Steeped in Religion

The most dominant influence in the Eisenhower home was religion, both the River Brethren and the Jehovah's Witnesses, or the Watchtower Society. Both David and Ida Eisenhower were active in the Watchtower during most of the formative years of their six sons. This portrait of the Eisenhower family was taken in 1902. (Left to right, front row) David, Milton, Ida; (back row) Dwight, Edgar, Earl, Arthur, and Roy.
President Eisenhower and the Influence of the Jehovah's Witnesses

by Jerry Bergman

Dwight D. Eisenhower considered himself fortunate to have been raised in the American Midwest and attributed his later success partly to those roots. He openly praised many small-town and rural values including honesty, neighborliness, integrity, and community. The values of his parents, Ida and David Eisenhower, and their home environment also were reflected in the extraordinary success of all their children. And probably the most dominant influence in the Eisenhower home was religion, both the River Brethren and the Jehovah's Witnesses, or the Watchtower Society.1

Both Eisenhower parents were active in the Watchtower during most of the formative years of their six sons. Ida Eisenhower stated that she became involved with the Watchtower in 1895 at age thirty-four, when Dwight was only five years old. She was baptized in 1898, meaning she was now what is called a Jehovah's Witnesses minister. Further, she did not "flirt" with the Witnesses' beliefs as claimed by some authors but "was a faithful member of Jehovah's Witnesses for 50 years." Dwight Eisenhower said his mother had "an inflexible loyalty to her religious convictions," and in 1955 Watchtower president Milton G. Henshel claimed, "Ida Eisenhower was one of the most energetic [Watchtower] preachers in Abilene, Kan."2 The Watchtower Society had a major religious influence on the future president until 1914 when he left for West Point.

Born on October 14, 1890, at Denison, Texas, Dwight D. Eisenhower, who became the thirty-fourth President of the United States, was reared with five brothers in Abilene, Kansas. Their parents owned a modest, two-story, white framed house on Southeast Fourth Street. The house was on a three-acre lot, and Ida, a frugal, hard-working woman, planted a large garden there to raise much of the family's produce needs. Journalist Steve Neal claimed that the Eisenhowers

Jerry Bergman is a professor of behavioral science at Northwest State College in Archbold, Ohio. His primary research interests are in the history and sociology of American religious sects, and he has published widely in the behavioral science journals.

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1. Marley Cole, Jehovah's Witnesses: The New World Society (New York: Vantage Press, 1955), 180; Gladys Dodd, "The Religious Background of the Eisenhower Family" (Bachelor of divinity thesis, Nazarene Theology Seminary, 1959). Jehovah's Witnesses often were referred to as Bible Students before 1932 and also were called Russellsites, named for their leader Charles Taze Russell. The sect was founded by Russell at Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in 1885.


STEEPED IN RELIGION
LEFT: The Eisenhower family home at 201 Southeast Fourth Street in Abilene, where Watchtower followers often met for religious discussions. BOTTOM LEFT: Although David and Ida Eisenhower and their sons sometimes attended the River Brethren Church in Abilene, they were not active members. BOTTOM RIGHT: Unlike David and Ida, many of the Eisenhower clan were lay members or preachers in the River Brethren Church, including Dwight’s uncle, Reverend Ira Eisenhower, shown here with his bible. Ironically, Ira and his brother Abraham may also have helped encourage David and Ida’s beliefs in end-time events, which were prophesied by the Watchtower.
were able to feed their growing family because of this small farm, which included cows, chickens, a smokehouse, fruit trees, and a large vegetable garden.  

Ida Stover Eisenhower grew up in Virginia's Shenandoah Valley and originally attended a Lutheran church. Paul Hutchinson, the editor of *Christian Century*, concluded that Ida showed a “deep interest in religion from her earliest years.” Hutchinson also noted that as a schoolgirl Ida studied the bible extensively and quoted freely from it — she once memorized 1,365 biblical verses in six months, a fact cited with pride by several of her sons.  

The Sunday school records in the Lutheran Church at Mount Sidney near Staunton, Virginia, still contain her bible memorizing record.  

Ida Stover and David Eisenhower met when both were students at Lane University, a small United Brethren college in Lecompton, Kansas. After they married at Lecompton on September 23, 1885, they both dropped out of college. Although they each completed only one term, their desire for education persisted and reflected itself in their strong support for their sons’ educations. Evidently David introduced Ida to the religious group popularly called the River Brethren; many of his relatives were involved in this religious community. Neither became deeply involved in this sect, although, wrote Merle Miller, “it has often been stated flatly that Ida and David Eisenhower were River Brethren.” Jacob Eisenhower, David’s father, and two of his sons were members, but the president’s cousin, the Reverend Ray L. Witter, claimed that although Ida and David came to Brethren services for several years, “neither was ever an actual member.”

That neither Ida nor David became members of the River Brethren Church and that they did not regularly attend for any length of time has been verified by many researchers. Close family friend R.G. Tonkin stated that he “never knew any of the family to attend the River Brethren church.” Both church records and oral history indicate that Dwight Eisenhower attended for less than a year around 1906.

Evidence that Dwight Eisenhower occasionally may have attended Sunday school at Abilene’s River Brethren Church includes the claim by John Dayhoff (listed in the 1906 church records as a member of Dwight’s class) that he went to Sunday school with him. When Eisenhower did attend, he evidently “never seemed to pay any attention or take any interest in the lesson,” according to Ida Hoffman, the regular teacher. Although three of the Eisenhower children including Dwight are listed in the 1906 *Souvenir Report of the Brethren Sunday School of Abilene, Kansas*, their parents are absent from the report. The listing of the three boys likely was due in part to the influence of Jacob, Dwight’s grandfather, an active minister of the River Brethren Church until his death in May 1906.

