

A Tale of Two Presidents

At particular moments in history, the presidency has required different talents and ambitions of those who held the office, from managing a crisis to maneuvering Congress to moving the nation. No two figures better illustrate the variety of qualities the office demands than Dwight D. Eisenhower and John F. Kennedy.

by Michael R. Beschloss

For most of American history, the presidency has been a weak office, and that was very much in keeping with what the Framers intended. They did not want another king of England; they did not want a dictator. They made sure that there were checks against presidential power, one of them being impeachment, and they were very worried about the idea of a president who would do too much. Much of the power of the presidency comes not from what is in the Constitution but from two other sources.

The first is the president's ability to go to the American people and ask them for something, especially sacrifice. One very good example would be Franklin Roosevelt saying, in effect, in 1940: "You may not want to get prepared for a possible war in Europe and Asia, but this is something I've thought a lot about, and this is a sacrifice that we may have to make." Another example would be a president's appeal for a painful tax increase to achieve a balanced budget.

The second source of presidential power is a president's ability to get things out of Congress. The Founders hoped that presidents would have such moral authority, and people would think they were so wise, that members of Congress would be intimidated. If a president went to Congress and asked for something like civil rights, members would take heed. That's one reason why Lyndon Johnson was a much more powerful president in 1964, 1965, and 1966 than others might have been: because of his experience as one of the most canny and powerful leaders in the history of Congress, he was extraordinarily effective at getting what he wanted.



Dwight D. Eisenhower met at the White House on January 19, 1961 with his successor, John F. Kennedy. Ike called the 1960 election “a repudiation of everything I’ve stood for.”

For most of our lifetimes, we have been in a situation that is something of an aberration. When I was 10 years old, hoping to be able to write history about presidents when I grew up, it seemed very glamorous. I thought these people were, to crib a phrase from Leonardo DiCaprio, “kings of the world.” The president was the centerpiece of the American political solar system, the center of our foreign and domestic policy, the most powerful person in the American government, and America was astride the world. That was the case from Franklin Roosevelt until the last year of George Bush’s presidency.

In the 1930s, Congress and the American people granted Roosevelt extraordinary influence over domestic affairs. In the wake of Pearl Harbor, they extended that power into foreign affairs. After 1945, Americans thought it was a good idea for power to flow to Washington. That enhanced the power of presidents. People liked federal action and federal programs. Congress was

inclined to defer to the chief executive in foreign policy because we had to win the Cold War. Then, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Americans grew more skeptical about Big Government. Power began to flow away from Washington. When the Cold War ended, foreign policy seemed less urgent. The result is that now we are returning to a time in which presidents don't have the kind of power that they had between the 1930s and the 1980s.

Dwight Eisenhower became president of the United States in 1953, at the apex of presidential power. But that power was enhanced by the man himself and the situation in which he found himself. It is hard to imagine a leader in a more commanding position. As the hero of World War II in Europe, Eisenhower enjoyed as august a national and world reputation as anyone who has ever entered the White House. With his impeccable reputation for character and integrity, he was as much a national father figure as George Washington.

Eisenhower had been elected by a landslide, and in that election he took both houses of Congress back from the Democrats. He could fairly argue that his ample coattails had made the difference. This was a new president with enormous reservoirs of political strength, but also limited ambitions, much more limited than those of Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt, or Lyndon Johnson.

Although he would never have alienated conservatives in his party by saying so in public, Eisenhower had no desire to turn back the clock on the New Deal. Instead, he wanted to consolidate those reforms and do what Republicans do: administer the programs more efficiently and economically. Beyond that, he saw himself among the conflicting demands of labor, business, finance, and other engines of the American economy as a balance wheel poised to let postwar prosperity roar ahead under a balanced budget.

He wanted to eliminate isolationism from the Republican Party and postwar America. We sometimes forget how close Republicans came to nominating the isolationist senator Robert Taft of Ohio in 1952. Ike had such deep convictions about this issue that in the winter of 1952 he went to Taft and said, "I feel so strongly about defending the Free World against the Soviets that I will make you a deal. If you renounce isolationism, I won't run against you for president."

