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Commentary/Eisenhower, the President

Mary S. McAuliffe

For years after Dwight D. Eisenhower left office the American public still enthusiastically "liked Ike," but the historians, political scientists, journalists, and other opinion shapers did not. Eisenhower, they claimed, was the dull leader of a complacent and uninteresting era. He was unintelligent, inarticulate, bland, passive, and captive to the influence of corporate executives, who used him for their own ends.

The American people, said these critics, loved Ike for his war record and his grin. They elected him president as a kind of security blanket, so they could forget the troubles and pressures at home and abroad. The Eisenhower years, one critic devastatingly pointed out, were the years of the "great postponement."¹

As of this writing, a small explosion of articles and books have recently been published—with more still to come—attempting to prove quite the opposite. Eisenhower, the revisionists argue, was intelligent, decisive, and perceptive, a strong leader who guided his administration with a deft hand and a president who led his nation peacefully through eight tortuous years of Cold War.

This revisionism began slowly and on a small scale during the late 1960s, when a handful of popular writers and journalists began to take another look at the published accounts of the 1950s and reached some startlingly new conclusions about the Eisenhower presidency. Eisenhower, they concluded, had been a president with great, although carefully hidden, political as well as leadership abilities.²

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¹ William V. Shannon, "Eisenhower as President: A Critical Appraisal of the Record," *Commentary*, 26 (Nov. 1958), 390. See also Marquis Childs, *Eisenhower: Captive Hero: A Critical Study of the General and the President* (New York, 1958); Richard Rovere, *Affairs of State: The Eisenhower Years* (New York, 1956); Vincent P. DeSantis, "Eisenhower Revisionism," *Review of Politics*, 38 (April 1976), 191-92; and Gary W. Reichard, "Eisenhower as President: The Changing View," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 77 (Summer, 1978), 266-67.

² Murray Kempton, "The Underestimation of Dwight D. Eisenhower," *Esquire*, LXVIII (Sept. 1967), 108-09, 156; Garry Wills, *Nixon Agonistes: The Crisis of the Self-Made Man* (Boston, 1969),

Revulsion against the turmoil of the 1960s and the Vietnam War, reinforced by nostalgia for an apparently simpler and happier era, seems to have prompted this first reassessment of the Eisenhower presidency. In the aftershock of the 1960s, Eisenhower revisionism continued to grow. By the early 1970s, professional historians had begun to incorporate elements of this revisionism into their scholarly writings.³

Herbert S. Parmet was the first historian to write a major work on the Eisenhower presidency based on revisionist perceptions.⁴ Two years later, Peter Lyon published a major biography of Eisenhower which was revisionist in its treatment of Eisenhower personally while still reserving great criticism for his presidency.⁵ Unlike the first revisionists, who had based their reassessments upon close readings of well-known published sources, the new Eisenhower histories of the 1970s were based, at least in part, upon newly available primary sources. Parmet found substantial grounds for his reevaluation of Eisenhower in personal interviews and the Eisenhower Library's White House central files. Lyon was the first to publish a major work based on the library's extensive Ann Whitman file, of which only relatively small portions were then available to scholars.⁶

From the outset, revisionists undertook to debunk the prevailing view of Eisenhower as a weak or passive leader who was content to let others run his presidency for him. Murray Kempton and Garry Wills, Parmet and Lyon—all depicted Eisenhower as an active and politically skillful president, a strong leader and policy maker who ran his own administration—although often circumspectly. Several specialized studies appearing in the mid-1970s and late 1970s served to reinforce this view. Douglas Kinnard, in *President Eisenhower and Strategy Management*, concluded that at least in one area, that of strategic policy making, Eisenhower was “very strong indeed.”⁷ Similarly, James R. Killian, Jr., Eisenhower's first special assistant for science and technology, observed that “in the way he handled advice from his scientific advisers, I found him [Eisenhower] to be an activist.”⁸

118–38; DeSantis, “Eisenhower Revisionism,” 198–99; Reichard, “Eisenhower as President,” 274–75.

³ See, for example, the prologue to William L. O'Neill, *Coming Apart: An Informal History of America in the 1960's* (Chicago, 1971), 3–24.

⁴ Herbert S. Parmet, *Eisenhower and the American Crusades* (New York, 1972).

⁵ Peter Lyon, *Eisenhower: Portrait of the Hero* (Boston, 1974).

