

# Eisenhower Was a Democrat

by Robert H. Ferrell

**M**ANY YEARS AGO, in 1909, when he was nineteen years old, Dwight Eisenhower announced himself as a Democrat. He did so in a speech of November 9 of that year, before an assemblage of Democrats in Abilene. He drew the Republican party as the party of privilege, the Democratic party as the party of the people, and concluded that the only course for a young man who was a student of politics was to vote for the Democrats.

The occasion of the Abilene address was a meeting of the party at which a rising lawyer from Olathe, George H. Hodges, gave the principal address, and virtually threw his hat in the ring for the gubernatorial election the next year. Another Olathe lawyer, Charles C. Hoge, also addressed the two hundred people who crowded into Workman Hall and first consumed a dinner of cream chicken and cold tongue served by the Ladies Aid Society of the Lutheran Church of Abilene. Between the addresses by the Olathe lawyers came three short speeches by high school youths from Chapman, Herington, and Abilene. One of them spoke on Thomas Jefferson, another on Andrew Jackson, and the third, young Eisenhower, spoke on "The Student in Politics."<sup>1</sup>

Eisenhower at this time had graduated from Abilene High, in June 1909, having taken an extra year because of a serious illness in which an infection in one of his legs turned gangrenous and there was danger of an amputation. For two years after graduation he would remain in Abilene, working in the Belle Springs Creamery owned by a religious group, the River Brethren, to which his parents belonged. In the autumn of 1909 he was taking prepara-

tory courses at the high school, in hope of receiving an appointment to West Point.<sup>2</sup>

The address was nothing that young Eisenhower spent much time with. He wrote it up the evening before the meeting, in the office of the local Democratic newspaper, the *Dickinson County News*. He had accustomed himself to come round to the office because the editor, Joseph W. Howe, was a member of the Abilene school board (as well as head of the Democratic party in the county) and sponsor of a society of high school boys, the Knights of Honor, to which Eisenhower belonged. One of Eisenhower's friends also worked for the *News*. Moreover, Howe kept a considerable library of books in the office, partly books that came to the paper for review, in part books that Howe bought, and the boys wrote their high school papers there.<sup>3</sup>

The speech was nicely written. This was what one might have expected from a young man who had been a good student in high school, who had read a considerable number of books, notably about history, and concerning whom the seer of the Abilene High class of 1909, one of the class's prettiest girls, had made a remarkable prediction for the school annual. She had said that Eisenhower's brother Edgar, who also had graduated with the class of 1909, would become President of the United States and serve two terms, at which time Dwight would be professor of history at Yale.

Many years later after World War II, when Eisenhower had become famous as the leading American general of the European theater of operations, had served a three-year term as chief of staff of the U.S. Army, become president of Columbia University in 1948, taken a leave from Columbia in 1951 to serve as supreme commander of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, and begun to display Republican sympathies, his Democratic past caught up with him. In the autumn of 1951 the widow of the Olathe attorney, Hoge, who had spoken on the same occasion as Eisenhower, was cleaning out some papers in her house and came upon an old blue program in gold print, four

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1. *Abilene Daily Reflector*, November 10, 1909; *Dickinson County News*, Abilene, November 11, 18, 1909; *Emporia Gazette*, January 12, 1952.

2. He had to apply for both of the academies, West Point and Annapolis, and take whatever was available. He hoped for Annapolis, as did his close friend in Abilene, Everett (Swede) Hazlett; but when the time arrived, Sen. Joseph L. Bristow had two vacancies for Annapolis, one for West Point, and chose Eisenhower for the latter. Eisenhower's friend went to Annapolis. See Robert Griffith, ed., *He's Letters to a Friend: 1941-1958* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1984), 3.