Taft easily could have accepted, and Eisenhower never would have been president. It shows you how deeply he felt about this. He wanted to use his office to make sure that no postwar national leader could come to power without vowing to ensure that the United States would remain permanently engaged in the world. That comes about as close as anything Eisenhower had to a deep political conviction.

He hoped that by the end of his eight years in office he would be able somehow to reduce the harshness of the Cold War. As a military man, he was

> MICHAEL R. BESCHLOSS is the author of a number of books on American history, including *The Crisis Years: Kennedy and Khrushchev, 1960–1963* (1991) and *Taking Charge: The Johnson White House Tapes, 1963–1964* (1997). This essay is adapted from *Power and the Presidency*, edited by Robert A. Wilson and published in January by PublicAffairs. Copyright © 2000 by Robert A. Wilson.

very conscious of the danger of nuclear war. Once, sitting through a briefing by a civil defense official who was blithely describing how the federal government could survive underground after a Soviet nuclear attack, Ike told him to stop. “We won’t be carrying on with government,” he barked. “We’ll be grubbing for worms!” He was disgusted that the United States had to spend billions of dollars on what he called “sterile” military programs, when it could have invested in schools and hospitals and roads.

To hold down the arms race as much as possible, he worked out a tacit agreement with Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev. Khrushchev wanted to build up his economy. He didn’t want to spend a lot of money on the Soviet military because he wanted to start feeding people and recover from the devastation of World War II. But he knew that to cover this he would have to give speeches in public that said quite the opposite. So Khrushchev would deliver himself of such memorable lines as, “We Soviets are cranking out missiles like sausages, and we will bury you because our defense structure is pulling ahead of the United States.” Eisenhower dealt with this much as an adult deals with a small boy who is lightly punching him in the stomach. He figured that leaving Khrushchev’s boasts unanswered was a pretty small price to pay if it meant that Khrushchev would not spend much money building up his military.

As a result the arms race was about as slow during the 1950s as it could have been, and Eisenhower was well on the way to creating an atmosphere of communication. Had the U-2 spy plane not been shot down over the Soviet Union in 1960 and had the presidential campaign taken place in a more peaceful atmosphere, John Kennedy and Richard Nixon would have competed on the basis of who could increase the opening to the Soviets that Eisenhower had created. Whether or not that would have sped the end of the Cold War is open to argument.

When he took office in 1953, Eisenhower was disheartened by the bitterness and exhaustion in the American political climate. We had been through a stock market crash, a great depression, five years of global war, a growing Soviet threat, full-fledged Cold War, the Korean War, McCarthyism, and the backlash against it—all in the space of less than a generation. Our nerves were frayed. Ike wanted to be the calming, unifying national symbol who could give us a bit of breathing space.

What personal qualities did Eisenhower bring to the Oval Office? The most obvious: He was the most popular human being in America, and probably the most popular human being in the world. But he was also a much more intelligent man than people understood at the time. People who watched his press conferences—filled with those sentences that lacked verbs and never seemed to end—thought Ike was a wonderful guy but not too bright. Now, almost a half-century later, we have access to his letters and diaries, and records of his private meetings. When you take Ike off the public platform and put him in a small room where he’s talking candidly to his aides and friends, you find a leader much in command of complex issues—very different from the caricature of the time.

Harry Truman once predicted that when Ike became president he would be frustrated. Truman said that as a general, Eisenhower would shout, “Do this!” and “Do that!” but that in the White House, when he did that, nothing would happen. Indeed, Ike had never taken part before in domestic politics. But what people overlooked was that in the army for almost 40 years he had been operating in large, bureaucratic organizations, not least the Allied Expeditionary Force in Europe. This was good experience for a president who had to deal with a rapidly growing Central Intelligence Agency and Pentagon and with ballooning domestic bureaucracies like the new Department of Health, Education, and Welfare.