⁶ The Ann Whitman file, a remarkable collection maintained by Eisenhower's personal secretary, contains thousands of revealing documents, including Eisenhower's personal diary, transcriptions of his telephone conversations, personal correspondence, records of pre-press conference briefings, and other informal and formal records of the Oval Office.

⁷ Douglas Kinnard, *President Eisenhower and Strategy Management: A Study in Defense Politics* (Lexington, Ky., 1977), x.

⁸ James R. Killian, Jr., *Sputnik, Scientists, and Eisenhower: A Memoir of the First Special Assistant to the President for Science and Technology* (Cambridge, 1977), 221. Killian also points out Eisenhower's “responsiveness to innovation” and “willingness to make bold technological decisions.” *Ibid.*

See also George B. Kistiakowsky, *A Scientist at the White House: The Private Diary of President Eisenhower's Special Assistant for Science and Technology* (Cambridge, 1976). Kistiakowsky reports that he left office “liking and respecting Dwight Eisenhower greatly.” *Ibid.*, ix.

More recently, Fred I. Greenstein has provided substantial evidence, based on the Whitman file, that Eisenhower as president was "politically astute and informed, actively engaged in putting his personal stamp on public policy, and applied a carefully thought-out conception of leadership to the conduct of his presidency." Greenstein finds that the scope of Eisenhower's activity was tremendous and that he in no way abdicated his fundamental policy-making powers through overdelegation. Eisenhower persuaded his subordinates to become "willing lightning rods" for unpopular administration policies and preferred to exercise leadership through covert, or "hidden hand" methods of operation. Greenstein speculates that Eisenhower's tremendous temper, which he struggled to restrain, "probably contributed to his . . . approach to leadership and to his preference for 'hidden hand' over confrontational leadership."⁹ Political realities, including the constraints of the Republican party's right wing, plus Eisenhower's own personal philosophy of leadership, probably reinforced his choice of leadership methods.

Revisionists generally agree on Eisenhower's strength as a presidential leader, but until recently they have taken a dim view of his response to Sen. Joseph R. McCarthy, largely supporting the traditional view that Eisenhower ignored or performed badly on the McCarthy issue as well as the larger one of internal security.¹⁰ Allen Yarnell and Robert Wright, however, use the diary of Eisenhower's press secretary, James Hagerty, to show that Eisenhower played an active, although carefully hidden, role in confronting and sharply constraining the Wisconsin senator. Perhaps most fascinating are those examples where Eisenhower personally took actions that, later in press conferences, he claimed he could not remember or never knew about.¹¹ Still, despite many concrete examples of Eisenhower's attempts to curb McCarthy, the full extent of his "hidden hand" methods in this instance remains difficult to pin down. Yarnell admits "we have a great deal more to learn" about the strategy Eisenhower used in dealing with McCarthy, and Wright states that many of the initiatives taken by the Eisenhower White House against McCarthy were staff initiatives, many of them possibly without Eisenhower's personal knowledge.¹²

One aspect of Eisenhower's presidential leadership that has intrigued revisionists has been the question whether strong administration figures such as Secretary of State John Foster Dulles dominated the president and actually shaped policy. The traditional view held that John Foster Dulles dominated foreign policy just as Eisenhower's assistant, Sherman Adams, controlled the shape of domestic policy. Arthur Larson, a prominent member of Eisenhower's administration, attempted to dispose of the prevailing view on John Foster Dulles in his 1968 book on Eisenhower as president.¹³ Subsequent revisionists

⁹ Fred I. Greenstein, "Eisenhower as an Activist President: A Look at New Evidence," *Political Science Quarterly*, 94 (Winter 1979-80), 577-86, 596-97.

¹⁰ See, for example, Parmet, *Eisenhower and the American Crusades*, 264-67, and Lyon, *Eisenhower*, 491, 500, 521-24.

¹¹ Robert Wright, "Ike and Joe: Eisenhower's White House and the Demise of Joseph McCarthy" (senior thesis, Princeton University, 1979). A version of this thesis is scheduled to be published in *American Heritage*.

¹² Allen Yarnell, "Eisenhower and McCarthy: An Appraisal of Presidential Strategy," *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, X (Winter 1980), 96; Wright, "Ike and Joe."