After the Eisenhower family moved into the house at 201 Southeast Fourth Street, Jacob lived with them. He previously had lived there with David’s brother Abraham. Abraham was a self-taught veterinarian who, when he later became an itinerant preacher, agreed to rent this house to David on the condition that Jacob could continue to live there until he passed away.

Many other relatives and friends who were River Brethren also likely had a major influence on Dwight Eisenhower’s religious development. He was surrounded physically and emotionally by his Kansas kin, including aunts, uncles, grandfathers, and a great-grandfather, most of whom were lay members or preachers in one of the
Brethren, or Holiness, sects. Gladys Dodd concludes that these Brethren, with whom Eisenhower was involved on occasion in worship, "were a clannish lot, glued together by common ties of unique appearance and modes of baptism, abhorrence of war, and the like." David also was connected with the River Brethren through his employment at the church-owned Belle Springs Creamery, where he worked from the time he moved to Abilene until he retired.  

In view of this River Brethren background, why would Eisenhower's parents become Watchtower followers? A major catalyst was the death of an eight-month-old brother, Paul, from diphtheria in 1895. This tragedy devastated the Eisenhowers, and the theological explanation provided by the River Brethren that Paul was in heaven did not seem to satisfy them. At this time three neighborhood women were able to comfort the grieving parents with the hope that they would see their son soon by offering them the Russellite teaching that death was merely sleep and that all those in the grave soon would be resurrected. In 1895 it was taught that this would occur in the new world that would arrive before 1914, a mere nine years away then. The three women—Clara Witt, Mary Thayer, and Emma Holland—also sold Ida a set of volumes entitled *Millennial Dawn* (later renamed *Studies in the Scriptures*) and a subscription to *Zion's Watch Tower and Herald of Christ's Presence*, now named the *Watchtower*. Ida soon became involved and influenced her husband to join a short time later.

David and Ida Eisenhower's interest in Armageddon and the imminent return of Christ was highly influenced by the Watchtower preoccupation with end-times events, especially the date of the prophesied battle. They also were likely influenced by David's brothers Abrahm and Ira Eisenhower, both of whom were themselves evidently influenced by the end-times date speculation of the Tabor, Iowa, evangelistic sect known as the Hephzibah Faith Missionary Association. It also is likely that other persons of their acquaintance, aside from Watchtower followers, shared similar theological interests.

In her extensive study of the Eisenhower family's religious involvement, Gladys Dodd concludes that Ida soon became a "faithful and dedicated Witness and actively engaged as a colporteur [missionary] for the Watch Tower Society until her death." Dwight Eisenhower's faith was "rooted in his parents' Biblical heritage," and the Eisenhower boys' upbringing was "steeped" in religion.

The Eisenhowers held weekly Watchtower meetings in their parlor, where the boys took turns reading from and discussing scripture and Watchtower books. Dwight Eisenhower also was involved in these Watchtower studies—he claimed that he had read the Bible completely through twice before he was eighteen. Historian Stephen Ambrose concluded that the degree of religious involvement of the Eisenhower boys was such that

David read from the Bible before meals, then asked a blessing. After dinner, he brought out the Bible again. When the boys grew old enough, they took turns reading. Ida organized meetings of the Bible Students of the Watchtower Society, which met on Sundays in her parlor. She played her piano and led the singing. Neither David nor Ida ever smoked or drank, or played cards, or swore, or gambled.

It is difficult to conclude that this upbringing did not have major influence on the Eisenhower boys. The Watchtower followers met in the Eisenhowers' home until the growth of the group forced them to rent a local hall in 1915. Later a large Watchtower meeting house (now called a Kingdom Hall) was built in Abilene. R.G. Tonkin estimated that when the Eisenhower boys were young the size of the class was "about fifteen people." Dodd described the early Russellite group in Abilene:

Both Henry N. Engle and his daughter Naomi were school teachers, and were somewhat more educated than the agrarian Brethren generally. They felt an intellectual and spiritual affinity toward David and Ida Eisenhower (both had been to college), and, a little later, for Dr. James L. Thayer, dental surgeon, whose mother Mrs. Mary Thayer first introduced the Watch Tower to the Eisenhowers. This company together with L.D. Toller and the R.O. Southworths constituted the nucleus of the Abilene congregation of Russellites. From 1896 until 1915, the Bible Students... met on Sunday afternoons at the Eisenhower home for their meetings. During most of this twenty year period, David Eisenhower (and occasionally L.D. Toller) served the class as the Bible-study conductor, or “elder” as the group called its leader.\footnote{Dodd, “The Religious Background of the Eisenhower Family,” 236}

One of the more revealing documents about Ida Eisenhower’s faith was a letter she wrote to Richard Boeckel, a young man who had become a Jehovah’s Witness while still in the army. In August 1944 Boeckel attended a Watchtower assembly in Denver where he met Lotta Thayer of Abilene. In his conversations with her, Boeckel explained the difficulty of being a Witness in a military environment. Thayer then told him that her neighbor was General Eisenhower’s mother and added that “she’s one of Jehovah’s Witnesses. Would you like her to write you?”\footnote{Richard A. Boeckel, “A Soldier who Became a Preacher,” Watchtower (October 15, 1980): 24–29; Miller, Ike the Soldier, 78.} Boeckel must have been pleased when Ida Eisenhower wrote:

A friend returning from the United Announcers Convention of Jehovah’s witnesses, informs me of meeting you there. I rejoice with you in your privilege of attending such convention.

It has been my good fortune in the years gone by to attend these meetings of those faithfully proclaiming the name of Jehovah and his glorious Kingdom which shortly now will pour out its rich blessings all over the earth.