What qualities did Eisenhower lack? As an orator, he was no Franklin Roosevelt. He seemed to design his language to make sure that no one would remember or, in some cases, even understand what he said. Some scholars, such as political scientist Fred Greenstein of Princeton, think that Eisenhower was often deliberately boring or opaque as a ploy, to keep from polarizing people. Maybe so, but the inability to use what Theodore Roosevelt called the “bully pulpit” is a big problem for a president. It robbed Eisenhower of considerable power that, used in the right way, could have been very important for this country.

Imagine if Eisenhower had been president in 1939. That was when FDR was making the case to the American people that we had to build our own defense forces because we might have to fight a war. His oratorical skills helped to move opinion in Congress and among the American people enough so that when war came, we were prepared. Had Roosevelt been mute, we would have lost World War II.

The ability to move a nation is essential if a president wants to ask Congress and the American people for something. It is just as essential if things are going badly. That’s when a president needs to reassure the public. In 1958, America was plunging into recession. Eisenhower refused to improve things by unbalancing the budget. The Republicans lost badly in the 1958 midterm elections, largely because Ike could not or would not explain to Americans why it was necessary to stay the economic course. He allowed his critics to take the initiative, saying, “Eisenhower is tired and washed up and so obsessed with a balanced budget that he doesn’t care about people who are suffering.”

Another example came the previous year, with the Soviet launching of *Sputnik*, the first earth satellite. Eisenhower’s foes said, “Ike is so lazy and asleep at the switch that he has allowed the Russians to be first to launch a satellite. Now the Russians can drop nuclear weapons on Chicago or Detroit.” In fact, sending up *Sputnik* was not the same thing as being able to drop a bomb precisely on a target by missile. The Soviets were still years away from being able to do that. But Eisenhower was unable to make that case to the American people. The result was near national hysteria.

Another of Ike’s shortcomings was as a horse trader. He once said, “I don’t know how to do what you have to do to get something out of a congressman.” You wouldn’t have heard Lyndon Johnson saying such a thing. Getting

members of Congress to do things they don't want to do is a crucial part of being president.

One of the tapes LBJ made of his private conversations as president captures a revealing conversation he had in 1964. He knows that the key to getting his civil rights bill passed will be Everett Dirksen of Illinois, Republican leader of the Senate. He calls Dirksen, whom he has known for 20 years, and essentially says, "Ev, I know you have some doubts about this bill, but if you decide to support it, a hundred years from now every American schoolchild will know two names: Abraham Lincoln and Everett Dirksen." Dirksen liked the sound of that. He supported the bill, and the rest was history. You will never find an example of a conversation like that in the annals of Dwight Eisenhower. His diffidence about Congress limited his ability to get things done.

If Eisenhower were president in a time requiring a leader standing in the epicenter of heroic change, like Roosevelt in the 1930s and 1940s, for example, he probably would have been a disaster, because he lacked the ambitions and the skills that kind of presidential leadership requires. Yet Eisenhower was magnificently suited to the 1950s. He got people to accept Social Security and other controversial reforms as a permanent way of American life. For much of the decade, he balanced the budget, kept inflation low, and presided over a postwar boom. He fathered the interstate highway system. He was the very image of a chief of state. He made Americans feel good about themselves and their country. He killed isolationism. He muted the U.S.-Soviet arms race as much as any president could have.

To use the parlance of West Point, I would suggest three demerits in Ike's record as president. The first: Joseph McCarthy. Eisenhower was a civil libertarian. He knew what Senator McCarthy's reckless charges about internal communism were doing to this country. Imagine if Eisenhower had stood up in 1953 and said, "McCarthyism is a poison in this society. Believe me, of all people I will be the last to let this country be injured by communists within, but we can't tear this nation apart." That could have changed history. Instead, Ike was stunningly



Ike hovers above the fray of national concerns in 1957. Despite limited ambitions, he mastered the complex issues.