3. Reminiscence by Howe in *Emporia Gazette*, January 12, 1952.

pages tied with a gold ribbon, containing the menu of the meeting of 1909 and listing the speakers. By this time the principal speaker of the occasion, George Hodges, had died, but his brother Frank was living in Olathe and Mrs. Hoge gave him the program. Frank Hodges sent it posthaste to President Harry S. Truman, and advised Truman to reveal Eisenhower's political past if the general became too enamoured of the Republicans and gave evidence of desiring the GOP presidential nomination in 1952.<sup>4</sup>

At the outset President Truman did not pay much attention to Frank Hodges' suggestion. Hodges was a longtime leader of the Kansas Democracy. He was publisher of the *Johnson County Democrat*. For ten years, until 1943, he had headed the regional office of the Reconstruction Finance Corporation in Kansas City, and in this post had corresponded with Truman, then Missouri's senator. After Truman became President, Hodges wrote occasionally, and the President replied in familiar terms. But by 1951, Frank Hodges was eighty-eight years old. About the time the Eisenhower program of 1909 came to light, he sent the President a telegram relating the fact of his birthday and that "I am well and strong." The President perhaps considered him a little too old to be politically alert.<sup>5</sup>

The information Hodges offered nonetheless was worth attention, because of the momentary troubles of the Republican party. In the autumn of 1951 the Republicans were engaged in a bitter factional fight between conservatives, headed by Sen. Robert A. Taft of Ohio, and liberals who had no leader and hoped to enlist Eisenhower. Unfortunately for the Republican liberals, the latter's politics were murky, as the general had voted for the first time in 1948. Moreover, in the summer of that year the liberal Democrats, led by Rep. James Roosevelt of California, had sought to make a Democrat out of Eisenhower, proposing to run him for their party's nomination against Truman. Eisenhower had given them a "General Sherman," refusing the possibility of nomination, only at the very last moment.<sup>6</sup> Since that time he had shown no awkward

tendencies, seeming to be a Republican. But if the Republican conservatives were to discover that he actually once had been a Democrat, the fat might be in the fire. In 1940 the GOP had gathered, the conservatives reluctantly, behind Wendell Willkie, once a Democrat, and the conservatives were still blaming Willkie's defeat on his running a "me too" campaign—on his ineradicable Democratic beliefs.

At last, on January 7, 1952, because of the imminent New Hampshire primary, Eisenhower declared himself. Three days later Truman brought up Frank Hodges' information during a press conference.<sup>7</sup> He aroused a considerable interest. Then the text of Eisenhower's speech of 1909 became public, appearing first in the *Emporia Gazette* in a serial reminiscence about the general by the quondam editor of the *Dickinson County News*, Howe, who many years before had removed to Emporia. The *Washington Times-Herald*, a conservative Republican newspaper, printed part of the front page of the *Dickinson County News* for November 18, 1909, which contained Eisenhower's address. The *New York Times* picked up the story and quoted a few sentences of the speech from the *Times-Herald*.<sup>8</sup>

At this juncture the editors of the *Kansas City Times*, a Republican paper, did something thoughtful for the liberal wing of the party. They quoted a denial of the

Foster Dulles against Herbert Lehman. In 1948 when the California Democrats threatened to disrupt the Democratic party, Truman was furious, and used the so-called steamroller on them at the convention in Philadelphia; a sitting Democratic President can almost always control the party's convention through the national committee. Eisenhower made two statements of disapproval of his 1948 candidacy, but the Roosevelt supporters went so far as to try to organize a preliminary session of the convention at which they would vote in their candidate. During the convention a sound truck broadcast Eisenhower propaganda from the street in front of the convention hall.