My friend informs me of your desire to have a word from General Eisenhower’s mother whom you have been told is one of the witnesses of Jehovah. I am indeed such and what a glorious privilege it has been in association with [other Witnesses].

Generally I have refused such requests because of my desire to avoid all publicity. However, because you are a person of good will towards Jehovah God and his glorious Theocracy I am very happy to write you. . . .

It was always my desire and my effort to raise my boys in the knowledge of and to reverence their Creator. My prayer is that they all may anchor their hope in the New World, the central feature of which is the Kingdom for which all good people have been praying the past two thousand years.

I feel that Dwight my third son will always strive to do his duty with integrity as he sees such duty. I mention him in particular because of your expressed interest in him.

And so as the mother of General Eisenhower and as a Witness of and for the Great Jehovah of Hosts (I have been such for the past 49 years) I am pleased to write you and to urge you to faithfulness, as a companion of and servant with those who “keep the commands of God and have the testimony of Jesus.”

To encourage Boeckel to accept Watchtower doctrines, Ida mentioned several current events that the Watchtower then taught as evidence that Armageddon would occur very soon, concluding that

Surely this portends that very soon the glorious Theocracy, the long promised Kingdom of Jehovah the Great God and of his Son the everlasting King will rule the entire earth and pour out manifold blessings upon all peoples who are of good will towards Him. All others will be removed [killed at Armageddon].

Again may I urge your ever faithfulness to these “Higher Powers” and to the New World now so very near.

The letter, dated August 20, 1944, was signed “Ida E. Eisenhower” and closed with “Respectfully yours in hope of and as a fighter for the New World.”\footnote{Cole, Jehovah’s Witnesses, following page 190.}

In another letter, Ida stated she has “been in the truth since ninety six [1896 and I]... am still in... it has been a comfort to me... Naomi Engle stay [sic] with me and she is a witness too so my hope [sic] are good.”\footnote{Fleming, “Ike’s Mom Jehovah Witness 50 yrs.,” 3; Cole, Jehovah’s Witnesses, 192.} Merle Miller related an experience involving Boeckel that reveals the irony of Eisenhower’s mother’s faith:


\footnote{15. Dodd, “The Religious Background of the Eisenhower Family,” 236}

\footnote{17. Cole, Jehovah’s Witnesses, following page 190.}

\footnote{18. Fleming, “Ike’s Mom Jehovah Witness 50 yrs.,” 3; Cole, Jehovah’s Witnesses, 192.}
A pyramid chart, specifically of the Pyramid of Gaza, was a central teaching of the Bible Students. This wall chart was first published in 1898, and based on it David created a similar chart that hung in the Eisenhower home. Captivated by the bizarre drawing, the sons spent hours studying David's creation.
... one time when Boeckel refused, as a good Witness must, to salute his superior officers at Fort Warren, he said that he was a Witness and that his refusal to salute was "based on my understanding of the Bible." One officer reportedly said, "General Eisenhower ought to line you Jehovah's Witnesses up and shoot you all!" Boeckel then, again according to The Watchtower, said, "Do you think he would shoot his own mother, sir?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"Reaching in my pocket and taking out Sister Eisenhower's letter, I handed it to him... he read the letter... handed it back to me. 'Get back to ranks,' he said, 'I don't want to get mixed up with the General's mother.'"

The Eisenhowers' involvement in the Watchtower also created many family conflicts. On one hand, Russells taught that the Brethren and all other churches were not pleasing to God, and under their second president, Joseph F. Rutherford (1916–1942), they viciously attacked all religion with slogans such as "religion is a snare and a racket." The Watchtower under Rutherford taught that all priests and ministers are of Satan leading their flocks to eternal damnation.20 River Brethren, on the other hand, concluded Dodd, were rabidly opposed to Russells. As late as 1913 ... the Evangelical Visor advertised a pamphlet entitled "The Blasphemous Religion which teaches the Annihilation of Jesus Christ" as the "best yet publication against Russells" and the editor thought every River Brethren minister should read it. In 1928, one of the Brethren ministers, Abraham Eisenhower (David's brother), wrote to the Evangelical Visor concerning Russells: "Oh, foolhearted nonsense. It is the devil's asbestos blanket to cover up the realities of a hell fire judgment. The word of God will tear off this infamous lie and expose the realities of an existence after death."

This strong statement would reflect the general attitude of most of the Eisenhowers.21

The River Brethren have much in common with the Mennonites and both were once called "the plain people" because of their simple lifestyles and dress. Although the sect generally has modernized and even in the early 1900s no longer placed as much emphasis on details of clothing as it had formerly, it was still comparatively strict in the 1800s. Marriage could be dissolved only by death, hard physical work was considered a prime virtue, and after the turn of the century members could not use or even grow tobacco. In some respects, early Watchtower teachings were similar, and both have changed in major ways since the Eisenhowers became involved in 1895. Further, "a number of the River Brethren had become followers of Russell." No record exists as to how many River Brethren actually converted to the Watchtower, but enough did so to cause the Brethren and other churches concern.22

Dwight Eisenhower also was influenced by the religious ideas of his father. David Eisenhower actively served the Watchtower for many years as an elder and bible study conductor, a role that he occasionally alternated with L.D. Toliver.23 Although his early upbringing was in the River Brethren and he briefly attended Lutheran and later Methodist churches before and during his college days, he converted to the Watchtower a few years after his wife. But unlike Ida who remained firm to the end, David Eisenhower's commitment to the Watchtower eventually changed until he openly became an opposer.

