

# Do We "Like Ike"?: Historians and the Eisenhower Presidency

by William Howard Moore

CONCLUDING HIS PRESIDENTIAL MEMOIRS in the mid-1960s, Dwight D. Eisenhower found his thoughts going back to the days of the New Deal. The sage of Gettysburg seemed to fear that a revival of Rooseveltian paternalism, regimentation, and fiscal irresponsibility might condition future historians to dismiss his own presidency as irrelevant. Despite a certain grudging admiration for Franklin D. Roosevelt's wartime leadership, Ike had never approved of FDR personally nor had he been truly comfortable with much of New Deal economic and social policy. To a considerable extent, Eisenhower viewed his own presidency as a counterpoint to the supposed excesses of the Roosevelt Administration. Historians, he thought, would likely judge one generously, the other harshly.<sup>1</sup>

Clearly, the New Deal/Fair Deal had cast a giant shadow over Eisenhower's years in the White House. At issue among contemporary writers was the degree of success Ike had achieved in bringing the GOP out of its negative, reactionary 1930s mode. Even Ike's staunchest supporters agreed that the modernization of the Republican party was a key test of leadership. Merlo J. Pusey and journalist Robert J. Donovan might differ over Ike's success in bringing the GOP into the second half of the twentieth century, but they at least conceded that such an effort had been made. Eisenhower's most articulate defender, Labor Department undersecretary and speechwriter Arthur Larson, argued in 1956 that the President had already moved the New Republican party into the "authentic American center." Having discovered the keys to an expansive economy based upon a

partnership between federal and state governments (a partnership that respected individual initiative), Ike's Modern Republicanism had transcended the divisive, class-based, redistributive rhetoric of the Democrats. Eisenhower's GOP had assimilated the New Deal, had absorbed its social concerns, but had left its "pawnbroker economics" in the dustbin of history.<sup>2</sup>

Eisenhower sensed, however, that his supporters were not winning the battle of words. Liberal journalists such as Richard Rovere found a confused, lazy Ike mired in meaningless pieties, alternately borrowed from contemporary liberalism, Dr. Norman Vincent Peale, and the public relations industry. Eisenhower seemed to Rovere to lack the energy to tackle the government's administrative machinery, much less remake his party; his Ike could only invite comparison with Calvin Coolidge.<sup>3</sup> Columnist Marquis Childs thought Ike a "captive hero" of powerful right wing, status quo forces in his own party and in the business world. Commentator William V. Shannon dismissed the Eisenhower years as a time of "great postponement."<sup>4</sup>

Academic scholars seemed to mirror these negative conclusions. Princeton historian Eric Goldman, in a widely adopted college supplement, categorized the Eisenhower Administration as a case of "the bland leading the bland." Perhaps, Goldman concluded, Ike had

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1. Dwight D. Eisenhower, *The White House Years: Waging Peace, 1956-1961* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Co., 1965), 654. For a delightfully written, if not entirely persuasive, account of Eisenhower's attitudes toward Roosevelt and the New Deal, see William E. Leuchtenburg, *In the Shadow of FDR: From Harry Truman to Ronald Reagan* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 41-62.

2. Merlo J. Pusey, *Eisenhower the President* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1956), 294; Robert J. Donovan, *Eisenhower: The Inside Story* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1956), 61, 153; Arthur Larson, *A Republican Looks at His Party* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1956), 183 and Chapters 1, 2. The highly influential pollster Samuel Lubell also saw the 1930s as the political backdrop for the 1950s. He credited Eisenhower with leading moderates of both parties away from the sterile rhetoric of the depression years. Lubell, *Revolt of the Moderates* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1956), 5, 6, 9, 35-38, 90, 101-2.

3. Richard H. Rovere, *Affairs of State: The Eisenhower Years* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Cudahy, 1956), 352-55.

4. Marquis Childs, *Eisenhower: Captive Hero: A Critical Study of the General and the President* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Co., 1958), 163; William V. Shannon, "Eisenhower as President," *Commentary* 26 (November 1958): 390, 397. The administration had offered few exclusive interviews to ranking columnists, an oversight that may have predisposed them to critical judgments of Eisenhower. Patrick Anderson, *The Presidents' Men* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Co., 1968), 192-3.



