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H-Diplo Review Essay on **George H. Nash, ed. *Freedom Betrayed: Herbert Hoover's Secret History of the Second World War and Its Aftermath***. Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 2011. ISBN: 978-0-8179-1234-5 (cloth, \$49.95).

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Reviewed for H-Diplo by **Justus D. Doenecke**, New College of Florida

When Japan attacked Pearl Harbor, ex-President Herbert Hoover decided to collect documents centering on the background of the Pacific War, doing so in the hopes of proving that the conflict could have been averted. Over the years, the project expanded, by 1945 encompassing all of World War II and the events leading to it. By 1950 the project had been extended to include the immediate postwar years, with the accumulated page proofs of “the Magnum Opus” exceeding one thousand printed pages. The manuscript continued to go through many drafts, with some material added, some dropped. When Hoover died in October 1964, the work was still not completed, though it contained sufficient material for several books. Hoover’s sons Herbert Jr. and Allan decided against publication, possibly out of fear that this highly opinionated work would detract from their father’s reputation.

Thanks, however, to the efforts of George H. Nash, Hoover’s most prominent and thorough biographer, the Magnum Opus is now published, though honed down to a mere 957 pages. Nash’s lucid, well-written, and thorough introduction is close to a hundred pages in itself. Nash describes in detail the evolution of this manuscript and often edits the text itself, at times correcting Hoover’s errors. He includes an appendix consisting of documents and correspondence that clarifies the development of this work.

Nash concedes that as a scholarly work, the book has limitations. It rests almost entirely on published materials and offers little fresh data. As a revelation of the inner workings of Hoover’s mind, however, Nash finds the work invaluable. In addition, this unique combination of “scholarship and polemic” (lxxxiv) raises questions that he thinks are still debated, ranging from the wisdom of Britain’s diplomacy in 1939 to America’s China policy in 1946-1949.

¹ [Changes from Version 1.0]: Magnus Opus exceeds “one thousand printed pages,” not “three thousand;” (p. 1); B.A. from Colgate in “1960,” and Ph.D. from Princeton in “1966” (p. 4).

Certainly Hoover's claims are sweeping indeed, reading as if the editorial boards of Colonel Robert R. McCormick's *Chicago Tribune* or Joseph M. Patterson's *New York Daily News* had decided to write contemporary history. According to the former president, American recognition of the Soviet Union in 1933 "opened the gates" to destructive conspiracies (29). The failure of the New Deal to restore the American economy caused Franklin Roosevelt to "divert the public mind" by resorting to "foreign power politics," which is "a policy as old as Machiavelli" (873).

Hoover admits he could find himself little "disposed to condemn" the Munich Agreement of September 1938 (876), as he claimed it rectified injustices contained in the Versailles Treaty. He denounces Britain for guaranteeing Poland in March 1939 ("probably the greatest blunder in the whole history of European power diplomacy" (877)). Hoover infers that it was American pressure that caused Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain to make such a risky commitment. Most of Franklin Roosevelt's interventionist moves in 1939-1941 come under Hoover's scathing indictment, among them aiding the Soviets in the summer of 1941 and engaging in an undeclared naval war with Germany that fall. Unlike some anti-interventionists, Hoover favored sending supplies to Britain, but opposed the 1941 lend-lease bill on the grounds that it surrendered vital warmaking power to the president.

When Hoover turns to the Pacific, he blames Roosevelt for foolishly levying sanctions on Japan, arguing that Roosevelt ignored the fact that within several years Japan would "have collapsed from internal economic reasons alone" (813). Moreover, in the long run, Hoover argues, the seventy million Japanese could not long dominate a billion Chinese. FDR refused to meet with Japanese Prime Minister Konoye Fumimaro, and therefore prevented negotiations "that would have saved China from ravishment and would have protected the American pacific flank" (847). Not surprisingly, Hoover bestows upon the Roosevelt administration the responsibility for the Pearl Harbor attack, citing such writers as Admiral Robert A. Theobald, journalist George Morgenstern, and historian William Henry Chamberlin.

Once the United States entered the war, according to Hoover, it made one disastrous decision after another. The invasion of North Africa was a dubious venture. Backing Prime Minister Winston Churchill's "soft underbelly" Balkan strategy was equally unwise. The unconditional surrender policy needlessly prolonged the European conflict. There was hardly a summit conference that did not betray the Atlantic Charter, the Big Three's treatment of Poland being especially egregious in this regard. By their imposition of the Morgenthau Plan, just slightly modified by JCS 1067, the Allies imposed a Carthaginian peace on Germany.

Roosevelt's conduct in the Pacific war comes under equal condemnation. Hoover denounces the secret agreement with Stalin, made at Yalta, that affirmed the status quo in Soviet-dominated Outer Mongolia, gave Sakhalin and the Kurile islands to Russia, leased Port Arthur to the Soviets, and provided for joint Chinese-Russian operation of the Chinese Eastern and South Manchurian railroads (both railroads being in reality massive development corporations), for such moves transferred Mongolia, Manchuria, and other important territories to the Soviets. President Harry Truman's decision to drop atomic bombs on Japan was not only "immoral" (882) but unnecessary, for Japan had repeatedly been suing for peace.