Dodd concludes that "by 1919 David Eisenhower's interest in Russell had definitely waned and before his death in 1942 he is said to have renounced the doctrine of Russell." In a letter to Edward Ford, a Jehovah's Witness and longtime friend, David stated that a critical factor causing his disillusionment with the Watchtower was its end of the world prophecy failures including 1914 and 1915.24 After he left the Watchtower, his son Arthur claimed that David remained a student of the scriptures, but his "reading

19. Miller, Be the Soldier, 79.
22. Ibid, 234, 235. Although major differences existed, especially in doctrine, both groups were pietistic Protestant conservative sects opposed to war, albeit on somewhat different grounds. Both also stressed the importance of biblical study, condemned many worldly habits, and were then very concerned with the last days and eschatology.
23. Ibid, 225.
habits were confined to the Bible, or anything related to the Bible.” Although the bible was central to David Eisenhower’s thinking, Milton added that his father also “read history, serious magazines, newspapers, and religion literature.”

When David Eisenhower died in March 1942 at the age of seventy-eight, the service was conducted by Witness James L. Thayer, assisted by Witness Fred K. Southworth. Ida’s nurse Naomi Engle was “a strong-willed Witness” who “had arranged a Jehovah’s Witness funeral for David even though he had made it clear before his death that he was no longer a believer.” Edgar Eisenhower stated that his father left the Watchtower because he “couldn’t go along with the sheer dogma that was so much a part of their thinking.” His sons later adamantly claimed that David accompanied his wife on Watchtower activities primarily in an effort to appease her. Later Watchtower accounts usually referred only to Ida as a Witness, supporting the conclusion that David had left the Watchtower around 1915.

Neal even claimed that David Eisenhower was led by the Watchtower into “mysticism,” noting that “the most unusual expression of David’s belief was an enormous wall chart,” ten feet high and six feet wide, of the Egyptian pyramids that he made when the Eisenhower boys were growing up. “[A]ccording to David, the chart contained prophecies for the future as well as confirmation of biblical events. Captivated by the bizarre drawing, the sons spent hours studying David’s creation.” With the chart, Dodd wrote, David Eisenhower proved to his own satisfaction that the lines of the pyramids—outer dimensions, inner passageways, angles of chambers, and so on—prophesied later Biblical events and other events still in the future. As might be expected, this demonstration fascinated his children; the chart came to be one of the family’s most prized possessions.

The pyramid chart, specifically of the Pyramid of Gaza in Egypt, was in fact a central teaching of the Bible Students, as they were called. The WALL chart was first published in 1898 in the Millennial Dawn, volume 1, and a large wall version was made available later by the Watchtower. This chart played a prominent role in Watchtower theology for more than thirty-five years. Charles T. Russell, the sect’s founder, learned from the pyramid many of his prophecies, especially the year 1914 when the end of the world was expected to have come. The pyramid also was used to confirm the Watchtower’s dispensational theology.

Dodd noted that the pyramid chart still was in the Eisenhower family home as late as 1944, but in 1957 she could no longer locate it in either the family home or the Eisenhower museum nearby and learned that the chart and other Watchtower effects evidently had been discarded. Dodd concluded the Watchtower items probably were destroyed by the family to reduce their embarrassment over their parents’ involvement in the Jehovah’s Witnesses.

The disposal the Eisenhowers’ Watchtower literature, charts, and other items is only one indication of the many conflicts the Eisenhower boys likely experienced because of their parents’ religion. These conflicts may be one reason why none of them ever became involved in the Watchtower or even a fundamentalist church. The boys’ Watchtower background is not widely known or acknowledged, likely in part due to the antagonism many people had then, and still have today, against the Watchtower. This antagonism is illustrated in a quote claiming that “late in life” Ida became, “of all things, a member of the sect known as Jehovah’s Witnesses.”

Accounts of the Eisenhower family history commonly repeat the claim that the president’s parents

were River Brethren or were not directly involved with the Watchtower. Typical was an April 1969 Time magazine article that reported only that they “were members of the River Brethren, a Mennonite sect,” adding that “along with their piety, the Eisenhowers gave their sons the frontier creed of self-starting individualism.” Another account claimed:

Eisenhower’s parents, members of a Protestant sect called the River Brethren, brought up their children in an old-fashioned atmosphere of puritanical morals. Prayer and Bible reading were a daily part of their lives. Violence was forbidden, though in a family of six boys the edict was a bit hard to enforce.4

The misinformation about the religion of Eisenhower’s parents is compounded by the fact that many biographies and even the writings of the Eisenhower sons often declined to fully and honestly acknowledge the parents’ actual religious affiliation. President Eisenhower’s spiritual mentor and close friend Billy Graham was led to believe that the president’s parents “had been River Brethren, a small but devoutly pious group in the Mennonite tradition.” Many authors referred to followers of the Watchtower faith only as “fundamentalists” or “Bible students,” the latter term the Jehovah’s Witnesses used only until 1931.5 In his 1974 biography Peter Lyon stated that

37. Edgar Eisenhower admitted only that “Our parents’ religious interests switched to a sect known as the Bible Students. The meetings were held at our house, and everyone made his own interpretation of the Scripture lessons. Mother played the piano, and they sang hymns before and after each meeting. It was a real old time prayer meeting. They talked to God, read Scriptures, and everyone got a chance to state his relationship with Him. Their ideas of religion were straightforward and simple. I have never forgotten those Scripture lessons, nor the influence they have had on my life. Simple people taking a simple approach to God. We couldn’t have forgotten because mother impressed those creeds deep in our memories. Even after I had grown up, every letter I received from her, until the day she died, ended with a passage from the Bible.” See McCallum, Six Roads from Abilene, 21.
38. Lyon, Eisenhower, 38.
Ida Eisenhower was not happy about Dwight's choice of a military career, a violation of Watchtower beliefs. This was evident in her adverse reaction to his leaving for West Point in 1911. When he graduated from the academy in 1915, Ida presented her son a version of the Bible used by the Watchtower, which consistently used the term "Jehovah" for God.