During the 1952 presidential campaign, the streets of Abilene, Kansas, were thronged with those who "Liked Ike."

helped the nation ride out the worst of the McCarthy controversy. Perhaps, by giving the GOP the responsibility for administering programs it had formerly condemned, Eisenhower had helped insulate intelligent New Deal programs and internationalism from future right wing assault.<sup>5</sup> Two well-known foreign policy scholars were not even certain on the issue of internationalism. Hans Morganthau and Norman Graebner found drift, excessive delegation, and even closet isolationism still lurking within the Eisenhower Administration.<sup>6</sup>

Two memoirs from inside the administration reinforced liberal academics in their negative evaluations of Eisenhower in the early 1960s. Sherman Adams' *Firsthand Report* (1961), although generally admiring of Ike, conceded that the President exhibited a "distaste" for partisan politics and had been used by Old Guard Republicans to dislodge the Democrats from power. Emmet John Hughes, a gifted speechwriter, dispaired of Eisenhower's following through on any number of inno-

vative domestic or foreign policy ideas. Eisenhower had not even willingly consolidated New Deal initiatives; in fact, Hughes found Ike's values essentially those of a Southern Democrat.<sup>7</sup>

Buttressed by the apparent endorsement of such administration insiders, liberal scholars blasted Ike's failures as chief executive. To Richard Neustadt and James MacGregor Burns, two advocates of vigorous government and strong presidential leadership, Ike had flittered away eight years of golden opportunity. Blessed with almost unparalleled personal popularity, an aging and frequently ailing President had been smothered by an overprotective staff and mindless cabinet meetings. He had turned a deaf ear (while frequently on the golf course) to a multitude of problems. Eisenhower had refused to challenge Joseph McCarthy despite the horror the Wisconsin senator wreaked on the foreign policy establishment. Ike had refused any real moral leadership to the cause of civil rights, including even an endorsement of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. Overly concerned with unbalanced budgets and inflation, the

5. Eric Goldman, *The Crucial Decade and After, America, 1945-1960* (New York: Random House, 1960), 344, 292-3.

6. Hans Morganthau, "The Decline and Fall of American Foreign Policy," *New Republic* 135 (December 10, 1956): 11-16; Norman Graebner, *The New Isolationism: A Study in Politics and Foreign Policy Since 1950* (New York: Ronald Press, 1956).

7. Sherman Adams, *Firsthand Report: The Story of the Eisenhower Administration* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1961), 25; Emmet John Hughes, *The Ordeal of Power: A Political Memoir of the Eisenhower Years* (New York: Atheneum, 1963), 334, 338.

President had presided over three sharp recessions. He had delegated away most of the control of American foreign policy to ideologues like John Foster Dulles. Economic sluggishness had gone hand-in-hand with foreign policy reversals, and American purpose and prestige had weakened everywhere.<sup>8</sup>

In 1962 a well-publicized poll of seventy-five historians, political scientists, and journalists confirmed the bleak appraisal of Eisenhower. The open-ended survey, organized by historian Arthur M. Schlesinger, Sr., placed Ike in a dead heat with Chester A. Arthur for twenty-first place among American Presidents, just two notches from the bottom of the "average" category. And, in 1968, a panel of members from the Organization of American Historians placed Eisenhower only nineteenth among the thirty-two chief executives it considered. Ike's old historical nemesis, Franklin Roosevelt, ranked third in each survey, just behind Washington and Lincoln in the "great" category. Even Harry Truman, whom Eisenhower respected hardly at all, placed eighth or ninth in each poll.<sup>9</sup>

The 1962 survey, with its sharply contrasting estimations of the New Deal/Fair Deal Presidents and himself, may well have prompted Eisenhower to express in his memoirs some uncertainty about the future judgment of history. Complaining about a pro-New Deal, liberal influence among scholars would do Ike little good. Even the obvious contrasts between his negative evaluations by academics and his high public approval in general meant little. In classrooms and in textbooks, the man-in-the-street could easily be dismissed as uninformed.<sup>10</sup> Among scholars, the portrait of Eisenhower as a likeable, well-meaning bumbler seemed secure.<sup>11</sup>

In the historians' sweepstakes, Ike's escape from the icy breath of Chester A. Arthur would not come as a

result of some academic repudiation of the New Deal. Primarily it resulted from a growing disillusionment with Great Society liberalism and the course of the Vietnam War in the late 1960s. Vigorous government activity—generally spearheaded by activist, liberal Democrats—had apparently resulted in excesses in and a backlash against the civil rights movement. A widely publicized anti-poverty campaign had achieved little aggregate success. Never-ending escalation of American efforts in Vietnam had only discredited national leaders and polarized American society. Demonstrations on college campuses and violence in the inner city crowded their ways almost daily onto the evening news. Permissivism and the counterculture seemed to characterize much of America's youth. Under such circumstances, only a hardened excitement junkie could deny at least an occasional yearning for the calmer days of the 1950s and Dwight D. Eisenhower.

