

A President for Certain Seasons

Few U.S. presidents have been more universally liked than Dwight D. Eisenhower (1890–1969). Yet even before Ike was out of the White House, political scientists and historians began to quarrel about his presidency. A generation of harsh critics was succeeded by a far more admiring group of scholars, and the revisionism and counter-revisionism continues. The business of judging the 34th president will no doubt pick up during this centenary year, but as Alan Brinkley shows, it usually has less to do with the man himself than with other considerations.

by Alan Brinkley

Americans remember the 1950s for many things, but high among them is the image of Dwight D. Eisenhower, the genial, smiling national hero whose reassuring presence seemed to symbolize the halcyon days of the “American Century.” With the possible exception of Ronald Reagan, to whom Eisenhower has at times been compared, no postwar president has enjoyed such broad and continuing popularity; none has so clearly stamped his personality upon his time. It should come as little surprise, then, that the debate over Eisenhower’s reputation has served as a metaphor for a larger contest over America’s retrospective image of the 1950s.

To those who remember the fifties as an era of abundance, confidence, and tranquility, Eisenhower was indeed, as his biographer Stephen Ambrose has described him, “a great and good man” who successfully avoided the disastrous activism that so disrupted American life in the 1960s. To

those who recall the 1950s as a time of social stagnation, Cold War belligerence, and hidden turbulence, Eisenhower has seemed (like the decade itself) bland, ineffectual, mediocre—a man, Arthur Schlesinger has written, “who did not always understand and control what was going on, who was buffeted by events and was capable of misjudgment and error.”

The man whose presidency would inspire such strongly clashing interpretations was born on October 14, 1890, into a strict, puritanical family, which named him for the evangelist Dwight L. Moody but always called him “Ike.” He spent his unremarkable youth in Abilene, Kansas, where his father, having failed at more ambitious ventures, earned a modest living in a dairy run by a stern religious sect, the River Brethren, to which the entire Eisenhower family belonged.

Despite the general severity of his home, Ike was an outgoing, self-confident, popular boy; a good but not extraordinary athlete; a capable but not exceptional stu-

dent. He seemed to have no clear ambitions except an undefined desire to rise in the world. When he entered the United States Military Academy at the age of 20, it was only after an earlier plan to attend the University of Michigan had fallen through and after he had been denied an appointment to his first choice, Annapolis.

Eisenhower served most of his four years at West Point as a competent but undistinguished cadet, finishing 61st out of 164 in the class of 1915. Despite persistent efforts to secure an overseas assignment, he spent his first years after graduation as a training officer at army posts in Texas (where he met and married

Mamie Doud), Georgia, Kansas, Maryland, and Pennsylvania, molding new recruits for the combat duty in World War I that Eisenhower himself never saw. He was promoted to major in 1920, somewhat earlier than many of his contemporaries, but he remained at that rank for 16 years.

The great break in Eisenhower's career came almost by chance in 1924, when he barely won appointment to the Command and General Staff School at Fort Leavenworth—where he worked hard, took up golf, and ultimately graduated first in his class. His rise after that was steady, although not meteoric: aide to General Pershing, student at the Army War College, assistant to Douglas MacArthur (who was so impressed with the young major that he once called him "the best officer in the Army"), service in Europe and the Philippines. In 1939, after having broken painfully (but prudently) with the increasingly egomaniacal MacArthur, Eisenhower returned to the United States warning of Japanese ambitions and German militarism. He was much in demand as a staff officer now and rose into increasingly important administrative jobs as well as to the rank of brigadier general in the fall of 1941. Five days after Pearl Harbor, he was sum-



President Dwight D. Eisenhower and his wife Mamie depart from the Capitol after swearing-in ceremonies on January 20, 1953. Ike took 442 electoral votes in the fall election; Adlai Stevenson, 89.

moned to Washington by Army Chief of Staff George C. Marshall to serve in the War Plans Division.

In the War Department, as throughout his military career, Eisenhower won attention and respect not because he was particularly brilliant or charismatic but because he had great political gifts. He was adept at flattering without fawning, skilled at persuading without antagonizing. He was unfailingly discreet. He got along with everyone. Virtually no one disliked him.