Watchtower policy required disfellowshipping all members who were involved with the armed forces. But Ida never shunned her famous son in spite of his violation of Watchtower norms.
President Eisenhower, himself, seems to have written virtually nothing concerning his feelings about the Watchtower or even religion in general except that reviewed here. However, in Eisenhower’s words, his mother was “deeply religious,” and, he explained,

she had gravitated toward a local group known as The Bible Class. In this group, which had no church or minister, she was happy. Sunday meetings were always held in the homes of members, including ours.

The unusual program of worship included hymns, for which Mother played the piano, and prayers, with the rest of the time devoted to group discussion of a selected chapter of the Bible.

Although the group preferred the label Bible Students, when they met they usually did not study the bible but primarily Watchtower publications. In the early 1900s the study focus was a set of books called Studies in the Scriptures, written by C.T. Russell and his wife, and also the current issues of Watchtower magazine. Dwight Eisenhower acknowledged that the group was the Jehovah’s Witnesses:

There was, eventually, a kind of loose association with similar groups throughout the country ... chiefly through a subscription to a religious periodical, The Watchtower. After I left home for the Army, these groups were drawn closer together and finally adopted the name of Jehovah’s Witnesses.

Eisenhower then added, “They were true conscientious objectors to war. Though none of her sons could accept her conviction in this matter, she refused to try to push her beliefs on us just as she refused to modify her own.”

Conversely, Ida Eisenhower was not happy about her son’s violation of Watchtower beliefs. This was evident in her reaction to Dwight’s leaving for West Point in the summer of 1911. Eisenhower’s “mother and twelve-year-old brother Milton were the only

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42. These major depositories, as well as other pertinent documents, have been searched in vain: Defiance College Archives, Defiance, Ohio; Church of the Brethren Archives, Messiah College, Grantham, Pennsylvania; and Eisenhower Library, Abilene, Kansas.
43. Eisenhower, At Ease, 305.
44. Ibid.
family members there to see him off,” wrote William Pickett. Their “mother was unable to say a thing,” remembered Milton:

I went out on the west porch with mother as Ike started uptown, carrying his suitcase, to take the train. Mother stood there like a stone statue and I stood right by her until Ike was out of sight. Then she came in and went to her room and bawled. 5

Many reporters also termed Eisenhower’s mother “a religious pacifist.” Watchtower followers have been involved in extensive litigation over this term and have established in the courts that they are not pacifists but conscientious objectors, opposed only to wars initiated and carried out by humans. The Watchtower teaches that involvement in war, except those that God wants us to fight, is not only a violation of God’s law that “thou shalt not kill” and “thou shall love thy neighbor” but is also wrong because Watchtower doctrine considers war an improper use of time in these last days before the new world. Believers taught that their followers should be dedicated to converting others before the end, which since the late 1800s has been taught by the Watchtower to be “just around the corner.” They are in their words “conditional pacifists,” although the Watchtower often argues against all war on pacifist grounds. According to Eisenhower, his mother “was opposed to militarism because of her religious beliefs.” 46

Often Ida’s alleged pacifism is given as the reason for her opposition to her son’s military career when the actual reason was her Watchtower theology. For example, Alden Hatch, after recounting the constellation Ida had over Eisenhower attending West Point—even hoping he would fail the entrance exam so he would not go—concludes that the reason was her “abhorrence to war.” But Ida objected to her son’s decision for several reasons, and consequently she hid from her sons her “weakened faith” and “grief” that resulted from Dwight Eisenhower’s pursuit of a military career. 47

Jehovah’s Witnesses then also eschewed all political involvement because they felt—and still teach today—that the soon-to-be-established kingdom of God on earth—the millennium—was the only solution to all worldly problems. In Milton Eisenhower’s words, as good Jehovah’s Witnesses his parents “were more concerned with the millennium which unfortunately hadn’t come in their day, than they were with contemporary social institutions.” All of the Eisenhower boys disagreed with the Watchtower view in this area. Milton also stated his parents were “aloof from politics...and as I became older, I used to hold many conversations with them in a futile attempt to show them that they were wrong.” 48 Of course, as Watchtower followers Ida and, until he left, David were not allowed to be involved in politics—even voting became a disfellowshipping offense in the 1940s.

The Eisenhower sons’ embarrassment about their parents’ involvement in the Watchtower is vividly revealed in the following account:

Both Ida and David, but especially Ida, were avid readers of The Watchtower, and at the time of Ida’s death there was a fifty-year collection in the house on South East Fourth Street. The publication had arrived by mail from 1896 to 1946. It was Milton who bundled up the fifty-year collection of the presumably embarrassing magazines and got them out of the Eisenhower house and away from the eyes of reporters. He gave them to a neighbor and Witness. 49

The neighbor was Mrs. James L. Thayer, one of the women who originally converted Ida Eisenhower. In one of the last interviews given by the family, Milton said only that “we were raised as a fundamentalist family. Mother and father knew the Bible from one end to the other.” 50

Another account illustrates the press’s tendency to shy away from openly revealing the Eisenhower par-