7. Eisenhower's calculation was as follows: "On the seventh, due to a series of incidents, I decided to issue a short statement of my convictions concerning any possible connection between me and the current political contest in the United States. My position is that I'm doing a duty—I shall not leave it except if called to a more important duty. I would so consider a nomination by the Republican party. The immediate cause of my statement was an announcement by Senator [Henry Cabot] Lodge [Jr.] on Sunday the sixth that he intended to enter my name in the New Hampshire primaries. In answer to questions he said I'd be a candidate for the Republican nomination. Time and again I've told anyone who'd listen that I will not seek a nomination. I don't give a d— how impossible a 'draft' may be. I'm willing to go part way in trying to recognize a 'duty,' but I do not have to seek one, and I will not. So, my statement made these things clear, and if there is any more misunderstanding I don't see how it can be charged to me." Diary, January 10, 1952, in Robert H. Ferrell, ed., *The Eisenhower Diaries* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1981), 209. In the presidential press conference of January 10, Truman garbled the information Frank Hodges had sent him. "I was told by a brother of a former Governor of Kansas [George Hodges was elected governor in 1912] that in 1918 General Eisenhower was one of the precinct workers for George Hodges when he ran for Governor on the Democratic ticket in Kansas, and was elected," he said. "That is all the information I had at that time." *Public Papers of the Presidents: 1952* (Washington: 1966), 23.

8. *New York Times*, January 28, 1952, p. 10.

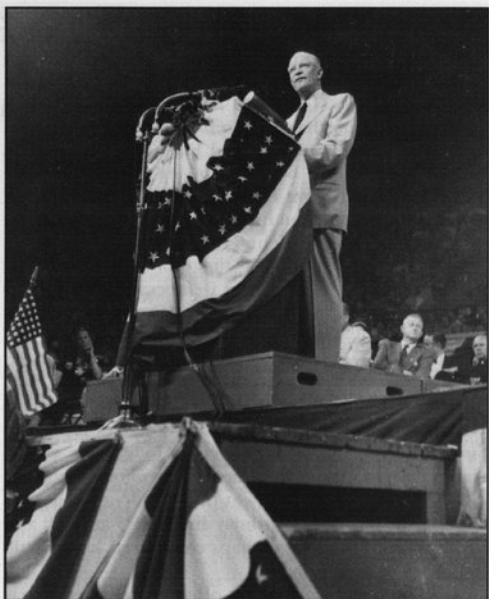
4. Hodges to Truman, September 14, 1951, "Hodges, Frank," President's Secretary's Files, Personal File, Box 313, Harry S. Truman Library, Independence, Missouri, [hereafter cited as "Hodges," Truman Library]. "I have made a great discovery," he wrote, and advised he was having photostats made of the program "when in 1909 Ike Eisenhower was a red hot Democrat making speeches for my brother George."

5. "TODAY IS MY EIGHTY EIGHTH BIRTHDAY I LIVE IN THE PERIOD OF THE GREATEST PROSPERITY AND THE WIDEST PRIVILEGES THIS NATION OR ANY OTHER NATION HAS EVER KNOWN. I AM WELL AND STRONG. TWELVE MORE YEARS WILL BRING MORE COMFORTS AND MORE HAPPINESS TO MAKE THE GREATEST CENTURY [IN] THE HISTORY OF THE WORLD." Telegram of September 19, 1951, "Hodges," Truman Library. The writer of the telegram died in 1962, aged ninety-eight.

6. Eisenhower in 1948 voted for Thomas E. Dewey for President, and in 1950 in a New York State senatorial election voted for John



Two years after his short speech, "The Student in Politics," Dwight D. Eisenhower was on his way to West Point; over forty years later, that speech would resurface when Eisenhower became Republican nominee for President.



*Times-Herald* story's importance from Charles M. Harger, a newspaper publisher in Abilene since 1882 and editor of the *Abilene Daily Reflector* in 1909. Harger's antiquity seemed to vouch for his reliability. He could not remember if he had attended the meeting of November of that year, Harger said, but he averred that Eisenhower's talk was on the theme of the importance of education in politics, along the line that the educated voter was the most intelligent voter. In a word, he said, the talk was strictly nonpartisan. The *Kansas City Times* overlooked the fact that Charley Harger was, of course, a Republican.<sup>9</sup>

The hullabaloo that Dwight Eisenhower once had been a Democrat disappeared from public view. When the editors of *Kansas in Newspapers* put together their compilation in 1963, they included the front page from the *Dickinson County News* that printed the Eisenhower speech. By this time Eisenhower had left the presidency

and the inclusion drew no notice outside of the readers of *Kansas in Newspapers*.<sup>10</sup>