In June 1942, Eisenhower was named commander of the European Theater of Operations and moved to London to command the growing American military presence that, two years later, would participate in the great Allied invasion at Normandy. There have been many critics of Eisenhower's talents as a military tactician and strategist in these years, but no one has questioned his success in handling the delicate problem of conciliating the fractious allies. Eisenhower had to handle personalities as difficult as Churchill, de Gaulle, Montgomery, Mountbatten, and Patton. He had to smooth over the national sensitivities and inevitable frictions among three distinct military cultures. He

had to handle the inevitable resentment of British officers, whose own troops formed the bulk of the Allied forces on D-Day, when Eisenhower was named supreme commander of the invasion. Even Field Marshal Montgomery, whose towering ego was legendary and who frequently clashed with Eisenhower during the war, said of him when it was over, "No one else could have done it."

The success of the invasion and the defeat of Germany made Eisenhower a major world figure and one of the most popular living Americans. There were immediate calls for him to run for the presidency—calls he consistently resisted for seven years. After the war, he served for a time as Army Chief of Staff, as president of Columbia University, and as commander of NATO, although not long enough in any of them to achieve great distinction.

Nothing, however, diminished his political star, not even his own continued denials of interest in it. In 1948, he rebuffed overtures from both major parties. But he did, it seems clear, have great political ambitions and was waiting for a way to seize the spotlight without appearing to want it. Finally, in the spring of 1952, he agreed to run, explaining his decision by charging that the leading Republican candidates (chief among them Senator Robert Taft of Ohio) were dangerously isolationist and that he was entering the race to protect America's global commitments, including NATO and the Marshall Plan. Six months later, he roundly defeated Adlai Stevenson in a contest that drew more voters—63.3



General Eisenhower, Supreme Allied Commander, talks with U.S. paratroopers before they board planes for the D-Day invasion.

percent—than any presidential election since 1908.

The era we know as the "fifties" really began in 1953, the first year of the Eisenhower presidency. That year saw the end of the Korean War, the death of Joseph Stalin, and the beginning of the decline of Joseph McCarthy. To many Americans, particularly those who were white, male, and securely middle-class, it was the beginning of an era that seemed then (and remains

now) bathed in a warm glow of triumph and contentment. It was a time of remarkable growth and abundance, when the American gross national product nearly doubled, when poverty declined by almost half, and when public schools seemed not only adequate but (despite the Sputnik scare in 1957) good. It was a period of relative peace, when few challenged the basic premises of the Cold War and American troops engaged in no significant combat. It was a time of nearly unprecedented national self-satisfaction. Relatively few middle-class Americans would likely have disputed the 1960 report by the Commission on National Goals, created by the Eisenhower administration, which proclaimed the nation's most important mission to be persuading the rest of the world of its own political and economic superiority. "The United States," it recommended, "should, at all times, exert its influence and power on behalf of a world order congenial to American ideals, interests and security. It can do this without egotism because of its deep conviction that such a world will best fulfill the hope of mankind."

But if the Eisenhower presidency mir-

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rored the success and complacency that characterized much of American life during the 1950s, it also obscured problems that were mounting behind the decade's placid façade. The administration seemed oblivious to the growing impatience of American blacks, frustrated by their own exclusion from most of the abundance they saw around them, angry at the slow response to the 1954 Supreme Court decision requiring school desegregation, mobilizing in Montgomery (and elsewhere) for an assault on racial injustice that would soon convulse the nation. It took little notice of the frustrations of American women, moving into the workplace in unprecedented numbers, encountering obstacles to advancement, and accumulating grievances and demands that would shortly revolutionize gender relations.

Eisenhower's America was epitomized by the music of Guy Lombardo (a frequent performer at the White House), by the heroic films of John Ford, by the upbeat television fare of "Ozzie and Harriet" and "I Love Lucy," and by the president's own love of golf and bridge. But from other corners of American culture came suggestions of troubles to come. Social scientists issued warnings about the stifling effects of modern bureaucracies, while novelists and playwrights lamented the suffocating conformity of suburban and corporate life. There was the jarring new music of Elvis Presley and Buddy Holly. And there was the rasping voice of disillusionment from small but growing communities of dissenters, among them the Beats, whose outrageous attacks on the nation's most cherished values—progress, order, even rationality itself—augured the far more widespread cultural revolt of the 1960s.