Once again, journalists and popular commentators, and not academic historians, first staked out the new ground on Ike. Obviously disaffected with the overly visible and overly promised leadership of Lyndon Johnson, Murray Kempton and Richard Rhodes now found in Eisenhower a shrewd, understated political manipulator. Ike's seeming passivity and garbled syntax were, in fact, they claimed, a deliberate camouflage for an engaged, activist leader moving stealthily but purposefully toward his objectives.<sup>12</sup> In *Nixon Agonistes* (1969), Garry Wills concluded—as did Nixon—that Eisenhower had been a skilled and cunning "political genius." Ike had, thought Wills, "the true professional's instinct for making things look easy. He appeared to be performing less work than he actually did." The amiable, relaxed image of Eisenhower, plus his avoidance of open conflict, was one key to the President's consistently high popularity ratings.<sup>13</sup>

Of course, no serious student could argue in the wake of the Goldwater nomination of 1964 that Ike had "modernized" the Republican party during his tenure. Consequently, even Arthur Larson, who had come close to making that point in 1956, conceded in 1968 that Eisenhower had exhibited no sustained interest in or energy for rebuilding the GOP at the grass roots. Generally adverse to partisan ideology and strife, Ike had wanted to lead the party along pragmatic lines by lending it his popularity. Unfortunately, the right wing had rejected this overture.<sup>14</sup>

12. Murray Kempton, "The Underestimation of Dwight Eisenhower," *Esquire* 68 (September 1967): 108-9, 156; Richard Rhodes, "Ike: An Artist in Iron," *Harper's Magazine* 241 (July 1970): 72.

13. Garry Wills, *Nixon Agonistes: The Crisis of the Self-Made Man* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1969), 119, 131.

14. Larson, *A Republican Looks at his Party*, Chapter 1; Arthur Larson, *Eisenhower: The President Nobody Knew* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968), 34-35, 37.

8. Richard Nuestadt, *Presidential Power: The Politics of Leadership* (New York: New American Library, 1964); James MacGregor Burns, *Presidential Government: The Crucible of Leadership* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1965); Goldman, *The Crucial Decade*, 343-46.

9. Gary W. Reichard, "Eisenhower as President: The Changing View," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 77 (Summer 1978): 273; Robert K. Murray and Tim H. Blessing, "The Presidential Performance Study: A Progress Report," *Journal of American History* 70 (December 1983): 535-37. Historian Thomas Bailey remained convinced that Eisenhower was being evaluated too negatively. Thomas Bailey, *Presidential Greatness: The Image and the Man from George Washington to the Present* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1966), 325-28.

10. Eisenhower, *The White House Years: Waging Peace*, 654. Shortly before leaving the White House, Eisenhower still had a fifty-nine percent approval rating and could probably have been reelected. Charles C. Alexander, *Holding the Line: The Eisenhower Era, 1952-1961* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1975), 288.

11. See, for example, the treatment of Eisenhower in a widely adopted textbook of the 1960s, John M. Blum, et al., *The National Experience: A History of the United States* 2d ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968), 789-812. Coauthor Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., responsible for this chapter, was an enthusiastic liberal Democrat. Even the contrasting photographs of Eisenhower and Adlai Stevenson, his 1952 and 1956 Democratic opponent, worked to Ike's disadvantage. *Ibid.*, 792, 806.

