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.1

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.2

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.3 Columnist Marquis Childs thought Ike a "captain 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."4

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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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), 64, 13; 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, Results of the Moderates (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1956), 5, 6, 9, 35, 38, 90, 101-2.


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

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, disagreed of Eisenhower’s following through on any number of innovative 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.

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 flitted 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


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.8

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.9

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.10 Among scholars, the portrait of Eisenhower as a likeable, well-meaning bumbler seemed secure.11

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 purposively toward his objectives.12 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.13 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.14

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 Wiesan 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.15

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.16

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 decision-making, 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.17 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 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.18

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

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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. Historians found themselves particularly interested in the work of political scientist Fred I. Greenstein, who exploited these new archival sources. Greenstein lent scholarly probe to the earlier contentions of Kent and Wills that Eisenhower had been a dynamic, activist chief executive. While feigning detachment, Ike pursued a vigilant, 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.

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.

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.”

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.”

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DO WE "LIKE IKE"? 195
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 ques-
tions 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 revo-
olution. 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 the energy while in the White
House was thus devoted to establishing what Griffith
calls the “corporate commonwealth”—a more har-
monious society in which labor unions, farmers, identifi-
able racial and cultural groups, and other “special interests”
would follow the leadership of business in sub-
ordinating 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 credibil-
ity had to be husbanded. It could be drawn upon to man-
age or seek some breakthrough in the Cold War;
employed to balance the budget, bring down ruinous
inflation; or used in general to encourage the safe
birth 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, 24 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 pre-
occupied with broad national and international prob-
lems. 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 signif-
cant 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 involve-
mint 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 liberal-
ism; Richard Nixon had resigned, disgraced, 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. 25 A peanut farmer had
been succeeded by an aging motion picture actor as the
country’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 moment.
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
country’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 inter-
est during the 1990s in domestic reform may be in the

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

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." 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. 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.