Even though Eisenhower left the White House in 1961 at least as popular among the general electorate as he had been when he entered it, his reputation among historians and other students of the presidency had already begun to sink. Throughout the 1960s and much of the 1970s, scholars dismissed Eisenhower as a bland mediocrity, a model of what a 20th-century president should not be. A 1962 poll of historians asking them to rank American presidents placed Eisenhower

22nd out of 33, between Andrew Johnson and Chester A. Arthur. The criticisms tended to fall into three general categories.

First, scholars pointed to what they considered Eisenhower's inadequate leadership. He was, they claimed, a passive, ineffectual, even vaguely stupid leader, an image perfectly captured by Herblock cartoons showing a perpetually dazed Ike with a dumb, distracted smile. Critics also charged that a few powerful advisers dominated the administration: Sherman Adams, his chief of staff until a 1958 scandal drove him from office; John Foster Dulles, the moralistic secretary of state who would sit next to the president at summit meetings and hand him notes telling him what to say. Eisenhower himself was out of touch, a man who would rather play golf than work, indeed a man who seemed always to be on the golf course. (Eisenhower's golfing was such a national joke, such a symbol of the president's supposed laziness and uninvolvedness with government, that when John Kennedy became president, he refused to play it—even though he liked golf and was reportedly better at it than Eisenhower.)

If Eisenhower failed to govern, he also failed to inspire. His critics complained about the president's ineffective public speaking style, his muddled, even incomprehensible syntax. Dwight Macdonald once presented a version of the Gettysburg Address in what he called "Eisenhowerese": "I haven't checked these figures, but 87 years ago, I think it was, a number of individuals organized a governmental set-up here in this country, I believe it covered certain Eastern areas, with the idea they were following up based on a sort of national independence arrangement." He seemed incapable of arousing public enthusiasm about anything, uninterested even in trying.

A second criticism involved Eisenhower's social and economic programs, or lack of them. He was, his critics charged, responsible for virtually no important initiatives in domestic affairs. He seldom displayed political courage, and he took stands on controversial issues—McCarthyism, civil rights—only when events forced him to do so, and then halfheartedly. One political reporter wrote toward the end of

Eisenhower's presidency that he would leave office with the country's domestic policies "about where he found them in 1953." The Eisenhower years, he predicted, would be seen as the time of the "great postponement."

A third complaint concerned Eisenhower's foreign policy, which his critics attacked as inflexible, ineffective, and unimaginative. Eisenhower's inability to produce a more dynamic approach to foreign policy, the critics insisted, resulted in consistent American failure to make any progress toward accommodation with the Soviet Union or any significant gains in international influence. He offered no real leadership in world affairs; he intervened in small matters (usually clumsily) and allowed big ones to fester.

The general verdict on the Eisenhower presidency was that it stopped short of being disastrous but that it lacked anything approaching greatness. It was characterized above all by what was widely described as "drift," aimlessness. As the columnist Walter Lippmann put it, Eisenhower had never been willing "to break the eggs that are needed for the omelette." All this was, of course, in implicit contrast to the great presidential hero of the 1960s, John F. Kennedy.

By the late 1970s, this initial, dismissive evaluation began to face challenges from scholars who have become known as Eisenhower revisionists. (Many of them were among the first to do serious research in the Eisenhower papers.) According to them, Eisenhower was not an aimless, ineffective stumblebum. He was, rather, a wise and prudent statesman whose quiet leadership and restrained policies were more worthy of emulation than those of the more active (and reckless) presidents who followed him. By the early 1980s, the revisionist interpretation had become something close to a new orthodoxy. A poll of historians conducted in 1982 ranked Eisenhower ninth; another, a year later, placed him eleventh, two notches above John Kennedy.

The revisionists responded to each of the major critical indictments. First, they claim, Eisenhower was not the detached, uninformed leader that scholars once be-

lieved him to be. He was, instead, an intelligent, decisive, and exceptionally skillful politician. He permitted the public, and even much of his own government, to believe that he was a passive president, above the fray; but in private he was articulate, informed, and commanding. He ran the government quietly, but firmly and effectively. Even Eisenhower's bumbling rhetoric, some scholars insist, was all part of a carefully orchestrated political strategy. Almost every revisionist cites the president's reply to a warning from his press secretary, James Hagerty, about an anticipated question on a difficult matter: "Don't worry Jim," Eisenhower replied as he prepared to walk into a press conference, "I'll just confuse them."

