

President Herbert Hoover on “Self-Reliance

When President Herbert Hoover took office, the unemployment rate was 4.4 percent. When he left, it was 23.6 percent. During the early days of the Great Depression, Hoover launched the largest public works projects up until his time. But he continued to believe that problems of poverty and unemployment were best left to "voluntary organization and community service." He feared that federal relief programs would undermine individual character by making recipients dependent on the government. He did not recognize that the sheer size of the nation's economic problems had made the concept of "rugged individualism" meaningless



Document 1: Herbert Hoover, “Annual Message to Congress on the State of the Union,” December 2, 1930

“Economic depression cannot be cured by legislative action or executive pronouncement. Economic wounds must be healed by the action of the cells of the economic body—the producers and consumers themselves. Recovery can be expedited [speeded up] and its effects mitigated [eased] by cooperative action. That cooperation requires that every individual should . . . maintain his self-reliance; that each and every one should search for methods of improving his business or service . . . that each should seek to assist his neighbors who may be less fortunate; that each industry should assist its own employees; that each community and each State should assume its full responsibilities for organization of employment and relief of distress . . .”

Document 2: Herbert Hoover, Press Release, February 3, 1931

My own conviction is strongly that if we break down this sense of responsibility of individual generosity to individual and mutual self help in the country in times of national difficulty and if we start appropriations of this character we have not only impaired something infinitely valuable in the life of the American people but have struck at the roots of self-government. Once this has happened it is not the cost of a few score millions but we are faced with the abyss of reliance in future upon Government charity in some form or another.

Questions

- 1. How did Hoover believe the U.S. should handle the problems of the Great Depression?**
- 2. What role, if any, did Hoover believe the federal government should play in promoting economic recovery?**
- 3. Why do you think Hoover held this view?**
- 4. How do you think American voters responded to Hoover’s position? Why?**