THE DEPRESSION AND AMERICAN CULTURE
(2Ki 6:25) And there was a great famine in Samaria, as they besieged it, until a donkey's head was sold for eighty shekels of silver, and the fourth part of a kab of dove's dung for five shekels of silver.
OBJECTIVES:

- We will examine how the Great Depression affected the social values, literature and popular culture of that era.
- We will examine the presidency of Herbert Hoover and his response as president to the Great Depression.
Depression Values:

- American social values seemed to change relatively little in response to the depression.
- Instead, many people responded to hard times by redoubling their commitment to familiar ideas and goals.
- However, many people also began to look to the government for assistance, many blamed corporate moguls and bankers for the depression.
Depression Values:

- Millions of people responded eagerly to reassurances that they could, through their own efforts, restore themselves to prosperity and success.
- In the 1930s, Dale Carnegie’s *How to Win Friends and Influence People* was a best selling book that conveyed a message that personal initiative was a route to success;
- It was also that the best way for people to get ahead was to fit in, and make other people feel important.
Depression Values:

- Literature shifted from the personal concerns of the 1920s and devoted themselves to exposes’ for social injustice.
- Erskine Caldwell’s “Tobacco Road”, which later became a long-running Broadway play, was an exposé of poverty in the rural South.
Depression Values:

- During the 1930s, almost every American family had a radio.
- Radio in the 1930s was often a community experience.
- Young people would place radioes on their front porches and invite friends over to sit, talk, or dance.
- Within families, the radio often drew parents and children together in the evening to listen to favorite programs.
Movies in the New Era:

- Although initially movie attendance dropped significantly in the first years of the Depression;
- Most Americans resumed going to the movies because it was a less expensive entertainment option and provides a way of escape.
Movies in the New Era:

- In many ways, movies were as safely conventional in the 1930s as they had been in the late 1920s.
- Hollywood continued to exercise tight control over its products in the 1930s through its resilient censor William Hays.
- Who ensured that most movies carried no sensational or controversial messages.
Movies in the New Era:

- But neither the censor nor the studio system could prevent films from exploring social questions altogether.

- A few films such as *King Vidor’s Our Daily Bread* and John Steinbeck’s novel *The Grapes of Wrath* did explore political themes.
Movies in the New Era:

- Director Frank Capra provided muted social messages in several of his comedies, *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington, Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*.
- This celebrated the virtues of small town and the decency of the common people in contrast to the selfish, corrupt values of the city and the urban rich.
- Capra’s films captured a populist admiration for ordinary Americans.
The 1930s saw the beginning of Walt Disney’s long reign as the champion of animation and children’s entertainment.

Disney began to produce feature length animation films starting in 1937 with Snow White.
Popular Literature and Journalism:

- The social and political strains of the Great Depression found voice much more successfully in print than they did on the airwaves or the screen.
- Much literature and journalism in the 1930s dealt directly or indirectly with the tremendous disillusionment and increasing radicalism of the era.
Popular Literature and Journalism:

- In the 1930s, books offering criticism of American society were widely published such as *U.S.A.* by John Dos Passos, that overtly attacked modern capitalism,
- *Disinherited* by Jack Conroy gave a harsh portrait of Coal Miners.
Popular Literature and Journalism:

- *Studs Lonigan* by James T. Farrell was a portrait of an lost, hardened working class youth.

- *Miss Lonely hearts* by Nathaniel Wet was the story of an advice columnist overwhelmed by the sadness he encounters in the lives of those who consult him.
Popular Literature and Journalism:

- Escapists and Romantic novels were popular as well such as *Gone with the Wind*.
- But it was a time where books tackled the harsh reality of American society during this bitter time.
The Popular Front and the Left:

- In the later 1930s, much of the political literature was a result of the rise of the Popular Front, a broad coalition of “anti-Fascist” groups on the left, of which the most important was the American Communist Party.