Stephen Ambrose, author of the first major Eisenhower biography based on extensive work in presidential documents, summarized the new view:

What the documents show, in my opinion, is how completely Eisenhower dominated events. Eisenhower, not Charlie Wilson, made defense policy; Eisenhower, not Foster Dulles, made foreign policy; Eisenhower, not Ezra Benson, made farm policy. Whether the policies were right or wrong . . . they were Eisenhower's policies. He ran the show.

The political scientist Fred Greenstein, who developed a similar argument, made his evaluation of Eisenhower's leadership the title of his influential book: *The Hidden-Hand Presidency* (1982).

The revisionists have also defended Eisenhower's domestic policies, which they insist marked not an abdication of social responsibilities but a restrained and prudent effort to consolidate and refine the social commitments the nation had made under the New Deal. During the 1950s, they argue, there was neither sufficient popular support nor adequate financial resources for a major new domestic agenda; instead, Eisenhower ensured that there would be no retreat from earlier gains. By promoting stable economic growth, he laid the groundwork for the ambitious social efforts of the 1960s. And while he may not have moved boldly to fight McCarthyism or to support civil rights, he worked behind the scenes to undermine McCarthy

and to moderate racial conflicts, probably doing more than any other likely Republican president would have done during the 1950s.

The most dramatic reversal came in the assessment of Eisenhower's international leadership. Scholars began to argue that his foreign policy, unlike the policies of presidents who came before and after him, maintained the peace, avoided excessive and disastrous foreign commitments, and displayed a shrewd awareness of the limits of American power. He ended one war, declined to begin another, and placed wise restraints on the growth of the American military. At the same time, he maintained and strengthened the nation's commitments to its international goals, ensuring the survival of a stable, bipartisan foreign policy.

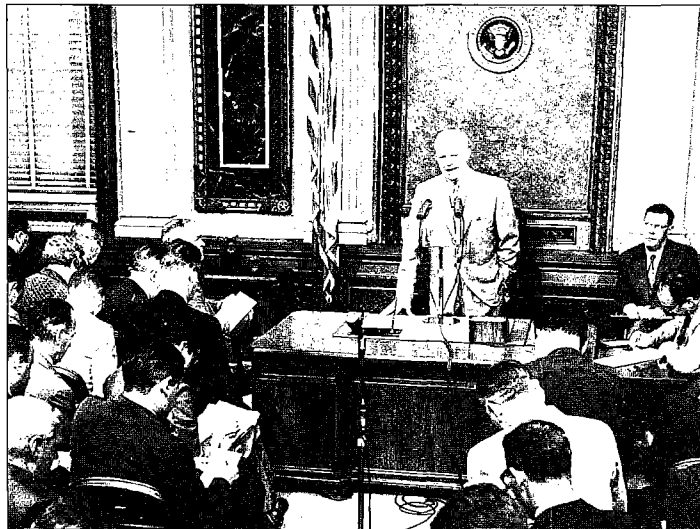
It takes little imagination to recognize the origins of this new view of Eisenhower. It has emerged not only from new archival revelations but also from a new sense of what government in general (and presidents in particular) can and should do. Its sources are the profound disillusionment with social activism that began during the late 1960s; the association of liberalism with Vietnam, with economic instability, with racial conflict, and with the disappointing results of social-policy initiatives. When liberals tried to do the things they criticized Eisenhower for not doing, they often did them badly, even disastrously. Eisenhower's caution has come to seem admirable by contrast.

Yet a careful look at these contrasting interpretations reveals that they may not be as incompatible as they at first appear. Both are pictures of a cautious leader who preferred restraint to bold action. What is different is not the account of what Eisenhower did (with the exception of the now widely accepted picture of his greater involvement in the affairs of his administration). What is

different is how we have come to judge what he did, how we view the philosophy of leadership and government that lay at the heart of the Eisenhower presidency.

