



# KEEPING MR. HOOVER FIT

DR. BOONE AND THE STORY OF THE MEDICINE BALL CABINET

The president's cabinet is convening this morning, but you will not find them in any boardroom or oval office. This is 1929 and the president is on the south lawn of the White House immersed in a new morning ritual that the press has dubbed "Hoover Ball." Starched shirts and polished shoes have been replaced with athletic sweaters and well-worn sneakers in this "Medicine Ball Cabinet" as Herbert Hoover and his close confidants fling an eight-pound leather ball over a nine-foot net under the watchful eye of CDR Joel Boone, MC, USN.

Dr. Joel Boone is a legendary figure in Navy medical lore. He is a Medal of Honor recipient noted for heroics in France and Haiti; he is also credited for adapting helo-decks to U.S. Navy hospital ships, reforming health and sanitary conditions in coal-mines, and serving as the namesake of a Navy clinic in Little River, VA. In the 1920s and 30s, Boone was seen by many as the consummate, and perceivably perennial, practitioner of White House medicine. He first earned his keep as the assistant White House physician to Presidents Warren G. Harding and Calvin Coolidge, and the primary care physician to Herbert Hoover.

In 1928, when the President-elect Herbert Hoover and wife Louise traveled to South America on a goodwill tour to outline U.S. economic and trade policies, Coolidge sent Boone to accompany

the Hoovers on their return voyage from Montevideo aboard USS *Utah*. It was aboard this battleship that Boone first noted the president-elect's sedentary lifestyle. He thought it vital that Hoover do more than take the occasional walk on deck for exercise. Boone convinced Hoover to start throwing a medicine ball around for a few minutes each day. Other members of Hoover's party would join in this daily plyometric play. In his unpublished memoir, Boone recalled that "it was just passing the ball in a circle, one to the other. Then, having been acquainted with deck tennis in my earlier days cruising long distances aboard ship... I conceived, in a limited space, using the medicine ball to play a modified game of tennis, as it were, . . . throwing it with our hands across the net, which was kept high, with players on the deck."<sup>1</sup> *Utah* and crew arrived stateside in January 1929 with the Hoovers readying for their term in the White House. Dr. Boone and the simple weighted leather ball would soon follow them there.

On 10 March 1929, six days after the inauguration, Boone conducted a physical examination of President Hoover in his dressing room.<sup>2</sup> Boone noted that the 54-year-old man's health was good except that he suffered from dyspnea, carried too much *avoirdufois* around the abdomen, and his pulse was not as strong as expected. After taking his blood pressure, Boone was taken aback when Hoover confided that

he had never had his blood pressure taken before in his life.<sup>3</sup> Despite this overdue test, the President's blood pressure was a normal 120/70. CDR Boone reviewed the results with Hoover in considerable detail. He outlined a special diet that would keep Hoover's weight down, and advised him on developing a regular exercise routine.<sup>4</sup>

With curiosity about the president's health abounding, reporters pestered Dr. Boone on how he was planning to keep the weighty leader in shape. Boone may have erred when he responded that he was "open to suggestions." Hosts of concerned citizens soon flooded Boone with their own recipes for good health—swimming, bowling, lawn bowling, handball, boxing, archery, volleyball, woodwork, horse-shoes, ladder climbing, and rowing. Health and fitness entrepreneurs championed the newest (and suspect) advances in fitness technology. The Sanitary Equipment Company of Cleveland, OH, offered to install their "Health Horse" in the White House. C.U. Widner of Upland, CA, submitted information on a device called the "Simplex Apine Adjuster," which "if used daily mornings and evenings will absolutely prevent any and all diseases." Dr. L.S. Szunkowski of Chicago, IL, bested his "Vibrall Chair" which vibrated 300-times a minute and promised to give the sitter a sensation of riding horseback!<sup>5</sup> Boone retreated from the armies of opinions and dubious technologies to his own

1. *Joel Boone Papers—Memoirs*, Library of Congress, Washington, DC (XXI-1181)

2. In his book *The White House Physician*, Dr. Deppisch credits Dr. Boone with institutionalizing the White House Medical Unit. Before Boone's tenure as Hoover's primary physician, the White House Medical Unit was but one individual who had access to a storage closet for medical supplies. Boone doubled the staff and established an examining room and physician's office, for the "medical team." (Deppisch, Ludwig. *The White House Physician: A History from Washington to George W. Bush*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company. 2007. pp 76)

3. *Memoirs*. (XXII-51-54)

4. *Ibid.* (XXII-53-54)

5. *Ibid.* (XXII-57a)



*“I conceived, in a limited space, using the medicine ball to play a modified game of tennis, as it were, ... throwing it with our hands across the net.”*—Dr. Joel Boone

All photos courtesy of the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library and Museum

method of fitness—the medicine ball.

