

Rugged Individualism and Hoover: Definition and Speech

Lesson Transcript

Hoover's speech on 'rugged individualism' in the closing weeks of the 1928 Presidential election was one of the most important he delivered. Study this lesson to find out what rugged individualism encompasses and learn some points of emphasis from this speech.

Definition of Rugged Individualism

In the 1928 Presidential election, **Herbert Hoover**, the 31st president of the United States, was campaigning against Democrat Alfred Smith. As the election came to a close, Hoover sought to define his own philosophy, made famous in the speech entitled 'Rugged Individualism.' Herbert Hoover's definition of **rugged individualism** was freedom from government intervention and focus on individual entrepreneurship, enterprise, and volunteerism.

The Key Points of Hoover's Speech

We'll examine some of the essential quotes from Hoover's speech and how they reflect the rugged individualism principles of individual freedom, eliminating poverty, individual happiness, and individual success.

1. Individual Freedom

Hoover argued that one of the problems emerging from World War I was how European governments encroached on human freedom as well as individual and commercial endeavors. Hoover made the argument that this was not reflective of what it means to be American: 'We were challenged with a peace-time choice between the American system of rugged individualism and a European philosophy of diametrically opposed doctrines - doctrines of paternalism and state socialism. The acceptance of these ideas would have meant the destruction of self-government through centralization of government.' For Hoover, rugged individualism communicated the greatness of individual freedom. Hoover believed that freedom from government intervention was the path for individual and social happiness.

2. Eliminating Poverty

In his speech, Hoover argued that individual freedom was critical for eliminating poverty and suffering in American society: 'By adherence to the principles of decentralized self-government, ordered liberty, equal opportunity and freedom to the individual our American experiment in human welfare has yielded a degree of well-being unparalleled in all the world. It has come nearer to the abolition of poverty, to the abolition of fear of want, than humanity has ever reached before. Progress of the past seven years is the proof of it.' In embracing pure freedom, Hoover sought to clearly define himself against his Democratic challenger.

3. Individual Happiness and Success

Hoover's speech asserted that when freedom is guaranteed, individual happiness can be found. The speech defined rugged individualism in as many forms of American life as possible. Hoover suggested that a lack of restraints helped people 'born without inheritance' be successful because of 'freedom of initiative and enterprise.' Hoover made the argument that rugged individualism differentiated American identity from nations in Europe, such as Russia. He argued that even though both Russia and America possessed the same amount of natural resources, embracing individualism made one nation successful and another one not as profitable. In trying to connect his own political platform with American individualism, Hoover used the speech to make a definitive statement about his beliefs.

Hoover closed the speech in suggesting that the prosperity and 'return to normalcy' that had been part of the 1920s was because of this spirit of individualism. He argued that individual freedom was the essential piece in creating economic success. For Hoover, it's only through individualism that 'men and women can walk in ordered freedom' and 'enjoy the advantages of wealth.' While he concedes that 'no system is perfect,' Hoover suggests that the future of America is rooted in rugged individualism, a system that leads to an 'America, healthy in spirit, unfettered, youthful, and eager.' Hoover's optimistic view of rugged individualism played a very large role in his election. Americans liked being told that great days were ahead and that government intervention was not needed.

The Legacy of Rugged Individualism

On the heels of the speech, Hoover won the Presidential election of 1928. He was in office for less than a year when the Stock Market Crash of 1929, also called Black Tuesday, fundamentally altered the nation and his presidency. The ending to the 1920s was the beginning of the economic crisis known as the **Great Depression**. President Hoover still clung to his idea that rugged individualism could lift the nation out of the economic condition in which it was immersed. Hoover spoke to the public about his dogged claims of individual freedom helping the nation in the form of 'voluntary organization and community service.' It rang hollow with the American public. The nation was convinced that government intervention was needed. As this need became louder, Hoover's words regarding 'rugged individualism' seemed to haunt him. He lost the Presidency in the election of 1932 to Democrat Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

Lesson Summary

Rugged individualism was the name that **Herbert Hoover**, the 31st president of the United States, gave to his embrace of freedom. In his speech, he defined **rugged individualism** as the spirit of America, a realm where government kept out of the commercial and private affairs of citizens. In the speech, Hoover made the argument that this individualism differentiated America from other nations and was responsible for American success. Hoover articulated his own philosophy and set in motion a belief system that would define him in both winning an election and losing his place in American history. While Hoover was able to win the Presidency with his appeal to rugged individualism, events spiraled out of his control so that this appeal led to his political downfall with the onset of the **Great Depression**, which was the worldwide economic collapse that affected America from 1929 into the 1930s.