¹³ Arthur Larson, *Eisenhower: The President Nobody Knew* (New York, 1968), 74.

have made good use of Larson's judgments and recollections. But a recent article by Richard H. Immerman uses the Whitman file as well as other primary sources to go beyond the Larson thesis. Immerman finds the relationship between Eisenhower and John Foster Dulles especially important because, in that relationship, the traditional image of Eisenhower as a "passive/negative president" is so very prevalent. Upon examination, Immerman finds strong evidence that Eisenhower dominated John Foster Dulles—instructing him, shaping foreign policy, and leaving him to execute the decisions and take whatever criticism resulted.¹⁴

While revisionists reject the image of Eisenhower as a passive, inept, and disinterested president, they disagree on other aspects of Eisenhower's presidency. Charles C. Alexander, for example, following the thesis first established by Eric F. Goldman, views Eisenhower as a political centrist who consolidated the gains of the New and Fair Deals during a period of vast flux and change.¹⁵ Others, including Elmo Richardson and Gary W. Reichard, stress Eisenhower's basic conservatism. Reichard, who uses quantitative methods to examine the relationship between Eisenhower and his Republican Eighty-third Congress, concludes that Eisenhower was an orthodox Republican in domestic policy. Only in foreign policy did he break with his party's old guard, and here Reichard concludes that the president used his leadership capabilities skillfully to persuade nationalist Republican congressmen to support policies of internationalism and mutual aid. On a related issue—whether or not Eisenhower successfully acted as party leader in changing the Republicans to a more moderate political stance—Reichard concludes that Eisenhower did indeed lead his party but did not change it, for the simple reason that his views "did not differ much from the views of most Republicans."¹⁶

Taking yet another position, Robert Griffith proposes that Eisenhower rejected both the traditional conservatism of his party and the federal statism of the New and Fair Deals while espousing a middle way—that of a corporate commonwealth. Eisenhower attempted to obtain the benefits of federal intervention without its dangers. Griffith concludes that Eisenhower was not a "captive hero" to the corporate executives who supported him but rather was an active supporter of their full-fledged political philosophy. Eisenhower and these corporate leaders feared the selfishness and shortsightedness of the

¹⁴ Richard H. Immerman, "Eisenhower and Dulles: Who Made the Decisions?" *Political Psychology*, 1 (Autumn 1979), 21–38.

¹⁵ Charles C. Alexander, *Holding the Line: The Eisenhower Era, 1952–1961* (Bloomington, Ind., 1975), xvi, 293. See also Eric Goldman, *The Crucial Decade—and After: America, 1945–1960* (New York, 1960). This essentially expands upon assertions by Robert Donovan, Arthur Larson, and Merlo J. Pusey that Eisenhower established a new, middle-of-the-road Republicanism between New Dealism and traditional conservative Republicanism. Arthur Larson, *A Republican Looks at His Party* (New York, 1956); Robert J. Donovan, *Eisenhower: The Inside Story* (New York, 1956), 142, 153, 401; and Merlo J. Pusey, *Eisenhower the President* (New York, 1956), 216, 218, 235–36.

¹⁶ Elmo Richardson, *The Presidency of Dwight D. Eisenhower* (Lawrence, Kans., 1979); Elmo Richardson, *Dams, Parks and Politics: Resource Development and Preservation in the Truman-Eisenhower Era* (Lexington, Ky., 1973); Gary W. Reichard, *The Reaffirmation of Republicanism: Eisenhower and the Eighty-Third Congress* (Knoxville, 1975), viii, ix, 3, 96, 116–17, 181–82, 217–18, 235. See also Emmet John Hughes, *The Ordeal of Power: A Political Memoir of the Eisenhower Years* (New York, 1963), 332–37.

masses as well as of special interest groups and sought to encourage purposefulness, self-sacrifice, and a long-range view among all sectors of the American people. Eisenhower's concept of leadership, Griffith concludes, was built upon the idea of persuasion and indirection and was the product of his desire to resolve conflict among powerful interests without calling upon coercive government intervention. Eisenhower's vision was of "a good society in which conflict would yield to cooperation, greed to discipline, coercion to self-government." And Eisenhower's vision "was no match for the vast and powerful forces of modern America."¹⁷

Griffith thus proposes that Eisenhower held a complete and all-embracing political philosophy that informed both his domestic as well as his foreign policy. Most revisionists have, instead, agreed with the traditional view that Eisenhower was not especially interested in domestic policy unless it was directly related to national security and defense. His real interest, they conclude, and the area where he showed the most talent as a leader and decision maker, was in foreign policy.