47. Hatch, General Ike, 21.
49. Miller, Be the Soldier, 79.
ents’ Watchtower involvement. When Dwight Eisenhower graduated from West Point Military Academy in 1915, his mother presented to him the American Standard version of the bible used by the Watchtower because it consistently used the term “Jehovah” for God. When Ike was sworn in as president for his second term, this bible was used. The press reports of this account, however, usually did not quote the words the president actually read, which were “Blessed is the nation whose God is Jehovah,” but instead substituted the word “Lord” for “Jehovah.” The Watchtower concluded that this misquote was an attempt to distance President Eisenhower from his parents’ faith by not using a term that was at that time intimately connected with the Jehovah’s Witnesses sect.51

Why were the Eisenhower sons (and the press) so reticent about honestly revealing their parents’ religion? One reason is apparent in an article published in the official Watchtower magazine *Awake!*

On September 11, 1946, Mrs. Ida Stover Eisenhower died in Abilene, Kans. Private services were conducted at the home, and public services were handled by an army chaplain from Ft. Riley. Was that in respect for Mrs. Eisenhower? Pallbearers were three American Legionnaires and three Veterans of Foreign Wars. Was that appropriate? . . . In 1942 her husband, also one of Jehovah’s witnesses, died. One of Jehovah’s witnesses preached the funeral service. Mrs. I.S. Eisenhower, like all Jehovah’s witnesses, believed religion a racket and the clergy in general, including army chaplains, to be hypocrites. She harbored no special pride for “General Ike” she was opposed to his West Point appointment. It was gross disrespect to the deceased for an army chaplain to officiate at the funeral.

As for the pallbearers, The American Legion particularly, and also the Veterans of Foreign Wars, are repeatedly ringleaders in mob violence against Jehovah’s witnesses. Hundreds of instances could be cited, but illustrative is the one occurring the Sunday before Mrs. Eisenhower’s death, in nearby Iowa. There war veterans broke up a public Bible meeting of Jehovah’s witnesses, doing much physical violence. Hardly appropriate, then, was it, for such to act as pallbearers? Only death could keep the body of Mrs. Eisenhower from walking away from a funeral so disrespectful of all that she stood for.52

Unfortunately, this article did not discuss how the Watchtower’s teachings and policy on military service, education, and involvement in “false religion” contributed to the conflicts noted in the article. President Eisenhower’s religious orientation was described as “moderate and tolerant, simple and firm,” quite in contrast to the confrontational, pugnacious Watchtower sect of the first half of this century. Other reasons for the press’s and the Eisenhower boys’ lack of honesty about their Watchtower background include the Watchtower’s opposition to the flag salute and all patriotic activities, vaccinations, and medicine in general. Witnesses rejected the germ theory and advocated many ineffectual medical “cures” including phrenology, radio solar pads, radionics, iridology, and the grape cure. They exhibited staunch opposition to the use of aluminum cooking utensils and fluoridation of drinking water.53

Although the Eisenhower brothers tried to minimize their Watchtower background, they did not hide the fact that their home environment was dominated with “biblically literalistic” values. And because the Eisenhowers were “fundamentalists,” explained Christian Century editor Paul Hutchinson, the bible was for them

the one authoritative guide, read every morning at family prayers, quoted again and again when family decisions were in the making. Both father and mother could quote the Bible for any occasion and almost from beginning to end. . . . They owned a concordance, but the sons remember that on the rare occasion when reference to it became necessary both parents were almost forgetful in seeking its aid.54

Ida and David Eisenhower’s religious beliefs clearly influenced their sons, but these “unorthodox if not eccentric views were not forced upon their chil-

Although influenced by the Watchtower's belief structure and values, none of the Eisenhower boys accepted the sect's major teachings. In later life the sons were uncomfortable with their parents' involvement with the Watchtower and tried to minimize this aspect of their religious background. This family portrait was taken in 1925 at the Eisenhower home in Abilene. (Left to right) Roy, Arthur, Earl, Edgar, David, Dwight, Milton, and Ida.

This float in the 1953 inaugural parade is but one example of the emphasis Eisenhower placed on religion during his military and political careers.
children.” In violation of Watchtower policy, the Eisenhower boys, concluded Neal, were “encouraged to reach their own conclusions” regarding religion, and this may have influenced their subsequent decisions to join “more conventional Protestant denominations.” Neal wrote that by setting high standards and teaching the value of high moral principles, “the parents had given their sons a ‘quiet strength.’”

Dwight Eisenhower and his brothers, as is true of about half of those raised in the Watchtower sect, left when they became adults—yet they no doubt were influenced by the Watchtower belief structure, values, and many of its ideals. As is true of many persons raised as Witnesses, however, they could not accept many of the Watchtower’s major theological teachings. One of the primary Watchtower beliefs—common of course to all fundamentalist, Protestant faiths—that the Eisenhower boys evidently still accepted later in life was the value and “truth” of the Bible. Dwight Eisenhower once stated “if each of us in his own mind would dwell upon the simple virtues—integrity, courage, self-confidence, and unshakable faith in his Bible—would not some of our problems tend to simplify themselves?”

A major part of Jehovah’s Witness doctrine is a required belief in creationism. The first booklet the group published against evolution was the 1898 work The Bible Versus the Evolution Theory, and the most recent was the 1985 Life—How Did It Get Here? By Evolution or By Creation? This teaching may have influenced certain statements Eisenhower made in retirement:

although I have seldom displayed or discussed my religious philosophy with anyone, a deep Bible-centered faith has colored my life since childhood. Devout parents, who loved the Bible as dearly as life itself, made sure of that. Indeed, before I was eighteen, I had read through the entire Bible and discussed it, chapter by chapter, with my mother.

We are a religious nation today because in the Declaration of Independence they stated their full reliance on “the laws of nature and nature’s God” and because they published before the world the self-evident truths . . .