Eisenhower's approach to the presidency rested on two fairly simple assumptions. First, he leaned instinctively toward consensus and conciliation and tried to avoid doing anything that might disrupt the basic harmony that he liked to believe prevailed in American society. He was, in that respect at least, the very opposite of his vice president, who thrived on conflict and later wrote that he "believed in the battle." Eisenhower, unlike Nixon, had a real aversion to conflict and confrontation. Second, Eisenhower had an equally deep aversion to the expansion of the state. His mission, he believed, was to restrain and limit the government, not force it to fulfill any great missions or obligations.

These two impulses complemented and reinforced one another. Consider Eisenhower's approach to one of the principal responsibilities of the postwar presidency: managing the economy. He claimed to accept the idea that government had a responsibility to promote economic stability and prosperity. But it should do so, he believed, by persuasion



Press conferences brought out the worst in Eisenhower's syntax. But what his critics pointed to as proof of cloudy thinking may in fact have been, as his defenders claimed, artful obfuscation.

and example: by encouraging business, labor, agriculture, and others to cooperate with one another. In practice, the administration paid lip service to the needs of labor and farmers and consumers, and remained primarily concerned with its most powerful constituency: business. Above all, Eisenhower rejected anything that might smack of coercion. He was not a "tool of the business community," as some critics have argued, despite the predominance of wealthy businessmen in his cabinet (once described as "six millionaires and a plumber") and his own social circle. He tried to persuade businessmen to weigh their self-interest against the national interest; he occasionally grew angry with them when he felt they had failed to do so. But he rejected any active, forceful role in pressuring or compelling the business community to act.

If Eisenhower was unwilling to commit the government to a direct role in managing or regulating the institutions of the economy, he also declined to commit it to the more indirect techniques of managing the economy through Keynesian tools. An example of that reluctance was the administration's approach to the biggest domestic program of the 1950s: the Interstate Highway Program. When it was launched in 1956, it received the largest appropriation of any domestic program in American history to that point, \$25 billion—a figure more than twice as large as the entire federal budget for any peacetime year before World War II. Keynesian economists and other policymakers argued that if the administration retained control of this enormous public-works spending program, it could raise and lower public expenditures in response to the condition of the economy: increase highway spending when a recession loomed, decrease it when inflation threatened. But the Keynesians lost the battle, and the highway funds were consigned to an inviolable trust fund, un-touchable by federal economic managers, controlled largely by state governments. Any impact the highway program had on the performance of the economy was largely inadvertent.

A similar pattern is visible in Eisenhower's approach to federal social programs. The challenge facing the government, he

believed, was not one of finding new methods and resources for dealing with domestic social problems (as Truman had believed before him and as Kennedy and Johnson would believe after him); it was the challenge of halting what he called the "dangerous drift toward statism," which must "be stopped in its tracks." He once explained his decision to run for president by saying that "the country is going socialistic so rapidly that, unless Republicans can get in immediately and defeat this trend, our country is gone. Four more years of New Dealism and there will be no turning back." Once in office, Eisenhower proposed virtually no new social programs. At times, he worked actively to reverse the "drift toward statism" that earlier programs had begun. He pulled the government largely out of public power development, resisting efforts to expand the Tennessee Valley Authority and once even proposing to sell it. He surrendered the government's monopoly over atomic energy, allowing private companies to build nuclear power plants. He turned control of offshore oil leases over to the states. He resisted a forceful federal commitment to civil rights. Despite the 1954 Supreme Court ruling on school desegregation, Eisenhower never openly endorsed the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision and at times privately decried it. He enforced it (as in Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1957) only when events compelled him to do so, and even then belatedly and grudgingly.

Eisenhower was not an ideologue, and he made no effort to dismantle the core of the social programs that already existed. "Should any political party attempt to abolish Social Security, unemployment insurance, and eliminate labor laws and farm programs," he once said, "you would not hear of that party again in our political history." In fact, he supported several measures to expand the coverage offered by existing programs, including one that brought seven million new people under Social Security. But these were concessions to political reality. At the core of his domestic policies lay a clear and unwavering commitment to avoiding social conflict and limiting the growth of the

state, even if that meant allowing social problems to remain unattended.

In many respects, the foreign policy of the Eisenhower administration was much like that of other postwar presidents. Eisenhower was no less anti-communist than other chief executives; his definition of America's global interests was no less expansive. Like Harry Truman, like the architects of the containment policy in its most expansive form, he insisted that the United States should be unwilling to concede any additional territory to communism anywhere in the world. In his inaugural address, for example, he said:

Conceiving the defense of freedom, like freedom itself, to be one and indivisible, we hold all continents and peoples in equal regard and honor. We reject any insinuation that one race or another, one people or another, is in any sense inferior or expendable.