Robert A. Divine, in his recently published survey, *Eisenhower and the Cold War*, stresses this point. Eisenhower, says Divine, accomplished no sweeping domestic reforms or significant domestic legislation. Instead, his major and significant achievement was in keeping the nation out of war for both his terms in office. In so doing, Eisenhower made full use of his considerable leadership abilities, always striving for peace but willing to threaten war where necessary to achieve his ultimately peaceful ends. Eisenhower's achievement in foreign affairs, Divine concludes, was essentially a negative one—keeping the nation out of war rather than committing it to a military adventure. But this "admirable self-restraint" is the basis for any Eisenhower claim to presidential greatness.¹⁸

Other revisionist historians mix their praise for Eisenhower's basic restraint with criticism for continuing the fundamental assumptions of the Cold War. Lyon, for example, labels Eisenhower a "Cold Warrior." Eisenhower, according to Lyon, was "obsessed by the menace of international communism" and the need to preserve the domestic and international status quo. And yet, Lyon concludes, Eisenhower's overall record in conducting foreign affairs was "proud and prudent," especially in comparison with the three presidents who followed him.¹⁹ Alexander also views Eisenhower as a cold warrior—one fully in charge of his own foreign policy—but one who wanted to reduce the arms race and lessen cold war tensions. "Old warrior and cold warrior that he was," Alexander comments, Eisenhower "nonetheless managed to gain . . . and . . . sometimes precariously . . . keep the peace."²⁰

As historians have given Eisenhower more and more credit for directing his own foreign policy, it has become difficult to absolve Eisenhower from the

¹⁷ Robert Griffith, "Dwight D. Eisenhower and the Corporate Commonwealth," *American Historical Review*, 87 (Feb. 1982).

¹⁸ Robert A. Divine, *Eisenhower and the Cold War* (New York, 1981), viii, 154.

¹⁹ Lyon, *Eisenhower*, 510, 536–37, 646–47, 652, 851, 854–55.

²⁰ Alexander, *Holding the Line*, 8, 65, 202, 210, 292. For an early revisionist assessment of Eisenhower and his foreign policy, see Barton J. Bernstein, "Foreign Policy in the Eisenhower Administration," *Foreign Service Journal*, 50 (May 1973), 17–20, 29–30, 38.

hard lines of this foreign policy. As Immerman points out in his study of Eisenhower and John Foster Dulles, a reassessment of Eisenhower's role totally undercuts the assumption that the administration's hard-line anticommunism resulted from the secretary of state's dominating influence. There are, Immerman notes, many examples of Eisenhower's "personal hard-line thinking."²¹

Historians such as Divine praise Eisenhower for his particular combination of restraint with firmness, his willingness to use the threat of American nuclear power but his ultimate caution and control. The nation did not, after all, go to war throughout Eisenhower's presidency.²² Scholars and popular writers, especially in the wake of Vietnam, have praised Eisenhower for reducing the military budget and for warning the nation against the growing influence of what he called the military and industrial complex.²³ And yet, new information coming to light indicates that Eisenhower played an active role in shaping and approving covert Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) operations in other nations such as Iran and Guatemala, where covert American force toppled unfriendly governments. It is becoming clearer that Eisenhower sought to use such covert methods as an alternative to direct force and the threat of nuclear war.

Blanche Wiesen Cook, in *The Declassified Eisenhower*, has revised her earlier portrayal of Eisenhower as a presidential pacifist and concludes that, although Eisenhower's commitment to peace was real, it was limited to the prevention of large-scale nuclear warfare. His alternatives to war consisted of a broad range of activities, including counterinsurgency and political warfare. His goal, based on a hatred of both fascism and communism, was to extend the American way of life—the American Century—throughout the world. But "the need to protect the United States' worldwide interests from both war and social upheaval resulted in new kinds of intelligence operations, new kinds of political activities, and a massive program of psychological warfare unprecedented in scope and intensity."²⁴

Stephen E. Ambrose, in *Ike's Spies*, also concludes that Eisenhower actively encouraged the growth of covert CIA activities during his administration until, "under his direction and orders," it became "one of America's chief weapons in the Cold War"—or, "the State Department for unfriendly countries," as CIA director Allen Dulles once described it. Eisenhower, says Ambrose, naturally turned to espionage and counterespionage activities during his presidency because of his success with these methods during World War II. He

²¹ Immerman, "Eisenhower and Dulles," 26.

²² Divine, *Eisenhower and the Cold War*, 100, 122, 153.

