

John smith and herbert hoover essay



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Both John Smith and Herbert Hoover, lost their most important elections because of the erroneous perception by the American people. In 1928, Smith was believed to be an agent of Rome and a corrupt New Tammany politician who did not have the best interests of the country at heart. In 1932, President Hoover was perceived to be out of touch with the plight of the working man and the struggles of his family in the midst of some of the worst years of the Great Depression. Even to this day, the perception of the latter is still believed by many casual historians and was further cemented by posterity's perception of his successor, Franklin Roosevelt.

Both men were Progressives who believed that they held the answers to bring America into a new age of progress. Prejudice and outside forces both were used to sidetrack each individual's full political possibilities, from coming to fruition. Al Smith was born on December 30, 1873 on the lower east side of Manhattan; an area that would come to define his life and how he defined himself. When Smith was thirteen, his father died and Smith was forced to drop out of the private school that he was attending. (Finan, 2003 pg. 8)

He was able to support his family at such a young age since he worked more than sixty hours a week in order to put food on the table and to pay the bills. His job was at the Fulton Fish Market paid him \$12 a week. (Burns 1999) Smith would comment that he received a degree from FFM. The Fulton Fish Market because it was there that he became well known in the immediate community. Smith was a "people person" and used those skills to make connections that would help to further his career in whatever he wanted to

do. The Democratic Political Machine, Tammany Hall, soon took notice to the skills of Smith.

Tammany Hall was the most important political force in New York City at the time. It was also one of the few places where an immigrant could hope to find a job or to receive help concerning family problems. Tammany Hall was a jack of all trades. And in return for such services, the ward bosses, expected and received, one's vote for life. It would be this connection that would be instrumental in Smith enjoying the meteoric rise in New York politics. However, due to the reputation for dizzying corruption that all too often accompanied Tammany Hall, such connections would serve as a severe impediment for him later in life.

Herbert Hoover was on October 10, 1874. He was born into a Quaker family in Iowa. Both of his parents died when he was a young boy and Hoover went to live with his uncle. Hoover did not attend high school but rather attended night school where he learned all that he need to learn in order to eventually be allowed entrance into Stanford University in 1891; the first year that the school was opened. Hoover graduated from Stanford University in 1895 with a degree in Geology. (Fausold, 1988 pg. 6) Hoover used his knowledge to make himself a name in the mining field in Australia and even devised a way to extract large quantities of zinc from the mines. Hoover married his college sweetheart and went to China in 1900; right at the time of the Boxer Rebellion in which Chinese nationalists, infuriated by Western influence, staged a number of riots in which they held many Americans captive. Hoover escaped unharmed. The early life of Smith and Hoover speak to the contrast

of the American people and the fact that there was a widening gap between the rich and the poor during the Gilded Age in which both were born into.

Hoover was born with more advantages by birth. His parents died young as did Smith's but Hoover's advantages were made greater by his education. Receiving a degree from Stanford University was one of the most tools that Hoover possessed in his desire to climb the social and economic ladder in his early years. Smith did not have those advantages. However, Smith possessed superior social skills and began his rise as a growing number of New York citizens were coming from Eastern Europe and who felt disenfranchised by the establishment who worked hard to keep them out of the political process.

Smith would use this to his advantage throughout his political career. Smith began his political career in 1895 when he secured a job at the Commissions of Jurors. In 1903, Smith was elected to the New York State Assembly. In 1911, the progressive side was summoned to the forefront of his mindset when in response to the 191 Triangle Factory in which dozens of women jumped to their death when a fire broke out in their factory.

The women were unable to vacate the building due to the fact that there had been talk of striking and unionizing and in fear of such things, the factory owners, locked the doors, preventing anyone from talking to other floors about a possible strike. Smith was directly affected by this mentally and vowed to be a man of the people. It would be a reputation that, at least in New York City, he would not be able to shake and would allow him to

continue enjoying a very successful career in New York politics. In 1919, Smith was elected Governor of the state of New York.