"The Helicopter Era," from Herblock: A Cartoonist's Life (Times Book, 1998)

quiet, although some recent revisionists argue that he tried to tunnel against McCarthy behind the scenes.

The most coherent statement Ike made against McCarthy was at Dartmouth in June 1953. He had been chatting about the virtues of playing golf. He urged Dartmouth men to have fun in their lives. They didn't seem to need the advice. But toward the end of that speech, he got serious. He had been told how McCarthy's agents had tried to have certain "subversive" books removed from U.S. embassy libraries abroad. He told the Dartmouth graduates, "Don't join the book burners. Instead, go to the library and read books on communism so you will know what you are fighting against." Nicely said, but these two sentences got little attention. They leave you feeling that Eisenhower could and should have said so much more.

Demerit two: civil rights. Ike never understood how vital it was to integrate American society after World War II. Imagine how he could have used his great moral authority and world reputation. He could have said in 1953, "I went to Europe and helped win the Second World War, but that was just part of the job. Now we have to finish what we fought for by bringing equal rights to all Americans." No other political figure would have carried so much weight.

But Ike had something of a blind spot on civil rights. He had spent a lot of his life in the South and overestimated the degree of resistance to a civil rights bill. We now know that in 1954, when the Supreme Court in *Brown v. Board of Education* ordered the desegregation of public schools, Eisenhower privately thought it a bad idea.

Ike had an aide named Frederic Morrow who was the first African American to serve on a president's staff. Morrow would talk to the president about civil rights on occasion and would come away feeling that he had made some headway. Then Ike would fly to Georgia for a hunting weekend with some southern friends. When he came back, it was almost as if his conversation with Morrow had never occurred.

Civil rights was a case where Eisenhower's instincts of compromise and moderation served him badly. Segregation was a moral issue. Because of the president's foot-dragging, the civil rights revolution, when it reached full force in the 1960s, was more bitter and violent.

The final demerit: One test of leaders is how they make sure that their ideas and programs will live on after they're gone. One way they do that is by building a political movement like a political party. Eisenhower tried to recreate his party in the image of what he called "modern Republicanism." But he failed. Four years after he left office, Republicans scorned his moderation as a "dime-store New Deal" and nominated Barry Goldwater. The Republican Party we see today is far more the party of Goldwater than of Eisenhower.

Another way you make sure your policies survive is with your words. But so unable or unwilling was Eisenhower to use his powers of persuasion that some of the basic tenets of his political credo vanished almost as soon as he left the White House. Because Ike failed to make the case for a balanced

budget, his Democratic successors were able to start the great inflation of the 1960s. Because Ike failed to make the case for a moderate arms race, John Kennedy started what was at that time the largest arms buildup in human history.

Another way to forge a legacy is to make sure you are followed by leaders who will carry on your purposes. Here Eisenhower failed. He once said that one of the biggest disappointments of his life was that in the race to succeed him, John Kennedy defeated his vice president, Richard Nixon. He called that “a repudiation of everything I’ve stood for for eight years.”



It is hard to imagine two more different men than Dwight Eisenhower and John F. Kennedy and perhaps in no way more so than this: Eisenhower in 1953 had access to vast amounts of power; Kennedy in 1961 had access to little.

Kennedy had been elected president by a margin of only 100,000 votes. Congress remained Democratic, but since most members had run well ahead of the new president, they felt they owed him little. As Kennedy saw it, he was faced by a House and Senate dominated by hostile coalitions of conservative Republicans and southern Democrats. Many of those who had known him as a fellow congressman or senator found it hard to get out of the habit of thinking of him as a distracted, absentee backbencher.

The American people had voted for Kennedy narrowly but they didn’t really know him. Unlike Eisenhower, from the moment he was elected, Kennedy had to work hard to make an impression. He was always worried that he looked too young for people to think of him as a president. When you look at videotape and newsreels of the period, you notice how stiff and formal Kennedy is on the platform.

