Rugged Individualism - Herbert Hoover
(October 22, 1928)

I intend... to discuss some of those more fundamental principles upon which I believe the government of the United States should be conducted....

During one hundred and fifty years we have built up a form of self government and a social system which is peculiarly our own. It differs essentially from all others in the world. It is the American system.... It is founded upon the conception that only through ordered liberty, freedom and equal opportunity to the individual will his initiative and enterprise spur on the march of progress. And in our insistence upon equality of opportunity has our system advanced beyond all the world.

During [World War I] we necessarily turned to the government to solve every difficult economic problem. The government having absorbed every energy of our people for war, there was no other solution. For the preservation of the state the Federal Government became a centralized despotism which undertook unprecedented responsibilities, assumed autocratic powers, and took over the business of citizens. To a large degree, we regimented our whole people temporarily into a socialistic state. However justified in war time, if continued in peace-time it would destroy not only our American system but with it our progress and freedom as well.

When the war closed, the most vital of issues both in our own country and around the world was whether government should continue their wartime ownership and operation of many [instruments] of production and distribution. We were challenged with a... 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... [and] the undermining of the individual initiative and enterprise through which our people have grown to unparalleled greatness. 

Let’s analyze Hoover’s famous 1928 campaign speech.
Read and answer the questions below.

1) What is Hoover referring to when he says the government took “unprecedented responsibilities” during WWI? Be specific.

2) According to Hoover, what choice was America faced with after the war?

3) What is “rugged individualism?”
There is [in this election]... submitted to the American people a question of fundamental principle. That is: shall we depart from the principles of our American political and economic system, upon which we have advanced beyond all the rest of the world...

I would like to state to you the effect that... [an interference] of government in business would have upon our system of self-government and our economic system. That effect would reach to the daily life of every man and woman. It would impair the very basis of liberty and freedom...

Let us first see the effect on self-government. When the Federal Government undertakes to go into commercial business it must at once set up the organization and administration of that business, and it immediately finds itself in a labyrinth. Commercial business requires a concentration of responsibility. Our government to succeed in business would need to become in effect a despotism. There at once begins the destruction of self-government...

And what has been the result of the American system? Our country has become the land of opportunity to those born without inheritance, not merely because of the wealth of its resources and industry but because of this freedom of initiative and enterprise. Russia has natural resources equal to ours... But she has not had the blessings of one hundred and fifty years of our form of government and our social system.

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 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 proof of it...

The greatness of America has grown out of a political and social system and a method of [a lack of governmental] control of economic forces distinctly its own. Our American system which has carried this great experiment in human welfare farther than ever before in history... And I again repeat that the departure from our American system... will jeopardize the very liberty and freedom of our people, and will destroy equality of opportunity not only to ourselves, but to our children.

4) According to Hoover, what is the election of 1928 about?

5) According to Hoover, how did America become “the land of opportunity”?

6) What would lead to “the destruction of self-government”?

7) How does this speech reflect the optimism (positive attitude) of the 1920’s?

8) Based on your reading of this document, predict whether Hoover will succeed in dealing with the upcoming economic crisis.