But, if one goes back to newspapers of the time and reads through the entire controversy, beginning with the dinner and address of November 9, 1909, a considerably different picture emerges. Editor Howe in 1952 was certainly a nonpartisan observer. As he described himself in the *Emporia Gazette*, he was a fervent friend of Eisenhower, would vote for him if he had opportunity, and yet had been a lifelong Democrat. The speech, he said, was a Democratic speech. "I'm certain," he added, "that the young Dwight I knew in Abilene thought of himself as a Democrat." Young Eisenhower's father, he said, had been a registered Democrat, although the elder Eisenhower took little part in politics.<sup>11</sup>

Howe also gave an interesting explanation of Dwight Eisenhower's discomfiture a few months after the

9. *Kansas City Times*, January 11, 1952, p. 2. "Charley Harger, of Abilene, . . . is the old Republican boss of Dickinson county and heads the Eisenhower Memorial at Abilene." Frank Hodges to Truman, January 11, 1952, "Hodges," Truman Library. The Memorial became the present-day Eisenhower Library complex with its visitor's center, museum, library, and chapel.

10. Nyle H. Miller, Edgar Langsdorf, and Robert W. Richmond, eds., *Kansas in Newspapers* (Topeka: Kansas State Historical Society, 1963), 142.

11. Howe's reminiscences appeared in the *Gazette* of January 9, 10, 11, 12, 14, 1952. The former editor dealt with the speech in the issue of January 12 and the text itself appeared in that issue.

speech when he discovered that to go to West Point he would have to gain endorsement of a Republican senator, the Honorable Joseph L. Bristow. Young Ike came to Howe to ask what to do. The editor told him to make his peace with both factions of the Republican party, the group represented by the *Abilene Daily Reflector* and its editor, Harger, known as the standpatters, supporting President William H. Taft, and the Theodore Roosevelt (Bull Moose) group represented by the *Abilene Chronicle*.<sup>12</sup> Eisenhower did that, and meanwhile had obtained Howe's support, for what it was worth—so this young man who by early 1911 was not yet twenty-one years old obtained support of Abilene's Republicans and Democrats. The result was the appointment, and Eisenhower was on his way to the presidency.<sup>13</sup>

The address of 1909 follows.<sup>14</sup> The reader should bear in mind that the Republican party was breaking up into conservative and liberal factions. For Dwight Eisenhower, however, there was no question as to what party a thinking young man should belong.

An old Proverb says: "As the twig is bent so will the tree be inclined."

Nowhere does this quotation apply more forcibly than to "The Student in Politics." The young man just starting in politics is taking a very important step in life, and one which in all probability will determine his political standing forever. He will naturally line up with one of the two great political parties and the chances are will remain a life member of that party.

For, a man, after voting the straight party ticket for several elections, seldom changes from one side to the other. This fact is proven conclusively by the controversy now going on in the Republican party. You know there is one brand of Republicans called Square Dealers, Insurgents, etc. and although these men are loud in their denunciation of Cannon, Aldrich and a few others,

who are hidebound party men, yet they refuse to join any other party, and at an election vote for the Republican candidates.<sup>15</sup> Thus, in reality, a man's party becomes a part of him, for as truly as he becomes a part of it, and he simply will not leave it.

The average man ceases to reason fairly on the questions involved and always casts his vote as before. True he continues to discuss the political questions of importance but only in an obstinate and lopsided manner of reasoning, in which he simply refuses to see any wrong in his party. Before each election he works himself into a frenzy of loyalty to his party, watches with feverish interest the returns from the different precincts, and then goes back to work in the same old way until the next election. Remember, however, we are speaking only of the average voter, whose commonplace duties in life leaves him scarcely any time for politics.