But if Ike had been purposeful, and his purpose was not to remake the Republican party, then what was he trying to do? A number of Eisenhower revisionists thought the answer lay in foreign policy. Disillusioned with the Vietnam experience, some scholars, including New Left historian Blanche Wiesen Cook, fixed upon Eisenhower, a military man, as an antimilitarist—a man whose knowledge of military budgeting and military politics uniquely equipped him to block mindless military costs and adventurism while President. Ike's relative restraint on military spending—criticized as penny-pinching by John Kennedy and liberal Democrats in 1960—was now portrayed as a significant achievement.<sup>15</sup>

In a widely respected diplomatic history textbook of the early 1970s, Stephen Ambrose sketched a clearer picture of Ike for would-be revisionists. Eisenhower, not Dulles, he showed, had been in charge of American foreign policy. Ambrose's Ike was deeply, sincerely committed to a balanced budget and to a relaxation of Cold War tensions. He consistently held military spending to a level almost twenty percent below that of the last Truman years. The President was able to justify such lower expenditures on the basis of secret U-2 photo-reconnaissance flights over the Soviet Union. Intelligence gathered during the U-2 missions conclusively showed that Nikita Khrushchev—despite rhetoric to the contrary—was also restraining Soviet military spending and posing no serious threat to American security. In a brilliant game of strategic upmanship, Eisenhower helped keep Khrushchev in power even while capping defense costs on both sides. Alarmist think tank and liberal Democratic rhetoric to the contrary, Eisenhower had delivered to Americans in the 1950s greater security at lower costs than almost any contemporary realized.<sup>16</sup>

The flush of excitement in finding something of positive merit in the Eisenhower presidency was hardly universal. While applauding Ike's restraint on military spending and his prophetic warnings against a "military-industrial complex," Richard Rovere thought luck itself had been largely responsible for his keeping the nation out of war. James David Barber, a political scientist studying presidential character, concluded that Ike shrank from power—that he had been essentially a "passive-negative" chief executive. In his *The Imperial Presidency*, liberal historian Arthur M. Schlesinger conceded

Eisenhower's basic decency, but argued that a Whiggish disposition and a deference to those around him kept him from engaging any number of pressing issues of the 1950s.<sup>17</sup> However shrewdly he may have played Khrushchev, Eisenhower had still been a captive of a virulent Cold War mindset and was hopelessly ignorant of the revolutionary changes remaking the Third World. He relied too heavily on his staff; he had little interest in any domestic program beyond a balanced budget; he had provided no leadership of consequence on McCarthyism, on civil rights, or on urban problems.

In the 1970s and early 1980s, a series of historians tried to make sense of the new Ike. Each in his own way, Herbert Parmet, Peter Lyon, Charles Alexander, Stephen Ambrose, Elmo Richardson, and R. Alton Lee discovered a complex and elusive man. There was the contrast between the public and private Eisenhower; there was a calculated coldness beneath the benign exterior; there was a sometimes brilliant understanding of foreign policy mixed with gapping ignorance of Third World problems. An emotional conservative with nineteenth-century values, Ike only reluctantly faced complicated twentieth-century problems such as racial segregation. Several of the scholars admitted to having approached their study with a bias against the old Republican general. Most ultimately arrived at an uncomfortable appreciation for his native abilities, but a disappointment at his unwillingness to have attempted more.<sup>18</sup>

Newly available archival sources buttressed Eisenhower revisionism. Of particular importance was the massive Ann Whitman File in the presidential library—a collection largely maintained over the years by Ike's private secretary. Included in the Whitman File were the Eisenhower Diary; correspondence with close friends; minutes of meetings with the cabinet, congressional leaders, and national security advisers; and summaries of telephone conversations. Supplemented by other collections, many opening in the late 1960s and 1970s, academics created something of a boomlet in Eisenhower studies. Insightful edited collections of Ike's letters by historians Robert Griffith and Robert Ferrell raced ahead of the superb, multi-volume, official collection of Eisenhower

17. Richard H. Rovere, "Eisenhower Revisited: A Political Genius? A Brilliant Man?", *New York Times Magazine* (February 7, 1971) 14; James David Barber, *The Presidential Character: Predicting Performance in the White House* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1972), 156-73; Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Imperial Presidency* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1973), 152-53.

18. Herbert S. Parmet, *Eisenhower and the American Crusades* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1972); Peter Lyon, *Eisenhower: Portrait of the Hero* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1974); Alexander, *Holding the Line: The Eisenhower Era, 1952-1961*, xv-xvii; Stephen E. Ambrose, *Eisenhower: The President* vol. 2 (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984); Elmo Richardson, *The Presidency of Dwight D. Eisenhower* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1979); R. Alton Lee, *Dwight D. Eisenhower: Soldier and Statesman* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1981), xi-xii.

15. See especially Cook's "Dwight David Eisenhower: Anti-militarist in the White House," *Forums in History Series* (St. Charles, Mo.: Forum Press, 1974). A highly useful collection of materials from the Eisenhower years is Robert L. Branyan and Lawrence H. Larsen, *The Eisenhower Administration, 1953-1961: A Documentary History* 2 vols. (New York: Random House, 1971).

