**"Rugged Individualism Speech"**

By Herbert Hoover October 22, 1928

*Herbert Hoover closed his campaign for the presidency in 1928 with this speech. It expresses the philosophy not only of Hoover, but of the Republican party during the 1920s. As you read, think about what sort of role Hoover sees for the federal government in the economic affairs of the nation. Why does Hoover favor such a role for the government? Also, think about in what sense Hoover’s response to the Great Depression might be seen as an extension of the philosophy he articulates here.*

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

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

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

Above: (Right) President Herbert Hoover, who was president during the stock market crash and ensuing depression. He argued that Americans needed to display “rugged individualism” to pick themselves up and get out of the economic disaster. (Left) A political cartoon from 1929 regarding Hoover’s reaction to stock market speculation and his insistence that business can solve the problems of the Depression.

When the war closed, the most vital of issues both in our own country and around the world was whether government should continue their wartime ownership and operation of many [industrial companies]. We were challenged with a... choice between the American system of **rugged individualism** (everyone for themselves) and a European philosophy of diametrically opposed doctrines … **state socialism** (where the government takes a strong role in supporting the people). The acceptance of these ideas would have meant the destruction of self-government through centralization... [and] the undermining of the individual [hard work] and enterprise through which our people have grown to … greatness.

… When the Republican Party came into full power it went at once resolutely back to our fundamental conception of the state and the rights and responsibility of the individual. Thereby it restored confidence and hope in the American people, it freed and stimulated enterprise (business), it restored the government to a position as an umpire instead of a player in the economic game. For these reasons the American people have gone forward in progress....

…And what has been the result of the American system? Our country has become the land of opportunity to those born without inheritance, not merely because of the wealth

of its resources and industry but because of this freedom of initiative and enterprise. Russia has natural resources equal to ours.... But she has not had the blessings of one hundred and fifty years of our form of government and our social system.

…And I again repeat that the departure from our American system... will jeopardize the very liberty and freedom of our people, and will destroy equality of opportunity not only to ourselves, but to our children....

# Questions for Reading 2:

1. Describe what Hoover called the “American system.” According to Hoover what are the threats “progress and freedom?” What is “rugged individualism”? After this speech the stock market crashed and the economy went into a depression.
2. How do you think Hoover would have responded to that depression? What actions would have taken (or not taken) according to the beliefs he says in this speech?
3. Do you agree with Hoover? Do Americans have “equality of opportunity”? Is America a “land of opportunity to those born without inheritance”? Explain why or why not.