JFK came to the presidency devoid of executive experience. The biggest organizations he had ever run were his Senate office and the PT boat he commanded during World War II. What’s more, he had been seeking the presidency for so long that he had only vague instincts about where he wanted to take the country. He did want to do something in civil rights. In the 1960 campaign, he promised to end discrimination in housing “with the stroke of a pen.” On health care, education, the minimum wage, and other social issues, he was a mainstream Democrat. He hoped to get the country through eight years without a nuclear holocaust and to improve things with the Soviets, if possible. He wanted a nuclear test ban treaty.

But as he was riding to the inaugural ceremonies with Kennedy in 1961, James Reston, the great *New York Times* columnist, asked what kind of country Kennedy wanted to leave his successor. Kennedy looked at him quizzically, as if he were looking at the man in the moon. Kennedy’s method was never the grand vision of a Wilson or Reagan. It was crisis management, hour to hour to hour.

Kennedy's vow to land a man on the moon before 1970 is a perfect example. When he became president, he had no intention of launching a crash moon program. Advisers told him it would be too expensive and would unbalance a space program that was divided among communications, military, weather, exploration, and other projects.

But in the spring of 1961, the Russians injured American pride by launching the first man, Yuri Gagarin, into space. Then Kennedy suffered an embarrassing defeat when he and the CIA tried to use Cuban exiles to invade Cuba at the Bay of Pigs and seize the country from Fidel Castro. In the wake of that botched invasion, he badgered his aides for some quick fix that would help to restore American prestige. The moon-landing program was rolled out of mothballs.

People at the time often said Eisenhower was responsible for the Bay of Pigs, since it was Eisenhower's plan to take Cuba back from Castro. That does not stand up well under scrutiny. Eisenhower would not necessarily have approved the invasion's going forward, and he would not necessarily have run it the same way. His son once asked him, "Is there a possibility that if you had been president, the Bay of Pigs would have happened?" Ike reminded him of Normandy and said, "I don't run no bad invasions."

Unlike Eisenhower, who almost flaunted his affinity for paperback westerns, Kennedy was a voracious reader of serious books. We also remember JFK as one of the great orators of American history, which is only half right. Extemporaneously, he tended to speak too fast and with language that did not last for long. The great utterances we think of as coming from Kennedy—"Ask not what your country can do for you"; "We choose to go to the moon"; "*Ich bin ein Berliner*"—were almost all in prepared speeches, usually written by his gifted speechwriter Theodore Sorensen. If you read Kennedy's speeches from his earliest days as a congressman in 1947, you can see the difference at the instant Sorensen signs on in 1953. It's almost like the moment in *The Wizard of Oz* when the film goes from black and white to color. Suddenly, Kennedy had found his voice.

When he used that voice, he was amazingly successful in moving public opinion. Think of the impact of Kennedy's inaugural, or his Oval Office speech in October 1962 announcing the discovery of Soviet missiles in Cuba and what he planned to do about them, or his civil rights address in June 1963, when he finally declared, as no president had ever said before, that civil rights was a "moral issue" that was "as old as the Scriptures and as clear as the Constitution."

JFK may never have run a large bureaucratic organization, but he was terrific at managing small groups. Look at the paramount moment of the Kennedy presidency, the Cuban Missile Crisis. How did he deal with the problem? He formed a small group of trusted officials, the Ex Comm (Executive Committee), which met in the Cabinet Room under the close supervision of the president and his brother Robert. Robert Kennedy was probably the most powerful member of a presidential entourage that we've

seen in this century. That cut both ways. On the one hand, John Kennedy had someone he could rely upon as absolutely loyal, someone who totally shared his purposes. But on the other hand, it was virtually impossible for the president to distance himself from anything his attorney general did, since people assumed that when Robert Kennedy spoke, the message came from his brother.



A 1961 lampoon of JFK after the Bay of Pigs. When asked about the fiasco, Ike said, "I don't run no bad invasions."