16. Stephen E. Ambrose, *Rise to Globalism: American Foreign Policy, 1938-1970* (Baltimore: Penquin Books, Inc., 1971), 217-271, especially 255-58.



*After two terms as President, Eisenhower, a student of history, wondered how future generations would view his administration when compared against those of his predecessors. Eisenhower is shown here with President Roosevelt when he was Supreme Allied Commander; and with President Truman in 1945 when Eisenhower received a hero's welcome home.*



Papers under the direction of Alfred D. Chandler, Jr., and Louis Galambos.<sup>19</sup>

Historians found themselves particularly interested in the work of political scientist Fred I. Greenstein, who exploited these new archival sources. Greenstein lent scholarly proof to the earlier contentions of Kempton and Wills that Eisenhower had been a dynamic, activist chief executive. While feigning detachment, Ike pursued a vigorous, even exhausting schedule of meetings and correspondence. Far from being the tool of his staff, he made it—and others to whom he delegated authority—his servants, and he paid particular attention to his need to get a rounded view, a range of options, on most any decision. When he wanted to evade directly confronting a question at a news conference, he deliberately vowed to confuse his questioner with hopelessly garbled syntax. While appearing to hold back from conflict, Ike pushed others into taking the confrontational positions that would serve his purposes. Thus Greenstein claimed that Ike worked through “hidden-hand” leadership to undermine Joseph McCarthy, even while he avoided any open quarrel with the Wisconsin senator. Though the liberal Greenstein fastidiously disclaimed any endorsement of Eisenhower’s ends, he emphatically applauded the cunning and resourcefulness of his means.<sup>20</sup>

Generally speaking, revisionists focusing on Cold War issues found more to praise than those specializing

on domestic problems. In his highly acclaimed *Strategies of Containment* (1982), John Lewis Gaddis argued that Ike’s appreciation of the limits of American resources and his sense of restraint served the nation better than had the expansive policies of Truman and Kennedy. Eisenhower’s more frugal “New Look” defense posture reflected the President’s “asymmetrical” approach to the Soviets—an unwillingness to match the enemy capability for capability. Gaddis’ Eisenhower would, instead, mobilize American strengths against communist weaknesses, accepting the fact that the Soviets would do the same. “Symmetrical” American responses, normally advanced by liberal Democrats, were costly and risked an arms race and an overextension of American power.<sup>21</sup>

In a largely derivative study of *Eisenhower and the Cold War* (1981), Robert A. Divine agreed that the Republican President had achieved some considerable success in his efforts to ease tensions with the Soviet Union—particularly in the limitation of atmospheric nuclear testing. While Ike remained a captive of Cold War rhetoric when confronting problems in Asia and the Middle East, he employed ambiguity, restraint, and ingenuity in handling flash points that might have led to war. In fact, concluded Divine, nearly all of Eisenhower’s foreign policy achievements were negative in nature. “He ended the Korean War, he refused to intervene militarily in Indochina, he refrained from involving the United States in the Suez crisis, he avoided war with China over Quemoy and Matsu, he resisted the temptation to force a showdown over Berlin, he stopped exploding nuclear weapons in the atmosphere.”<sup>22</sup>

Committed critics, of course, carried the story further than Divine. Clearly, for example, Ike’s cutback on conventional military spending entailed a loss of “flexible response”—a capacity to deal effectively with local problems. And it is demonstrably true that Ike turned to an expanded CIA to perform any number of cloak-and-dagger operations “on the cheap” for the American government. Blanche Wiesen Cook in her *The Declassified Eisenhower* roundly condemns these CIA operations, seeing in them an Eisenhower largely controlled by sinister multinational corporations. A more balanced recent work by H. W. Brands, Jr., portrays the President as setting general guidelines and objectives and then deliberately distancing himself from them so as to maintain a “plausible deniability.”<sup>23</sup>

21. John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), especially Chapters 4, 5, 11.

22. Robert A. Divine, *Eisenhower and the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 154.

23. Blanche Wiesen Cook, *The Declassified Eisenhower: A Divided Legacy* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Co., 1981), and H. W. Brands, Jr., *Cold Warriors: Eisenhower’s Generation and American Foreign Policy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 63-68. See also Stephen Ambrose, *Ike’s Spies: Eisenhower and the Espionage Establishment* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Co., 1981) and Richard Immerman, *The CIA in Guatemala: The Foreign Policy of Intervention* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982).