In contrast with this concept of the sacredness of life, modern atheistic dictatorships treat men as nothing more than animals or educated mules. How many materialistic psychologists and smart alec professors sneer that men invented God in a childish search for security; yet I have noticed that men in the foxholes or at the moment of death turn to some higher Power for comfort and courage.

Eisenhower then cites a number of times when he turned to God, and in his opinion the events that occurred after he did so lent evidence to his conclusion that God intervened in response to his prayer. Specifically during his World War II campaigns, Eisenhower constantly asked for “God’s guidance in making the right decision,” and during the eight years he was president he “never opened a cabinet meeting without a minute of silent prayer.” Of course, the sincere was of his outward display of piety is difficult, if not impossible, to judge.

As is also true of many Witness children, the Eisenhower children could not accept the Watchtower teaching that because the end of the world is soon to come it is a waste of time to obtain a college education or pursue a career. Nor could they accept the Watchtower teaching that all world events are strictly under God’s control, and it is futile to attempt to interfere with them—as if life and world affairs were a movie script that has already been written and can be played out only according to the script.

A major motivation to hide the family’s Witness background was likely an attempt to overcome the stigma of being raised in a fundamentalist sect, yet Eisenhower repeatedly stated that he accepted many of his parents’ beliefs. “We boys are all religious,” said Edgar Eisenhower, “but we don’t go around saying ‘I am a religious man’ any more than we would say, ‘I am an honest man,’ or ‘I am a clean man,’ or ‘I pay my bills.’” John Bonnell put it this way: “To the very close of his life Dwight Eisenhower carried in his

56. Fuller and Green, God in the White House, 216.
57. The Bible Versus the Evolution Theory (Allegheny, Pa.: Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society, 1898); Life—How Did It Get Here? By Evolution or By Creation? (Brooklyn: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of New York, 1985).

59. Ibid., 3.
mind and heart the indelible imprint of his parents’ religion.” 60 Merlin Gustafson claimed that one evidence of this imprint was that “within a few months . . . after taking the oath of office . . . he was popularly known as the ‘most religious President in our history.’” Many examples of Eisenhower’s religious actions that earned him this title have been cited:

He helped sponsor a nationwide moral crusade and religious revival, and in general he sought to encourage the cause of American religious interests. During his administration the highly publicized Prayer Breakfasts were begun and “Under God” was placed in the pledge of allegiance to the flag. He proclaimed Days of Prayer for the nation, backed the organization known as Foundation for Religious Action and invited Billy Graham and other prominent religious leaders to the White House. And he delivered hundreds of messages, both written and oral, to religious organizations. 61

Other “religious actions” of the Eisenhower administration included an entry entitled “God’s float” in the 1953 inaugural parade and the issuing by the postmaster general of a stamp bearing the motto “In God We Trust,” which soon was imprinted on U.S. currency. Eisenhower also once said that he believed one of the reasons he was elected was “to lead this country spiritually . . . we need a spiritual renewal.” 62

The reticence of the Eisenhowers to reveal their full religious background also caused a number of ironies. Many of those who attacked President Eisenhower did so on the grounds that he “never joined a church until after he became President” implying that “his Sunday worship as Pres. smack[ed] of hypocrisy.” It is true that most of Eisenhower’s adult years “were spent outside organized religion,” and he was sixty-three before he joined a church, but his personal statements and religious beliefs must be carefully evaluated before judgments can be attempted. 63

In response to the “non-religiousness” allegation, Paul Hutchinson wrote: “He seldom makes a speech without some reference to the nation’s need for spiritual strength. He attends church more frequently than most of his predecessors. He goes to prayer-meeting breakfasts. His cabinet sessions begin with prayer. He is never too busy to receive church delegations and several of his most important speeches have been delivered at church gatherings.” The role of religion in Eisenhower’s life evidently was so central that “again and again, as he wrestles with the requirements of the presidency, Abilene shows through. Its mark is plain on him. Most of the time it helps to steady his thinking and give his leadership confident direction. Occasionally, it betrays him into a belief that some problems are simpler than they are, and their solutions quickly to be found.” 64 The president’s religious background was evident on January 20, 1953. After being given the oath of office by Chief Justice Frederick M. Vinson, Eisenhower said:

My friends, before I begin the expression of those thoughts that I deem appropriate to this moment, would you permit me the privilege of uttering a little private prayer of my own. And I ask that you bow your heads:

Almighty God . . . my future associates in the executive branch of government join me in beseeching that Thou will make full and complete our dedication to the service of the people . . . regardless of station, race, or calling. May cooperation be permitted and be the mutual aim of those who, under the concepts of our Constitution, hold to differing political faiths; so that all may work for the good of our beloved country and Thy glory. Amen. 65

Eisenhower also ardently defended the convictions of his parents even if he disagreed with them. This conclusion was apparent in a letter that Eisenhower mailed during the last week of one of his major World War II campaigns. Dictated to his brother Arthur on May 18, 1943, the letter is his response to a story a reporter wrote about his mother’s Jehovah’s

Witness faith, stressing her alleged “pacifism” and the irony of Mrs. Eisenhower’s son being a general. Eisenhower, ignoring the claim that Jehovah’s Witnesses were pacifists, simply told Arthur that their mother’s “happiness in her religion means more to me than any damn wisecrack that a newspaper man can get publicized.” His respect for his mother also was revealed vividly in these words, written at the time of his father’s death in March 1942:

I should like so much to be with my Mother these few days. But we’re at war. And war is not soft, it has no time to indulge even the deepest and most sacred emotions. I loved my Dad. I think my Mother is the finest person I’ve ever known. She has been the inspiration for Dad’s life and a true helpmeet in every sense of the word.