Truman's Far Eastern policies fare little better. Hoover writes that Roosevelt's successor "sacrificed all China to the Communists by insistence [sic] of his left-wing advisors and his appointment of General [George C.] Marshall to execute their will" (882). In 1942 Hoover had been critical of the Chiang regime, calling the Chinese ruler "the war lord leader of a military oligarchy based upon a secret society," and arguing that his government lacked even the remotest resemblance to a Western-style democracy (818). Hoover compares Japanese rule of Korea (they "established order, built harbors, railways, roads and communications, good public buildings and greatly improved housing" (737)) to the inept postwar government of South Korea. Yet he defends Douglas MacArthur's victory strategies, deploring the general's firing by Harry Truman.

Anyone familiar with the three volumes of Hoover's *Memoirs* will note the same approach at work here. In this dense, at times turgid book that resembles a lawyer's brief, Hoover concedes that he writes in the tone of "I told you so" (851), but again he carries this practice to extremes. In his encyclopedic chronology, he never concedes a mistaken perspective on his part while FDR is wrong at every turn. Hoover admits he has loaded the manuscript with quotations, doing so, he writes, "so as to avoid any misinterpretation of their context which would change their import" (890). Little wonder that much of the text can read like some undergraduate term papers, a string of references loosely tied together by a sentence or so of narrative. At one point he repeats statistics on Poland's transfers of population on two consecutive pages (655, 656). He quotes verbatim a long editorial from the *New York World Telegram* in two different portions of the book (674, 693-694), though giving a different date each time.

Many of Hoover's claims can be debated. It is hard to find either a British or American historian who finds American pressure responsible for Britain's 1939 guarantee of Poland. He continually stresses that the United States was in no danger of invasion during the period 1939-1941, something FDR conceded in his 1941 State-of-the-Union address, but Axis domination of the Eurasian continent could make life most uncomfortable for the Western Hemisphere. Hoover accurately claims that polls of that time showed that over eighty percent of the people opposed entering the war. He fails, however, to note that the same polls indicated majority support for such Roosevelt policies as cash-and-carry, lend-lease, and convoys to Europe and for aiding Britain at the risk of war. Historians as respected as Waldo Heinrich and Hilary Conroy differ as to Konoye's ability to deliver on any commitment to FDR.² It is barely a secret that Roosevelt cynically deceived Polish leader Stanislaw Mikolajczyk, but one must ask what leverage the president possessed, for huge numbers of Soviet troops were already penetrating Eastern Europe. One could argue that the unconditional surrender policy, announced at Casablanca in January 1943, helped cement the

² In *Threshold of War: Franklin D. Roosevelt and American Entry into World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 184, Heinrich refers to "this melancholy nobleman," who "had already proven a weak reed for peace," and who "could offer no substantial concession." For Conroy, see his essay "Nomura and His John Doe Associates," in Hilary Conroy and Harry Wray, eds., *Pearl Harbor Reexamined: Prologue to the Pacific War* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990), 102, where Conroy indicts Hull for lacking the needed "bold diplomacy."

Grand Alliance when the Soviets greatly suspected Allied intentions, due to the failure as of yet to initiate a second front. (To Hoover, maintaining the Russian alliance was at best of no great importance).

Turning to the Pacific, one could claim that Roosevelt's China policy was flawed in just the opposite way Hoover suggests: FDR babied the China regime, refusing to make aid to China conditional on sorely needed domestic reforms, much less any commitment to engage Japanese troops far more seriously. As many historians, including Andrew J. Rotter, have noted, Japanese peace feelers in 1945 were oblique, the influential hard-liners being determined to fight to the end.³ Hoover quotes extensively from the 1947 report of Albert C. Wedemeyer calling for military aid to Nationalist China, but he does not include those damning portions of the general's account, namely that the corrupt and "spiritually insolvent" Kuomintang lacked the popular support needed to defeat the Communists.⁴ Despite the material improvements the Japanese bestowed upon Korea, most Koreans were not exactly enamored with Japanese rule, for the occupiers sought to obliterate Korea as a nation.

Hoover does make some valid points, particularly in regard to Roosevelt's inept diplomacy with Japan in the months immediately preceding the Pearl Harbor attack and the draconian measures initially applied to postwar Germany. But, as one finds so often in his account, he cannot resist blaming American policy on Communist influence. Furthermore, his account of his trip to Europe in 1938, where he met Hitler, is particularly revealing.

In short, the book's real value lies in offering further understanding of Hoover the man and the arguments he used to indict his successors.

Justus D. Doenecke is professor emeritus of history at New College of Florida. He received his B.A. from Colgate University (1960) and Ph.D. from Princeton University (1966). Among his books are *Not to the Swift: The Old Isolationists in the Cold War Era* (1979); *In Danger Undaunted: The Anti-Interventionist Movement of 1940-1941 as Revealed in the Papers of the America First Committee* (1990); *From Isolation to War, 1931-1941* (with John E. Wilz, 3rd ed.; 2002); *Storm on the Horizon: The Challenge to American Intervention, 1939-1941* (2000); *Debating Franklin D. Roosevelt's Foreign Policies* (with Mark A. Stoler, 2005); and *Nothing Less Than War: A New History of American Entry into World War I* (2011). He is currently writing a study on American debates concerning US engagement in World War I, the Paris Peace Conference, the League fight, and the 1920 presidential election.

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³ Andrew J. Rotter, *Hiroshima: The World's Bomb* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 180.

⁴ For the Wedemeyer quotation, see Mark A. Stoler, *George C. Marshall: Soldier-Statesman of the American Century* (Boston: Twayne, 1989), 170.

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