Like his predecessor and like his successors, Eisenhower believed firmly in the importance of American "credibility." He wrote Winston Churchill in 1955, "Every . . . retreat creates in the minds of neutrals the fear that we do not mean what we say when we pledge our support to people who want to remain free."

But despite the orthodox Cold War rhetoric, the Eisenhower administration departed in practice from both earlier and later approaches to foreign policy in important ways. And in that departure is visible another example of Eisenhower's consensual, anti-statist vision of statecraft. To him, the great challenge of the postwar era was to find a way for America to play its appointed role in the world without engaging in open confrontations and without a drastic and (he believed) dangerous expansion of the state.

Eisenhower's solution to this dilemma was a strategy of foreign policy that has become known as the "New Look." He had inherited a foreign-policy strategy that, in effect, committed the United States to fighting anywhere, and at any time, whenever free peoples faced a communist threat. Among other things, this strategy required the nation to maintain a large, permanent defense establishment, an

establishment Eisenhower believed would be just as threatening, just as "statist," as the construction of an excessively large welfare establishment. That was what he meant in his celebrated Farewell Address when he warned of the:

conjunction of an immense military establishment and a large arms industry The total influence—economic, political, even spiritual—is felt in every city, every State house, every office of the Federal government [W]e must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex. The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist.

These are not the words of someone concerned about an excessive use of American power in the world; they are the words of someone concerned about the possibility of an excessive concentration of power (and an excessive commitment of resources) at home.

The "New Look," then, was a strategy not for reducing America's definition of its interests in the world but for cutting the costs and decreasing the risks of that involvement. The United States would oppose communism whenever it attempted to expand, but not necessarily *wherever* it attempted to expand. As Secretary of State John Foster Dulles put it, "The way to deter aggression is for the free community to be willing and able to respond vigorously at *places and with means of its own choosing*." Specifically, that meant making greater use of the threat of "massive retaliatory power"—nuclear weapons—as a deterrent to aggression. It was under Eisenhower that the United States established as the cornerstone of NATO's defense strategy the idea that any Soviet attack on Western Europe would be met with a nuclear, not a conventional, counter-attack. The principal reason: It was too expensive to keep up an adequate conventional force in Western Europe.

Many people have linked this idea of "massive retaliation" with what Dulles liked to call "brinkmanship"—the willingness to go to the verge of war, to the "brink," in order to force an opponent to do what America wanted. The United

States would not get bogged down in slowly escalating conventional confrontations, as in Korea; it would set up a stark nuclear confrontation to intimidate its adversaries at the start. But "brinkmanship" was Dulles's idea; it was never much a part of Eisenhower's own thinking. Eisenhower was, in fact, generally averse to taking risks and provoking confrontations; he never did truly go "to the brink." In 1953, he helped settle the Korean War by threatening China and Korea with a nuclear attack; but he never made similar threats against the Soviet Union, which was capable of retaliating. Instead, he preferred to take action to foil what he believed to be communist expansion when the risks and the costs were low, and to avoid action when they were not.

On the one hand, Eisenhower was quite willing to support a series of covert operations organized and financed by the Central Intelligence Agency: the 1953 coup in Iran, which drove the popularly elected leader (a nationalist who was trying to expropriate some American property and was thus assumed to be a communist) from office and installed the young Shah (previously a figurehead) as absolute ruler; the 1954 CIA-engineered coup in Guatemala, which toppled a leftist regime that the administration suspected of communist leanings. And Eisenhower on occasion used American troops overtly to prevent the possibility of communist gains, as, for example, when he ordered marines to land in Lebanon to quell a leftist revolution (a revolution that was quelled without U.S. assistance or casualties).