Ida Eisenhower did not cut off her son because he became part of the military. Watchtower policy until recently required disfellowshipping all members who allowed themselves to be involved in the military, even as employees for war armaments plants. In spite of her son’s violation of Watchtower norms, Ida evidently never shunned him as Watchtower policy required. For example, in 1913, after attending a Witness convention in Washington and spending a week in Watchtower Headquarters in Brooklyn, the Eisenhower’s visited their son at West Point. No evidence has been found, however, that Ida Eisenhower experienced problems with the Watchtower for associating with a son who obviously violated a major Watchtower policy.

One explanation for this special treatment is that shunning was then not as rigidly enforced as it is today. Another is that after Dwight Eisenhower became a general, his mother may have been given special consideration due to her son’s prominence. As late as 1943 she was still a Witness in good standing—in 1943 a picture of her on the front page of the Wichita Beacon documented her involvement in a Witness assembly in that city.

Probably the most incongruous example of special treatment was Ida’s funeral service, described previously. For decades the Watchtower has forbidden such activity, and although it was sufficient grounds for expulsion, she was never disfellowshipped.

The thesis that Ida Eisenhower received unusual consideration from the Watchtower is supported by the problem that developed when the Watchtower tried to exploit Mrs. Eisenhower’s name for their advantage. This concerned the Eisenhower boys because Jehovah’s Witnesses generally were scorned by most churches and society in general. Virtually no members were college-educated, and the education level today is still extremely low—among the lowest of all religious denominations. A problem that the Eisenhower sons faced in the 1940s, according to

69. Dodd, “The Religious Background of the Eisenhower Family.”


GENERAL DWIGHT DAVID EISENHOWER
on this desk wrote his
INAUGURATION DAY PRAYER
at
THE STATLER
WASHINGTON, D.C.
JANUARY 20, 1953
THE PRAYER

Almighty God, as we stand here at this moment my future associates in the executive branch of government join me in beseeching that Thou will make full and complete our dedication to the service of the people in this throng, and their fellow citizens everywhere.

Give us, we pray, the power to discern clearly right from wrong, and allow all our words and actions to be governed thereby, and by the laws of this land. Especially we pray that our concern shall be for all the people regardless of station, race, or calling.

May cooperation be permitted and be the mutual aim of those who, under the concepts of our Constitution, hold to differing political faiths; so that all may work for the good of our beloved country and Thy glory. Amen.

Presented to
PRESIDENT EISENHOWER
by
CONRAD N. HILTON
FEBRUARY 1956

In 1953, after taking the oath of office, Eisenhower delivered this prayer.

At his second inauguration in 1957, the president is sworn in on the bible given to him by his mother when he graduated from West Point in 1915.
Edgar Eisenhower, was that their mother’s “deep, sincere and even evangelical religious fervor” was used by the Watchtower “to exploit her in her old age.”

This concern prompted Edgar Eisenhower to write a letter in 1944 to the Jehovah’s Witness who was caring for his eighty-two-year-old mother. As was and still is the practice for all members, young and old, Witnesses went door-to-door and “witnessed” on the street corners, primarily by selling their literature. Edgar, according to Kornitzer, believed his mother “was being taken out of the home and used for the purpose of distributing [Watchtower] religious literature.” Edgar defended his mother’s “right to continue to believe as she saw fit,” explained Kornitzer, but “she could be easily and mistakenly influenced in performing any service which would be represented to her as helpful to the advancement of [the Watchtower’s] religious beliefs.” Edgar’s concern was that she should no longer be taken from place to place and exhibited as the mother of General Eisenhower—solely for the purpose of attempting to influence anyone in his religious thinking.

I want mother shielded and protected and not exposed or exhibited.

I think Mother’s home should be maintained solely for her intimate friends and relatives and that no stranger should be permitted to live in the house regardless of who he may be.72

This problem eventually was solved by removing Naomi Engle, the Jehovah’s Witness who was then caring for Ida Eisenhower, from the home. Would Edgar Eisenhower have objected had his mother been allowed to use the Eisenhower name for a cause such as education, health, or even a church such as the Lutheran or Methodist? He likely objected because he felt she was exploited to spread a set of beliefs with which he and his brothers firmly and openly disagreed.

Although Dwight Eisenhower stated that his mother was highly “individualistic” and “not able to accept the dogma of any specific sect or denomination,” Miller noted: “that is what Eisenhower wanted to believe and perhaps at times actually did, but Ida herself contradicted it.” The Witnesses are required to conform rigidly to Watchtower beliefs, and little devianse is allowed even in what most people regard as very minor areas of life. Violation of this requirement results in total disassociation, and not even Witness relatives can normally communicate with those who are disfellowshipped.

Clearly the dominant religious influence in the Eisenhower home from the time the boys were young was Watchtower theology and beliefs. Both parents were deeply involved and highly committed to Watchtower theology. As adults, none of the boys formally followed the Witness teachings and theology although it profoundly influenced their lives and values. The eldest son, Arthur, stated that he could not accept the religious dogmas of his parents but that he had “my mother’s religion in my heart.” One author considered Dwight Eisenhower’s presidency to have been a crusade for “moral and religious” goals.75

Even in later life President Eisenhower preferred “the informal church service” with which he had grown up—one with “vigorous singing and vigorous preaching.” Further, although none of Ida Eisenhower’s boys were what she and other Witnesses called “in the truth,” she was hopeful that again someday they would embrace the religion in which they were raised. They openly rejected much of the Watchtower theology and medical ideas, especially its eschatology and millennial teachings, but nonetheless Ida was relatively supportive of them during most of their careers, often stating that she was proud of them and their accomplishments, even those achievements that violated her Watchtower faith.76

73. Miller, Ike the Soldier, 78.