- The party had long been a harsh and unrelenting critic of American capitalism and the government it claimed was controlled by it.
The Popular Front and the Left:

- But under the instruction of the Soviet Union, the party toned down their criticism of FDR because they saw him as a potential ally.
- Many American leftists also were attracted to the Spanish Civil War.
The Popular Front and the Left:

- Where Fascist forces were seeking to overthrow an existing Republican Government.
- It attracted a substantial group of young Americans, more than 3,000 in all.
- Who formed the Abraham Lincoln Brigade.
- Directed in part and created by the American Communist Party and traveled to join the fight against the Fascists.
The Popular Front and the Left:

- The Communist Party also took a firm stance in favor of racial justice, its active defense of Scottsboro defendants was an example of its efforts to ally itself with the aspirations of African Americans.
- The American Communist Party was not the open patriotic organization it appeared to be.
- It was always under the rigid supervision of the Soviet Union.
- Its leaders took their orders from the Communist leadership in Moscow.
The Popular Front and the Left:

- The subordination of the party leadership to the Soviet Union was most clearly demonstrated in 1939, when Stalin signed a nonaggression pact with Nazi Germany.
- Moscow then sent orders to the American Communist Party to abandon the Popular Front and return to its old stance of harsh criticism of American liberals;
- Communist Party leaders in the United States immediately obeyed, although thousands of disillusioned members left the party as a result.
The Popular Front and the Left:

- The Socialist Party of America, under the leadership of Norman Thomas, also cited the economic crisis as evidence of the failure of capitalism and sought vigorously to win public support for its own political program.
The Popular Front and the Left:

- The Socialist Party of America attempted to mobilize support among the rural poor.
- The Southern Tenant Farmers Union (STFU) supported by the party and organized by a young socialist, H.L. Mitchell, attempted to create a biracial coalition of sharecroppers, tenant farmers, and others to demand reform.
- But did not capture mass appeal and never became a major force.
The Popular Front and the Left:

- Even so, only a few times before in American history, did being part of the left seem so respectable and even conventional among workers, intellectuals, and others.
- Thus the 1930s, witnessed a significant if temporary widening of ideological range to mainstream art and politics.
The Popular Front and the Left:

- However Antiradicalism was a powerful force in the 1930s.
- Just as it had been during WWI and would again in the 40s and 50s.
- Hostility toward the Communist Party, in particular, was intense at many levels of government.
- Congressional committees chaired by Hamilton Fish of New York and Martin Dies of Texas investigated communist influence whenever they could find it.
The Popular Front and the Left:

- State and local governments harassed and sometimes imprisoned communist organizers.
- White Southerners tried to drive Communist organizers out of the countryside and the same in California.
THE UNHAPPY PRESIDENCY OF HERBERT HOOVER:

- Herbert Hoover began his presidency in March 1929 believing like most Americans, that the nation faced a bright and prosperous future.

- But even with the Great Depression, Hoover continued to rely on the principles that governed his public life; a system of cooperative individualism that he believed sustained a successful economy.
The Hoover Program:

- Hoover’s first response to the Depression was to attempt to restore public confidence in the economy.
- He summoned leaders of business, labor, and agriculture to the White House and urged them to adopt a program of voluntary cooperation for recovery.
The Hoover Program:

- He implored businessmen not to cut production or lay off workers; he talked to labor unions into forgoing demands for higher wages of better hours.
The Hoover Program:

- But economic conditions were so bad that voluntary cooperation could not be implemented.
- Although initially he attempted to use government spending as a tool for fighting the depression.
- The spending was not nearly enough in the face of such devastating problems.
- And when economic conditions worsened, Hoover became less willing to increase spending worrying instead about creating large government deficits.
The Hoover Program:

- Even before the stock market crash, Hoover began to construct a program to assist the already troubled agricultural economy.

- In April 1929 he proposed the Agricultural Market Act, which established the first major government program to help farmers maintain prices.
The Hoover Program:

- Hoover attempted to protect American farmers from international competition by raising the agricultural tariffs.
- The Hawley-Smoot tariff of 1920 increased protection on seventy-five farm products.
- The tariff on the contrary harmed the agricultural economy by stifling exports of food.
The Hoover Program:

- In the 1930 Congressional elections, the Democrats won control of Congress and the Democrats urged the president to support more vigorous programs of relief and public spending.
- Hoover continued to believe his polices were working.
The Hoover Program:

- But by the time Congress convened in December 1931 conditions had grown so desperate that Hoover supported a series of measures designed to keep endangered banks afloat and protect homeowners from foreclosure on their mortgages.

- More important was a bill passed in January 1932 establishing the Reconstruction Finance Corporation (RFC).