There was, in short, a pattern of interventionism in Eisenhower's foreign policy that reflected his belief that communism was indivisible, that a gain for the left anywhere was a loss for the United States. But it was also a pattern that reflected Eisenhower's cautious approach to conflict and power. He sanctioned intervention when it seemed safe and cheap, and he avoided or terminated it when it was not. In Korea, for example, Eisenhower agreed to a settlement that won nothing for the United States beyond a restoration of the status quo ante-bellum, a settlement that many critics denounced as tantamount to surrender but that extricated America from a

costly, stalemated war. In 1954, when the French appealed for American intervention in Vietnam to help save them from defeat at the hands of Ho Chi Minh's communist forces, Eisenhower refused to commit American troops (or, as some in his administration urged, use nuclear weapons) and opted instead for a negotiated settlement that in effect conceded half of Vietnam to the communists. Many liberals in the 1950s derided the Eisenhower foreign policy as weak, inflexible, and unimaginative. But those who experienced the consequences of the more expansive and aggressive foreign policy strategies of the 1960s tend now to find virtue in Eisenhower's relative restraint.

Eisenhower's approach to power rested on a cautious view of the state and of presidential power, and the modesty of his goals does much to explain the hostile, dismissive evaluations of his presidency that prevailed among scholars and others 20 years ago. Eisenhower's was so widely condemned for permitting the nation to "drift," for establishing no "national purpose," because his years in office (particularly his last ones) coincided with rising expectations of the state in general and the presidency in particular. The very successes that ensured Eisenhower's popularity in the 1950s—the remarkable abundance, the growing national confidence, the moderating of Cold War tensions—set in motion forces that would discredit him in the 1960s: a quest for great missions at home and in the world, an impatient yearning for greatness that the cautious Republicanism of the Eisenhower years did nothing to satisfy.

It was the presidency, moreover, that now stood at the center of hopes for a bolder and more dynamic American future. The presidency, Eisenhower's detractors believed, was the one institution capable of defining a coherent "purpose" for the nation, the one element of government that could marshal the country's resources and lead a forceful assault on its domestic and international problems. Evidence of this new view was visible in, among other places, the studies of presidential power that began to appear in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Almost all of them empha-

sized the need for presidential activism. Almost all of them portrayed Eisenhower as an example of what a president should not be like.

In 1956, Clinton Rossiter argued in *The American Presidency* that the president's powers were nearly unlimited, curbed only by his ultimate accountability to the people. "The President is not a Gulliver," he wrote,

immobilized by ten thousand tiny cords He is, rather, a kind of magnificent lion, who can roam freely and do great deeds so long as he does not try to break loose from his broad reservation There is virtually no limit to what the president can do if he does it for democratic ends and through democratic means.

Four years later, Richard Neustadt published *Presidential Power*. It was a less rapturous book than Rossiter's, more aware of the many limits on a president's ability to act. Neustadt cited Harry Truman's 1952 prediction of what Eisenhower would encounter once in office: "He'll sit here and he'll say: 'Do this, Do that!' And nothing will happen. Poor Ike." But to Neustadt, as to Rossiter, the difficulties were not an excuse for inaction, but a reason for the president to seek ways to exert power that *would* work. The president must act, Neustadt and others believed; if there were obstacles to action, he must find ways to circumvent them.

That is the crucial point at which prevailing liberal opinion in the early 1960s diverged from Eisenhower's view. If American government was going to *perform*, if it was go-

ing to accomplish great things, it would have to rely on leadership from the one area of government that could provide it: the efficient, modern, effective element of government. Not the clumsy and inefficient Congress; not conservative and corrupt state and local governments; but the presidency—the seat of action.

What doomed Eisenhower to dismissal and condescension from historians and others for more than a decade after he left office was his refusal to accept the idea that government had a great and compelling mission, his belief that the ambitions of the state should remain modest and limited. But those same inclinations explain the resurgence of Eisenhower's popularity during the 1980s, a time when many Americans came to question the desirability of a powerful president and the feasibility of a large and active government. Tired of conflict, disillusioned with the state, Americans have discovered a new appreciation for Eisenhower, whose genial decency and modest ambitions were such a comforting contrast to the superheated public atmosphere of the years after 1960.

But what of the future? Nothing in Dwight D. Eisenhower's uneventful presidency ensures him an important place in political history. He was not a Lincoln or Wilson or Roosevelt, who led the nation through great crises. He was not a Kennedy or Johnson or Nixon, who, for better

or worse, charted new paths and left the nation's public life forever altered. His reputation, it seems safe to predict, will remain what it has been now for 30 years: a hostage to Americans' fluctuating expectations of their leaders and their state.

