, Box 165.
37. "Mr. Hoover's Address," *Washington Post*, 18 November 1935, HHP, Box 165. "Dissecting the New Deal," *Ohio State Journal*, 18 December 1935, HHP, Box 166. "The Hoover Speech," *Emporia Gazette*, 19 February 1936, HHP, Box 168.
38. "The Stature of Hoover," *Columbus Evening Dispatch*, 14 February 1936, HHP, Box 168.
39. Lawrence, *Washington Star*, 24 March 1936.

40. "Hoover-Roosevelt Debate Grows Still More Direct," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 18 December 1935, HHP, Box 166. "Mr. Hoover Looks At Relief," *Minneapolis Tribune*, 18 December 1935, HHP, Box 166.
41. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Cycles of American History* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1986), p. 324.
42. Sacvan Bercovitch, "Horologicals to Chronometricals: The Rhetoric of the Jeremiad," *Literary Monographs*, vol. III, 1970, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press), p. 6. Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978). p. 4.
43. Kurt Ritter, "American Political Rhetoric and the Jeremiad Tradition: Presidential Nomination Acceptance Addresses, 1960-1976," *Central States Speech Journal* 31 (1980) 157.
44. See Ritter, pp. 153-171; Ronald Carpenter, "The Historical Jeremiad as Rhetorical Genre," in *Form and Genre*, eds. Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson (Annandale, VA: SCA, 1976), pp. 103-117; and Richard L. Johannesen, "Ronald Reagan's Economic Jeremiad," *Central States Speech Journal* 37 (1986) 79-89.
45. Stephen E. Lucas, "Generic Criticism and Historical Context: The Case of George Washington's First Inauguration Address," *Southern Speech Communication Journal* 51 (1986) 356.
46. Bercovitch, *American Jeremiad*, p. 93.
47. See Smith, p. 223. He writes that Hoover's friend John O'Laughlin, informed Douglas MacArthur that "Hoover would accept the nomination if offered it."
48. See Ritter, pp. 164-171.
49. Ritter, p. 157.
50. Herbert Hoover, "Crisis to Free Men," speech presented in Cleveland, Ohio on 10 June 1936, p. 4, *American Ideals*.
51. Cleveland speech, p. 5.
52. Cleveland speech, p. 7.
53. Cleveland speech, p. 8.
54. Cleveland speech, p. 8.
55. Cleveland speech, p. 10.
56. Cleveland speech, p. 12.
57. Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, "Introduction," *Southern Speech Communication Journal*, 51 (1986) 295.
58. Neustadt writes that presidents must often assume the role of the nation's teacher in order to be "effective as a guardian of public standing." He details four special features of "presidential teaching" (p. 168).
59. Roderick Hart observes that American presidents often assume a religious role in governing, that when "an American president is inaugurated, he is also ordained." For Hart's treatment of "Presidential Piety," see *The Political Pulpit* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue Univ. Press, 1977), pp. 8-10.
60. Schlesinger details the advantages afforded by the "institutionalization" of the post-presidency, pp. 325-329.