He was the first Irish American to be elected Governor of a state. His connection to Tammany and the ability and desire of the ward bosses to collect as many immigrant votes as possible, helped him to gain the office. A very large population of previously disenfranchised Irish, German and Italian voters, had seen Smith as a savior of sorts and voted for him in droves. Smith was again reelected in 1922, 1924 and 1926. (Burns 1999) During this time, Smith hired Robert Moses; possibly the most important and influential figure in the long history of New York history.

This is also one the legacies of Al Smith which some can see as a positive or negative aspect of his legacy as Moses ran roughshod over the rights and desires of others in order to do what he wanted to do and did so for neatly half a century. Those who study the life of Herbert Hoover, realize that the perception that the country had of him during the last years of his presidency as an uncaring and cold puppet of big business and the rich, really did not know the man. Hoover made the cause for humanitarian causes, his life's work.

Tired of making money in the mining business, Hoover, organized massive relief efforts abroad and in the United States, in order to help the American soldiers who were fighting in the First World War. A rationing program that would again be used to a greater extent during World War II, was first enacted by Hoover. He spent more than fourteen hours a day, eventually helping to distribute more than nine million ration packets to those affected

by the war. By the end of the war, Hoover was an international hero. In 1917, President Wilson appointed Hoover to head the American Food Administration. Fausold, 1988 pg. 42) By the end of the war, the New York Times proclaimed Hoover to be one of the “ Ten Most Important Living Americans. ” Hoover would spend the immediate years after the war, collecting donations for a new library and research center in order to catalog the recollections and experiences of the men who had just come back from the war. The United States government would end up copying the practice in the 1930’s, when they realized that the number of former American slaves was disappearing and that to preserve their experiences for history, was important.

Hoover realized this much sooner. Both Smith and Hoover climbed quickly in the social and political ladder. Smith was elected the first Irish American governor of not only New York, but of any state in the Union. Smith was able to connect the German, Irish and Italian immigrants; to make them come together for a purpose of helping the poor; a population that had been long ignored in New York history. Hoover did much of the same but on a smaller level. After making his money in the mining industry, Hoover sought to use his skills by helping returning veterans from the Great War; both here and overseas.

President Wilson recognized Hoover’s abilities and put him in charge, deep within his Cabinet. Hoover was gaining more experience on a federal level, every day. The climax of Smith’s career came during the 1928 Presidential election. Smith continued to break down barriers as he became the first Irish-American and Catholic to gain a major party’s nomination for the presidency

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of the United States. The reaction of the rest of the country, would prevent another such occurrence until John F. Kennedy's Presidential campaign, more than thirty years later.

The campaign was fraught with problems from the start as it became obvious that Smith really had no chance to win. There were a number of reasons for this. The first was that he was a Catholic. This fact was made clear in Protestant churches all over the country. " No agent of the Pope should be president! " (Burns, 1999) These words were the words of the famous preacher, Billy Sunday. Protestants feared that a Catholic President would be taking his cues from the Pope, rather than from the American people.

The second impediment was that he was a New Yorker. The country has always had a love/hate relationship with New York as it exemplifies everything that is good with the country: diversity, wealth, and all that is bad, crime and at the time, establishments that violated Prohibition. Smith was a New Yorker. He identified with the city and made the people his own family. However, when going on the radio to speak to the nation, his diction seemed like a foreign language to people who were not looking for such change and differences.

The third impediment was the fact that Smith was viewed as being closely aligned to Tammany Hall. The days of former boss William Boss Tweed had not escaped the minds of many Americans who distrusted such large party machines as hot beds for corruption. And the last reason was that in prosperous times or in war, the American people are scared to make a

change. By the election of 1928, most of the country was enjoying a nearly ten year euphoric ride of prosperity and parties. What was the reason to possibly change that now?

As a result, Smith lost to Herbert Hoover in one of the most lopsided elections in American political history. However, Smith did carry the ten largest cities in America. (Burns, 1999) Herbert Hoover won the 1928 presidential election very easily. Built upon the success of his Republican predecessors, Hoover was riding the wave of American prosperity. Hoover's abilities were in doubt, at least in the mind of his predecessor, Calvin Coolidge also would come under a great deal of criticism for not doing more to possibly prevent the Great Depression.