- A government agency whose purpose was to provide federal loans to troubled banks, railroads, and other businesses.
The Hoover Program:

- The RFC even made funds available to local governments to support public works projects and assist relief efforts.
- Unlike some earlier Hoover programs, it operated on a large scale.
- In 1932, the RFC had a budget of $1.5 billion for public works alone.
The Hoover Program:

- However the RFC agency failed to deal directly or forcefully enough with the real problems of the economy to produce any significant recovery.

- The RFC lent funds only to financial institutions with sufficient collateral; much of the money went to large banks and corporations.
The Hoover Program:

- After the initial shock and confusion of such a severe crisis, dissident voices began to be heard.
- In the summer of 1932, a group of unhappy farm owners gathered in Des Moines, Iowa to establish a new organization: the Farmer’s Holiday Association, which endorsed the withholding of farm products from the market, in effect a farmer’s strike.
Bonus Army:

- The most celebrated protest movement emerged from American veterans in 1924, Congress passed approved payment of a $1000 bonus to all those who served in WWI.
- The money to be paid at the beginning of 1945.
Bonus Army:

- By 1932, Veterans were demanding that the bonus be paid immediately.
- Hoover concerned in balancing the budget rejected the appeal.
- In June more than 20,000 veterans called the Bonus Army marched into Washington and built crude camps around the city and promised to stay until Congress approved legislation to pay the bonus.
Bonus Army:

- Some of the veterans departed in July, after Congress voted down their proposal.
- Many however stayed.
- Hoover was distributed by their continued presence.
- Finally he ordered police to clear the marchers out of several abandoned Federal buildings in which they have been staying.
Bonus Army:

- A few marchers threw rocks at the police and someone opened fire and two veterans were killed.
- Hoover considered the incident evidence of growing violence and radicalism and he ordered the United States Army to assist the police in clearing the buildings.
Bonus Army:

- General Douglas MacArthur the army chief of staff carried the mission himself with assistance with his aide Dwight D. Eisenhower and George S. Patton, with forces that greatly exceeded the president’s orders.
- MacArthur had even six tanks down Pennsylvania Avenue to chase the Bonus Army.
- The veterans fled in terror, their tent city burnt to the ground and more than 100 marchers were injured.
Bonus Army:

- The incident was perhaps the final blow to Hoover already battered political standing.
- Hoover’s own reserved personality reinforced the public image of him as aloof and unsympathetic to distressed people.
The Election of 1932:

- As the Presidential elections approached few doubted the outcome.
- The Republicans re-nominated Hoover but all knew he would not win.
- The Democrats nominated the governor of New York Franklin D. Roosevelt.
- He was a well known figure of the party.
The Election of 1932:

- Roosevelt was a Hudson Valley Aristocrat, a distant cousin of Teddy Roosevelt, he served in the New York State Legislature, to a position as assistant secretary of the Navy during World War I.
- To his party’s vice presidential nomination in 1920 of which he and presidential candidate James M. Cox lost.
The Election of 1932:

- He established a broad coalition and emphasized the economic grievances that most Democrats shared and avoided controversial issues.
- When he won the nomination, he addressed the convention in person to accept the nomination, a first and a break from tradition.
The Election of 1932:

- Roosevelt pledged a “new deal” giving his future program a name that would long endure but neither then nor in the subsequent campaign did Roosevelt give much indication of what that program would be.
The Election of 1932:

- In November 1932, Franklin Roosevelt won decisively over Herbert Hoover.
- Roosevelt received 57.4 percent of the popular vote to Hoover’s 39.7.
- Hoover carried only six Eastern States and Roosevelt won the rest in the electoral-college.
- Democrats won both houses in Congress.
- It was a broad and convincing mandate.
The Election of 1932:

- The period between the election and the inauguration (which in the early 1930s lasted more than four months) was a season of growing economic crisis.
- Presidents-elect traditionally do not involved themselves directly in government.
The Election of 1932:

- But in series of brittle exchanges with Roosevelt in the months following the election, Hoover tried to exact from the president-elect a pledge to maintain policies of economic orthodoxy.

- Roosevelt genially refused.
The Election of 1932:

- One month before the inauguration, the American banking system began to collapse, and Hoover again asked Roosevelt to give prompt public assurances that there would be no tinkering with the currency.

- No heavy borrowing, no unbalancing of the budget, Roosevelt again refused.
The Election of 1932:

- On March 4 1933, a day of both economic crisis and considerable personal bitterness.
- Hoover left convinced that the nation was heading towards disaster while Roosevelt beaming was heading to be inaugurated as the thirty-second president of the United States.