So since a man rarely changes from one party to another, his first vote is probably his most important one, and the causes which influence his first vote are necessarily important to him. In choosing between the two great parties, a young man is often influenced by personal admiration for certain candidates or leaders of his party. A leader of a political party who is a clean and fearless fighter and possesses a winning manner is undoubtedly the means of attracting a large number of votes to that party, for he is naturally the kind of a man that young fellows idealize.

Then there is an inborn desire in all normal and healthy boys to help the smaller of the contestants in an even fight. A young man in speaking of the political situation the other day said, "My father is a Republican and so was his father, but I am going to vote for the Democrats at the next election because I think they need me and the Republicans do not."

But notwithstanding such reasons, as an admiration, love of fair play, the parental vote and the like, a man's first vote is generally cast correctly. He has arrived at an age of self-confidence and has acquired a feeling of self-importance for he figures that he will be about one-fiftieth of a millionth part of the voters of these United States and therefore must be very careful in choosing sides before he is willing to cast his vote either way.

He learns that the party (the Republican) protects our manufacturers by placing a high import duty on all manufactured goods. This practically blots out foreign competition in that line and enables the manufacturers to make enormous profits off of the U.S. citizens. He sees that the rich man would still make a good profit, if the

12. It is a point of interest that Eisenhower's two essays into politics were against members of the Taft family—President Taft in 1909, the President's son Robert in 1951-1952.

13. *Emporia Gazette*, January 14, 1952. Eisenhower managed the correspondence with Bristow without reference to politics. See Eisenhower to Bristow, August 20, 1910; Bristow to P. W. Heath of Abilene, August 22, 1910, inquiring as to Eisenhower's qualities; George C. Sterl of Abilene to Bristow, August 23, 1910, volunteering a recommendation, and Bristow's acknowledgment of the next day (writing from Salina); a follow-up letter from Eisenhower to Bristow, September 3; Bristow to Eisenhower, September 5, announcing a preliminary test by the state superintendent of public instruction in Topeka; October 24, conferring the appointment subject to an examination at Jefferson Barracks, St. Louis; Eisenhower to Bristow, October 25, expressing thanks; Bristow to Sterl, October 26, and to P. W. Heath, same date, announcing the appointment; Eisenhower to Bristow, March 25, 1911, again thanking the senator, Joseph L. Bristow Papers, Manuscripts Department, Kansas State Historical Society (courtesy of James W. Leyerzapf, Dwight D. Eisenhower Library).

14. *Dickinson County News*, November 18, 1909.

15. Joseph G. Cannon first entered the House of Representatives in 1873 and was speaker beginning in 1903. Nelson W. Aldrich, millionaire Rhode Island businessman, had entered the Senate in 1881.

duties were removed or at the least considerably lowered, and being young, impulsive, vehement and outspoken, he calls the system legalized robbery. He also finds that the other party (the Democrat) wants to remove these excessive duties and arrange a tariff that will bring revenue into the U.S. coffers and at the same time be easier on the great mass of the citizens of this country.

In a further comparison, he learns that the Democrat party wants to make Congress more truly representative of the people, by having the U.S. Senators elected by direct vote of the people. The other party opposes such a plan or at least has never endorsed it in any of their national conventions. The boy, being rather shrewd, figures out that under such a condition it would be harder for the interests (the rich corporations) to control Congress, and naturally concludes that this is the reason the Republicans oppose such a plan. The young recruit notices, that because one party has been in power for fifty years, with only two brief interruptions, many evils

have sprung up in the machinery of the government, which a change in policy for a time would at least remedy if not blot them out.

The young man also sees that the more honest and fearless of the Republican leaders have become disgusted with the policies and actions of the party proper and have branched off into Square Dealers, Insurgents, Progressives and Reformers, though they still cling to the name Republican. He admires these men greatly but he cannot help but remark that they are fighting for many of the same principles which the Democrat party advocates, among them being lower tariff.

So he naturally concludes, that with the Republican party splitting up and a number of honest and fearless ones tending towards Democracy, that the Democrat party deserves his first vote. And since the first vote generally determines his political standing, we find one more intelligent young man enlisted under the standard of Democracy. [KH]