The tape recordings of the Ex Comm meetings over 13 days make it clear how enormously important it was to have Kennedy and his brother massaging the discussion. During the first week, the group moved from an almost certain intention to bomb the missile sites and invade Cuba to what JFK finally did: throw a quarantine around the island and demand that Nikita Khrushchev haul the missiles out. We now know that had Kennedy bombed, it might have easily escalated into a third world war. If Eisenhower had been running those meetings, with his Olympian approach, they might not have been nearly so effective. Here, Kennedy's talent for crisis management may have saved the world.

He had less success in his day-to-day dealings with Congress. One senator observed that the president would call him and say, "I sure hope I can count on your help on this bill." And he would reply, "Mr. President, I'd love to help you, but it would cause me big problems in my state." If Lyndon Johnson had been president, he would have said, "Tough luck!" and pulled every lever he could to get his bill, even if it meant phoning the senator's bank and having his mortgage called. But Kennedy would say, "I understand. Perhaps you'll be with me the next time."

A good example is civil rights. Whatever he had pledged in the 1960 campaign, he was too overwhelmed by the opposition on Capitol Hill to do much to integrate American society. Voters who remembered his promise to end racial discrimination in housing with a stroke of his pen angrily sent bottles of ink to the White House. Privately, he kept saying, "Wait until 1965. I've got to get reelected in a big way. If I'm lucky enough to run against Barry Goldwater, I'll win in a landslide with a big margin in Congress. Then on all the legislation I want, I can let 'er rip."

But the "Negro revolution," as people called it then, would not wait. In June 1963, with the South erupting in flames, Kennedy sent Congress a civil rights bill that was radical for its time. It was late, and he was pushed into it by

events, but this was genuinely a profile in courage. JFK's public approval ratings dropped about 20 points. Southern states that had helped him win the presidency in 1960 turned against him. When Kennedy went to Texas in November 1963, he was by no means a shoo-in for reelection, and the reason was civil rights.

Unlike Eisenhower, Kennedy never had the eight years he had hoped for. Only two years, 10 months, two days. And he never got that landslide in 1964. That went to Lyndon Johnson, who did have the good luck to run against Barry Goldwater. Thus, to understand JFK's use of power, we have to ask two final questions about what might have happened had he lived.

First, what would have happened to his civil rights bill? There is a good chance the Senate would have defeated it. In the aftermath of Kennedy's murder, Johnson was able to say, "Pass this bill as the memorial to our beloved late president." The Johnson tapes show that he used his monumental abilities to squeeze members of Congress to get the bill passed. Had Kennedy lived, neither of those things would have been possible. If you have to pull something redeeming out of the tragedy of Dallas, then it is fair to say that because JFK gave his life, 20 million African Americans gained their rights sooner than they might have.

The other question is what Kennedy would have done in Vietnam. Some of Kennedy's champions, such as Senate majority leader Mike Mansfield and Kennedy aide Kenneth O'Donnell, quote him as having said privately that he couldn't pull out before the 1964 election because he would be vilified as soft on communism. According to them, he planned to keep the troops in until after he was safely reelected, get the Saigon government to ask us to leave, and then withdraw.

I tend to be skeptical of this. If true, it means that Kennedy cynically would have kept young Americans in harm's way for 14 months or more merely to help himself through the next election, then surrendered the commitment for which they had been fighting.

Nor am I convinced by the notion that a reelected Kennedy in 1965 suddenly would have thrown caution to the winds. He still would have had to serve as president for four years, and if he seemed to cave in on Vietnam, at a time when most Americans believed in the domino theory, there would have been a national backlash that would have undercut his ability to get anything he wanted from Congress, foreign or domestic.

And there was always in his mind the possibility that Robert Kennedy, or other Kennedys, might run for president. I doubt that he would have done something that might have so injured his family's durability in American politics.

A more likely possibility is that if Kennedy had escalated the war for two years and found himself as frustrated as Lyndon Johnson was, he might have been more willing than LBJ to pull out. Throughout his political career, Kennedy was adept at cutting losses. The fact is we will never know. □