Although the medicine ball had been around for centuries and may have originated in Persia, physical educational instructor Robert J. Roberts of Boston, MA, is credited for its name and introduction in the United States in 1876.<sup>6</sup> In an article entitled the “Development of the Medicine Ball,” Roberts wrote “I had read about...a certain king who was half sick from eating too much and [from] neglect of exercise. His physician told him he could be cured of he would eat only certain kinds of food, and throw around a ball that the physician would give him to use daily, which was filled with [the] same marvelous drugs whose medicinal properties would, when the king had exercised vigor-

ously enough to bring a free visible perspiration, enter his body through his pores, and cure him.”<sup>7</sup> By the time Boone became Hoover’s physician, the medicine ball had been in the United States for over fifty years and commonly used by athletes and non-athletes alike to stay in shape and restore health.

Convincing Hoover to exercise was a challenge to be sure. Boone’s entreaties were met with such excuses as “I’m too busy” and “The game’s too boring.” Hoover even expressed doubt he could find anyone to play with him. After calmly listening to the president’s plea his case, Boone suggested that Hoover allocate 30 minutes each morning before breakfast for exercise. And if he drew up a list of candidates, Boone would personally arrange for

their participation.<sup>8</sup>

CDR Boone proceeded to plan the morning routine. The game started at 7:15 wind, rain, snow or shine, by the fountain on the south lawn. Boone marked out a rectangular court where he installed a tennis net. The players included a host of the president’s advisers and associates including Postmaster General Wallis Brown, Secretary of Agriculture Arthur Hyde, Lawrence Richey, William D. Mitchell, William (Bill) Hard, Justice Harlan Stone, and journalist Mark Sullivan. Throughout Hoover’s entire term in office, the morning medicine ball toss was interrupted only once: after the death of the Secretary of Secretary of War James W. Good.<sup>9</sup>

Newspapers started taking notice of this game and coined it the

6. Robert Roberts is also noted as the first full-time director of the YMCA (1876).

7. Roberts, Robert J. *Development of the Medicine Ball*. *American Gymnasia*. Am. Gymnasia Company: Boston, MA. Vol I. 1905. pp 248.

8. *Memoirs*. (XXII-55/56)

9. *Ibid*. (XXII-57)

“Medicine Ball Cabinet.” Richard Oulahan of the *New York Times*, observed that “Surgeon Boone of the navy whose specialty is the health of Presidents, is a member of the medicine ball cabinet—in fact their liveliest of all its members, who sets the pace for this strenuous pastime in the backyard of the White House—and he keeps watch to curb any tendency of Mr. Hoover to over-exert himself. From all accounts this daily brief period devoted to tossing the ball back and forth has been very beneficial to the President.”<sup>10</sup>

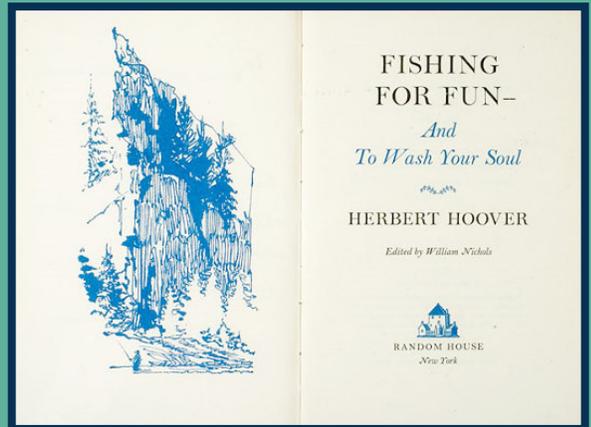
As his term ended in 1933, Hoover distributed autographed medicine balls to his trusted advisors as keepsakes of their time in office.<sup>11</sup> It may be imprudent to think Mr. Hoover would have liked these simple exercise balls to overshadow a presidential legacy that included the “Crash of ‘29” and Hoovervilles. However, as a symbol of exercise and wellness, the medicine ball should not be tossed aside. Hoover went on to enjoy the longest retirement of any U.S. president, dying on 20 October 1964 at the age of 90. His long life may have been the result of successively coping with stress, a longtime passion for fishing, or maybe, thanks in part to an innovative medical advisor and Navy physician named Boone. ■ ~ABS



**The “usual suspects”:** A group shot of President Hoover’s Medicine Ball Cabinet. Dr. Boone can be seen seated on the bottom right.

### FISHING FOR FUN

Hoover’s true pastime was unquestionably fishing. A year before his death, his own angling days behind him, Hoover published *Fishing for Fun and To Wash Your Soul* (1963). In a wistful postscript, he reminded readers that the joys of outdoor life did not end with the last catch. “Two months after you return from a fishing expedition you will begin again to think of the snowcap or the distant mountain peak, the glint of sunshine on the water, the excitement of the dark blue seas, and the glories of the forest. And then you buy more tackle and more clothes for the next year. There is no cure for these infections. And that big fish never shrinks.”



Text and image from the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library website gallery (<http://hoover.archives.gov/exhibits/Hooverstory/gallery09/index.html>)

10. Oulahan, Richard V. “Observations from the Times Watch-Towers.” *The New York Times*. June 23, 1929. pE1.

11. “16 Medicine Balls Bought By Hoover for Souvenirs.” *The Hartford Courant*. Feb 8, 1933. pp 2.