19. Robert Griffith, ed., *Ike’s Letters to a Friend, 1941-1958* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1984); Robert H. Ferrell, *The Eisenhower Diaries* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1981); Alfred D. Chandler, Jr., ed., (vols. 1-6) and Louis Galambos, ed., (vols. 6-11), *The Papers of Dwight David Eisenhower* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press). Of some special interest to scholars are Gary W. Reichard, *The Reaffirmation of Republicanism: Eisenhower and the Eighty-Third Congress* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1975); Douglas Kinnard, *President Eisenhower and Strategy Management* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1977); Robert A. Divine, *Blowing on the Wind: The Nuclear Test Ban Debate* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); Burton I. Kaufman, *Trade and Aid: Eisenhower’s Foreign Economic Policy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982); Mark Rose, *Interstate: Express Highway Politics* (Lawrence: Regents Press of Kansas, 1979); David I. Frier, *Conflict of Interest in the Eisenhower Administration* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1969); Theodore P. Kovaleff, *Business and Government during the Eisenhower Administration: A Study of the Antitrust Division of the Justice Department* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1980); Edward L. and Frank H. Schapsmeier, *Extra Taft Benson and the Politics of Agriculture: The Eisenhower Years* (Danville, Ill.: Interstate, 1975); James L. Sundquist, *Politics and Policy: The Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson Years* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1968); James C. Duram, *A Moderate Among Extremists: Dwight D. Eisenhower and the School Desegregation Crisis* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1981); Michael R. Beschloss, *Mayday: Eisenhower, Khrushchev and the U-2 Affair* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986); and R. Alton Lee, *Eisenhower and Landrum-Griffin: A Study in Labor-Management Politics* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1990).

20. Greenstein rejected any suggestion that his applause for Eisenhower involved nostalgia for the 1950s or any “postliberal” political sentiments of his own. He considered himself an “instrumental revisionist,” concerned primarily with Ike’s tactics and governing style. See Fred I. Greenstein, “Eisenhower as an Activist President: A Look at New Evidence,” *Political Science Quarterly* 94 (Winter 1979-1980): 575-99 and *The Hidden-Hand Presidency: Eisenhower as Leader* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1982).

Probably the most balanced, sophisticated treatment of Eisenhower to date comes in the work of historian Robert Griffith. In his 1982 article in the *American Historical Review*, Griffith sought to move beyond questions of Ike's energy or his unwillingness to embrace a liberal domestic agenda. Clearly, Ike was an activist on matters that he saw as critical, whether or not historians might later agree with his assessments. Griffith's Ike was a product of the twentieth-century organizational revolution. By background and instinct a conservative, Eisenhower had learned in his multi-faceted military career to seek social harmony, order, and efficiency. At least by the time of his presidency, Ike had developed an abiding sense that New Deal/Fair Deal spending and class rhetoric had unleashed inflation and poisonous social frictions within American society. He looked to a natural elite—business leaders in particular—to set an example for other segments of society by self-restraint and sacrifice. Much of his energy while in the White House was thus devoted to establishing what Griffith calls the "corporate commonwealth"—a more harmonious society in which labor unions, farmers, identifiable racial and cultural groups, and other "special interests" would follow the leadership of business in subordinating their particular goals to those of society at large. By example and by quiet (sometimes "hidden-hand") persuasion, Eisenhower sought to impress upon businessmen the need to forget the harsh rhetoric of the past and to assume their larger leadership functions in the Corporate Commonwealth. Ike would seek to reverse the centralizing tendencies of the past twenty years and spread leadership out through the business world and to the states and communities.

As the nation's leader, Eisenhower believed he had to set priorities. His own vast personal prestige and credibility had to be husbanded. It could be drawn upon to manage or seek some breakthrough in the Cold War; employed to balance the budget, bringing down ruinous inflation; or used in general to encourage the safe birthing of the Corporate Commonwealth. Even if he wanted to, he dared not squander his personal reservoir of goodwill with mindless business-bashing, open quarrels with Joe McCarthy, or dramatic confrontations with southern politicians over school desegregation. To do so risked a serious diminution of his authority to persuade in other, more critical, areas of American and global life.