²³ The phrase, as Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., and others have noted, was speechwriter Malcolm Moos's, not Eisenhower's own. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., "The Eisenhower Presidency: A Reassessment," *Look*, May 14, 1979, p. 44. Robert Griffith points out that the concept was one that had guided Eisenhower for many years. Eisenhower, says Griffith, believed that the nation's interests were best served by peace, not war, and his warning of the dangers of a "military-industrial complex" were "rooted in attitudes and opinions expressed more than a decade earlier." Robert Griffith, "Why They Liked Ike," *Reviews in American History*, 7 (Dec. 1979), 580.

²⁴ Blanche Wiesen Cook, *The Declassified Eisenhower: A Divided Legacy* (Garden City, N.Y., 1981), v-ix, xv-xxi, 291. For an earlier portrayal by the same author, see Blanche Wiesen Cook, *Dwight David Eisenhower: Antimilitarist in the White House* (St. Charles, Mo., 1974).

intended to fight the communists just as he had fought the Nazis, "on every battlefield, and with every available weapon." His critics pointed out that large corporate conglomerates frequently were the primary beneficiaries. And the CIA itself, living off its easy successes in Iran and Guatemala, burgeoned out of control. It focused increasingly on covert rather than intelligence-gathering activities and failed to provide the president with all the information he needed when he needed it. Eisenhower, says Ambrose, recognized the CIA's—and Allen Dulles's—weaknesses, but he was never able to find a satisfactory alternative or bring either fully into line.²⁵

All of the evidence on Eisenhower and the CIA is not yet in, and much of it may never be available to the general public. As Ambrose acknowledges, for example, there is no evidence that Eisenhower personally authorized or knew about the CIA assassination attempts on Patrice Lumumba or Fidel Castro. One of the major functions of the 5412 Committee—the "Special Group" created by the National Security Council to scrutinize all covert activities—was to "protect the President." It carefully examined policies and programs to make sure they did not get Eisenhower into trouble. But, as Ambrose points out, it also "provided a perfect device for obscuring the record, making it impossible for the historian to say that this man ordered that action, or otherwise fix responsibility."²⁶

Historians in the future have the challenging task of determining the exact degree of Eisenhower's direction and control over still-murky areas of covert activity during his presidency. They will also have to weigh the impact of this direction and control in their total evaluation of his presidency. Such information can cut either way. Cook has concluded that the Eisenhower presidency was the worse for Eisenhower's covert activities. Ambrose draws a more positive conclusion. Directly contradicting previous critics, for example, who scoffed at Eisenhower's Open Skies proposal to the Russians, Ambrose points out that it was based on Eisenhower's foreknowledge of the U-2 reconnaissance flights and concludes that Eisenhower's offer of a reciprocal agreement was "quite remarkable"—the "clearest proof of what chances and risks he was willing to take for peace." Had the Russians been "equally farsighted," he adds, Open Skies "might well have put a lid on the arms race."²⁷

Scholars during the past decade have thus broken with the old view of Eisenhower as a weak, bumbling, and disinterested president and have begun to establish his reputation for intelligence, decisiveness, and strength, both as a presidential and a military leader. But now they must decide what sort of presidency Eisenhower gave the United States and whether the effectiveness they claim he demonstrated made for true presidential greatness.

They will have to determine whether Eisenhower had a clear and comprehensive vision of where he wanted to lead the nation or whether his talents were exercised merely in a holding action, with little regard to the future.

²⁵ Stephen E. Ambrose, *Ike's Spies: Eisenhower and the Espionage Establishment* (Garden City, N.Y., 1981), xix, xi, 178, 181, 188, 217, 241–43.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 296, 306.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 270–71.

They will have to determine as well whether he should be remembered primarily as a president who sought peace or a president who led the United States more firmly than ever before into the covert manipulation of other nations' internal affairs.

Above all, they will have to continue to add complexity and irony to the portrait of Eisenhower as president, especially as the story of his manipulations for both peace and national security become more fully documented and evaluated. The well-appreciated irony of the soldier-president who sought peace and warned Americans of the military-industrial complex represents only an introduction to Eisenhower's complexity both as an individual and as a president. Those who praise Eisenhower too quickly may find themselves in the same trap of oversimplification as those who criticized him too quickly.

Eisenhower was once ridiculed and ignored; now he is widely praised and admired by the scholars and journalists who once condemned him. There is a good possibility that in the future praise for Eisenhower as president will be considerably tempered by criticism for some of his presidential choices and decisions as well as for some of his goals. Yet, however one considers him—and there will be increasing opportunities to do so as the historical literature on him continues to grow—Eisenhower clearly is emerging as one of the most important presidents of this century.