

Honoring a 2025 Travel Grant Recipient: Professor Edward R. Landa



Among the most recent awardees is Professor Edward R. Landa, a U.S. Geological Survey Emeritus soil scientist and Adjunct Professor at the University of Maryland– College Park, Department of Environmental Science and Technology. Dr. Landa received a Hoover Presidential Foundation Research Travel Grant for his investigation into applications of emerging nuclear-physics knowledge in the 1930s, a time when public understanding of atomic science was in its infancy.

Dr. Landa's research explores the scientific and economic dimensions of academic and industrial research & development activities well before the atomic age fully dawned. His work situates these events within the broader context of the technological optimism and governmental innovation of the Hoover and FDR eras.

A scholar whose career has focused on the fate and transport of inorganic and radioactive contaminants in surficial environments, Dr. Landa brings a unique interdisciplinary perspective that bridges environmental science and environmental/technological history. His longstanding interest provides a lens through which he examines the people and practices that helped to shape radioactivity research in the Nation during the first half of the 20th century.

Professor Landa's research began in the 1980s with the study of the American radium industry of the 1910-1920 period, a time when society's fascination with radioactivity bordered on enchantment. Discovered by Marie and Pierre Curie in 1898, radium's faint glow promised to illuminate both the mysteries of the atom and the progress of humankind.

Carefully controlled radium therapy became a valuable tool in the treatment of cancer. The present archival research, conducted using the Lewis L. Strauss Papers at the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library, extends the history of beneficial uses of ionizing radiation from the naturally occurring, but exceedingly costly to extract and refine, radium to the human-made products of the new "atom smashers."

Between the Wars

Central to Professor Landa's study is Arno Brasch, an emigre physicist from Nazi Germany whose previous field work on lightning in the Alps and then factory-scale, high voltage, particle accelerator experiments in Berlin caught the attention of Lewis Strauss, a financier who had worked under Herbert Hoover on the immense post-World War I relief effort in Europe. Following the death of his mother to cancer in 1935, Strauss established a foundation that sought to advance the treatment of the disease by making radium more available to patients in American hospitals. Brasch's work suggested an alternative, innovative therapeutic pathway, and together, as a scientist and patron-investor team, Brasch and Strauss interacted with many of the leading physicists and engineers of the pre-World War II era.

Strauss later served as a founding Commissioner (and later Chairman) of the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission under Presidents Truman and Eisenhower. The audience of the 2024 Academy Award-winning film *Oppenheimer* will undoubtedly remember the riveting portrayal, by actor Robert Downey Jr., of Lewis Strauss during the period 1947-1954.

Before Lewis Lichtenstein Strauss became a powerful and controversial figure in U.S. nuclear policy and a central character in the Oppenheimer story, he was a young businessman whose life was forever changed by a call to serve from Herbert Hoover.

Illuminating the Past Through Partnership

Reflecting on his experience, Professor Landa praised the expertise and dedication of the staff at the Hoover Presidential Library and Museum:

"The Hoover Presidential Library and the remarkable archivists who steward its collections were invaluable in helping me connect the dots in my research," he said. "Their depth of knowledge and meticulous organization of historical materials is unmatched. Truly impressive."

Landa's reflection underscores how the Hoover Presidential Foundation's Research Travel Grants Program does more than support research; it fosters collaboration between scholars and archivists, ensuring that primary sources continue to spark discovery and dialogue.

A Committee of Academic Excellence

Oversight for the Travel Grants Program rests with a committee composed of Hoover Presidential Foundation Trustees and academic members. Academic representatives, typically four to six scholars, hail from colleges and universities across the United States, with at least one from an Iowa institution. Each member serves a three-year term, renewable once, ensuring both continuity and fresh perspectives.

Beyond academic rigor, the Foundation seeks projects that have a public impact—publications, exhibitions, performances, or educational programs that ensure Hoover's humanitarian and political legacy continues to inspire new audiences worldwide.

A Commitment to the Future

Over the decades, the Hoover Presidential Foundation's Research Travel Grants have empowered scholars to uncover new perspectives on U.S. history, humanitarianism, and international policy. From examining early atomic science to reinterpreting global relief efforts, these projects continue to reveal the enduring relevance of the Hoover legacy.

In bridging past and present, the Foundation reaffirms its commitment to scholarship that not only preserves history but brings it vividly to life.