Although his interpretations of Ike have not yet reached book stage,<sup>24</sup> Griffith's work—especially when

combined with the scholarship of John Gaddis—may well mark the zenith of Eisenhower revisionism. They invite historians to see Ike on his own terms, in his own time. They sketch Eisenhower for what he was—a highly intelligent, purposeful, and resourceful President preoccupied with broad national and international problems. Committed to the Corporate Commonwealth at home, Ike displayed little sensitivity to civil rights or other social issues that concerned postwar liberals.

By the 1980s, the newer scholarship on Eisenhower and the misfortunes of his successors had brought a significant improvement in his scholarly reputation. A more comprehensive poll of teaching historians completed by Robert Murray and Tim Blessing in 1982 ranked Ike eleventh among thirty-six Presidents—fairly high in the "above average" category. Midwestern historians gave him his most favorable assessments; women and southern scholars were the most negative. The opening of new archival collections and the works of revisionist historians appear to have made a difference. They were, of course, writing against a backdrop of developments almost tailor-made to enhance Ike's reputation. The divisive involvement in Vietnam and its aftermath, rampant inflation, embarrassing and inconvenient dependence on foreign energy sources, and seeming incompetent or hopelessly compromised Presidents had marked the late 1960s and 1970s. Lyndon Johnson had been driven from office by antiwar protests and a backlash against Great Society liberalism; Richard Nixon had resigned, discredited, over the Watergate scandal; two sitting chief executives in a row—Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter—had lost bids for new leases on the White House.<sup>25</sup> A peanut farmer had been succeeded by an aging motion picture actor as the nation's President. A series of one-term chief executives, overwhelmed by circumstances, appeared to be in the nation's future; the office itself might indeed now be unmanageable. Under such trying circumstances, one might well ask whether the upward revision of Eisenhower would have occurred even if no new sources had been opened, if no new scholarly studies had been published.

One senses a leveling off in Ike's historical momentum. Another two-term Republican President, even older and probably less intrinsically able than Eisenhower, has left the White House to the warm applause of his countrymen. Under Ronald Reagan, inflation was down, gasoline lines were shorter. The nation's little wars were shorter and more decisive. The Soviets appeared far more cooperative in 1989 than in 1961. The White House might not be unmanageable after all, and hence Ike's achievements may well appear less impressive than before. Moreover, a renewed interest during the 1990s in domestic reform may be in the

24. Robert Griffith, "Dwight D. Eisenhower and the Corporate Commonwealth," *American Historical Review* 87 (February 1982): 87-122. A particularly useful short biography, drawing upon Griffith's insights, is Robert F. Burk, *Dwight D. Eisenhower: Hero and Politician* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1986). Burk had previously published *The Eisenhower Administration and Black Civil Rights* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1984).

25. Not since 1888 and 1892 had two successive incumbent Presidents lost reelection bids.

winds and would likely be endorsed by historians, who after all, gave Lyndon Johnson, John Kennedy, and Harry Truman marks higher than or almost as high as Ike's in 1982. Such an altered atmosphere is unlikely to enhance Eisenhower's standing in the academic world. Then, of course, there is the passage of time itself. As Robert Murray points out, the more contemporary a President, the more volatile his standing is likely to be. "Unless a president is rated in either the top or the bottom performance categories early on, he will reach his peak ranking within twenty-five to forty years after leaving office and then gradually drop in ranking."<sup>26</sup> Finally, there is no reason to expect any newly opened

American archival source, such as the Whitman File, to improve drastically our knowledge of or appreciation for the Eisenhower presidency.

In light of his centennial celebration, one might ask what Ike would make of a generation of historians who ranked FDR second to Lincoln and who liked Truman, Kennedy, and Lyndon Johnson almost as much as they did him.<sup>27</sup> If he were honest, he would have to admit that his own attempt in 1965 to establish his administration as an historical counterpoint to the New Deal had been ineffective. He might suggest something about a liberal bias within the profession or about the results not being final. Or, just as likely, he would slip into some syntactical contortion so confusing that one would not be certain whether he was answering the question or evading it. KH

26. Murray and Blessing, "Presidential Performance Survey," 552. British author Piers Brendon in *Ike: His Life and Times* (New York: Harper and Row, 1986) credits Ike with driving ambition, but blames him for permitting problems to fester. In a sense, then, Ike was responsible for many of the crises of the 1960s.

27. Murray and Blessing, "Presidential Performance Survey," 552.