It has been the perception of Hoover's peers as well as many who have come before and have gradually studied the Great Depression, to give all of the blame to the Hoover Administration. Herbert Hoover is still considered by popular opinion, to be one of the worst presidents in United States history. In this fact, the differences between perception and reality, especially in politics, have always made strange bedfellows. Hoover was pegged as a friend of big business and an enemy of the working classes. However, during his presidency, Hoover expanded the civil service coverage and he also cancelled private oil leases on government lands.

The Harding Administration had dealt with a scandal of their own when such shady oil/land deals were perpetuated under their administration. Hoover wanted so stay away from such shady land deals as much as possible. However, the basis for his motivation was the fact that he really did care

about the working class and the poor. Hoover convinced the Justice Department to go after criminals, such as Al Capone for tax evasion since they were unable to convict him on any of the multitude of other crimes that Capone had committed.

Hoover also appointed a commission which set aside more than three million acres of national forests and parks in a time when natural preservation had lost its appeal to most Americans who for a time during the Theodore Roosevelt Administration, applauded such efforts to help conserve and protect the nation's natural resources. Hoover also wrote a Children's Charter which advocated the protection of children of every race and gender; a concept that would not be fully adopted until the late 1960's. (Fausold, 1988 pg. 47)

However, when the Great Depression began on the last Friday in October, 1929. (Fausold, 1988 pg. 157) Hoover, like most Americans, believed that such setbacks were temporary. The Stock Market always suffers a fleeting "correction" and then is able to rebound. This has happened before and has happened countless times since 1929. Hoover, in February of 1920, had even announced that the stock market correction had passed and that things would be back to normal. However, by 1931, the country knew that this was not going to be solved overnight.

The situation was made worse by the fact that between 1930 and 1932, more than 5, 100 banks failed as panicked depositors withdrew their money in record numbers. The fact that Hoover failed to announce a "bank holiday" as was the case when Roosevelt was in office, only brought the critics out

against Hoover been more once he had left office. Hoover did not believe in laissez faire economics but he did not believe in an exponential increase of governmental involvement that would occur under the Roosevelt Administration. As a result, during the 1932 election, Hoover lost to Franklin Roosevelt by an electoral count of 472 -59. Burns, 1999)

Al Smith would rise again from his defeat in the 1928 election by being granted the title of President of the Empire State Building. Smith's friend, Jacob Rathskob, was in charge of constructing the building and wanted to place Smith at the head of the public relations campaign. Smith would be present at the opening ceremonies but despite his efforts, the Empire State Building, the tallest building in the world from 1931 until 1974 when Chicago's Sears Tower eclipsed it, would not become a commercial success until the 1960's.

Smith would die on October 4, 1944 as one of the most beloved New Yorkers in their history. Many of his programs were eventually adopted by Roosevelt as part of the famous " New Deal. " Roosevelt hated Smith and made that well known so he never did admit that it was Smith who had really inspired the New Deal. However, in secret, Roosevelt often lamented that much of what he was trying to do on a national level, Smith had attempted to complete, and was successful in his plans to bring to the people of New York, many of the same aspects.

Due to the fact that Hoover was a president and possibly had the ability to offset the effects of the Great Depression, one would have to say that Hoover was the more important figure. Importance does not accompany those who

succeed but those who fail. Importance lies in the ability of one to affect a wide number of people. Smith did that on a state level. There is no doubt to assert that. However, affected millions of peoples' lives after World War One. His organization helped to supply nine million people with rations which for many, kept them alive.

Hoover might not have been the more likable of the two, but he was the more important figure in American history. Had Smith won in 1928 or in 1932, there is a great deal of truth to the assumption that he might have been the greater figure. In New York history, Smith is only second to Robert Moses as the most important figure in the city's history. However, when speaking about the importance of an individual on a national, and in the case of Hoover, an international level, Hoover is the more important and misunderstood figure of the two.