
Book Review

The Eisenhower presidency and the seeds of America's postwar decline

by Carol White

Eisenhower The President

by Stephen E. Ambrose

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It is strange today to remember the old jokes targeting President Eisenhower for being well-meaning but bumbling. For many, now, the 1950s are seen through a hazy glow of sentimentality. Of course, Dwight D. Eisenhower was not measured against such national disasters as the Vietnam war or Watergate or the Carter presidency. The Eisenhower presidency, when the nation was an unchallenged superpower, was surely a better period than now. But the seeds of the present potentially disastrous decline of American power and will, were sown then.

When Eisenhower took office in 1952, the nation had just suffered the diminishment of the Truman presidency, but Eisenhower was measured against the reality of the Roosevelt presidency, and the aborted potentiality of having a Douglas MacArthur in the White House. From that vantage point, at the time, the American people were greatly disappointed by Eisenhower's eight-year period in office.

It was a time when the nation, at best, just held its own, beginning during the Korean war—which Eisenhower brought to a truce, rather than victory—and concluded by Sputnik, and the Soviet lead in missile development. Yet it is only a superficial irony that it was Kennedy and the Democrats who campaigned against the missile gap, and the military man Eisenhower who cautioned against increasing defense spending—and, incidentally, who refused to approve the Apollo program as too costly.

In fact, McGeorge Bundy, Kennedy's top adviser, was orchestrating rising national hysteria, not because he wanted a serious upgrading of our defenses, but as part of a program to turn the U.S. population from a nation of cultural optimists into defeatists. As early as 1957, Bundy's protégé Henry Kissinger had summarized a series of Council on Foreign Relations meetings, sponsored by Bundy and Averell Harriman, whose purpose was to hammer out the policies of the next administration.

In his book, *Nuclear War and Foreign Policy*, Kissinger wrote: "For the first time in our history, we are vulnerable to a direct, hostile attack. No remaining margin of industrial and technological superiority can remove the consciousness of our increasing vulnerability." This, of course, was a lie. Despite Soviet development of missiles, the United States had a comfortable lead over the Soviets in strategic weapons and delivery systems.

Eisenhower as President

As Ambrose is at pains to point out, Eisenhower was not an affable golf player who accidentally became President. He had been Supreme Commander of the European theater during the Second World War and of NATO forces thereafter, and he was accustomed to assuming executive responsibility under pressure. Before taking office, he already had long-standing working relationships with the world leaders of that day, Churchill, Adenauer, and de Gaulle. He was accustomed to facing broad questions of foreign policy, just as he was at home with the problems of military command. His liabilities were of another sort.

This is the second book of Ambrose's biography. The first traces Eisenhower from his boyhood in Abilene, Kansas, through his rise to the position of Supreme Commander, to the point where he has defeated Adlai Stevenson in the 1952 presidential campaign—from a small-town boy, son of a typical middle-class American family, Eisenhower had become the man Americans trusted most.

This book opens with a portrait of Eisenhower about to take office. According to Ambrose, Eisenhower has been adopted by a small coterie of Eastern liberals who have been assigned to control him. These men, known as "the gang," were Eisenhower's closest pals, his golf-playing, bridge-playing buddies, who had organized his presidential campaign, and continued to function as his kitchen cabinet. Ambrose goes to great lengths to document that Eisenhower ran his own government, rather than being its figurehead. But he does not draw out the obvious conclusion from his repeated references to the role of the gang as a kitchen-cabinet. To a very great extent Eisenhower was run by the liberal Eastern Establishment.

His over-riding obsession was to establish a fiscal policy

that would eliminate the federal budget deficit. It was his opposition to economic *dirigism* which had set him into such violent opposition even to the Roosevelt Democratic Party, that he once said that the only time he would have voted for Roosevelt, had he cast his vote, was when he ran for office the fourth time.

This was played upon to induce Eisenhower to accept defense and foreign-policy postures which weakened the Western Alliance. It was under the Eisenhower administration that the ground was laid for the doctrine of Mutually Assured Destruction—in the precursor form, Dulles's doctrine of massive retaliation. As Ambrose tells it, while Eisenhower rejected the idea of appeasement toward the Soviets, he more and more came to accept the “unthinkability” of nuclear war. At the same time, he was responsible for the shift into stockpiling nuclear weapons, under the rubric of “more bang for the buck.”

Eisenhower answered those who wanted to push through to victory in Korea with the necessity of balancing the budget as a reason to accept a no-win peace; and he worried about the cost of stationing U.S. troops in Europe.

Of course, Eisenhower had such military prestige that he needed no recourse to sabre rattling; nor would the Soviets have been likely to misjudge him by assuming that he would give ground to any aggression on their part. Nonetheless, the elements of Kissinger's justification for his disastrous SALT I giveaway to the Soviets are to be found in this period of Richard Nixon's vice presidency.

Throughout the period, Eisenhower and the Soviets used disarmament as a political football: Each, for example, would propose a cessation of bomb testing just after its own series of tests had been successfully completed. Yet it was at the end of Eisenhower's second term that both sides “unilaterally” ceased testing. Just as with the later Kennedy test-ban treaty, the question of anti-ballistic missile defense was raised as a reason not to cease testing. According to Ambrose, Eisenhower did not push for development but accepted the gloomy prognostications of his science advisers that ABM systems would not work.

On the more positive side, there is the decision which Henry Kissinger still curses at, to prevent the British, French and Israelis from concluding their military adventure by taking over the Suez Canal. In fact, it was in his frequently expressed dislike of colonialism that Eisenhower most resembled Franklin Roosevelt. Yet even here, like Roosevelt, he ends up in a muddle. Thus he urged the French to voluntarily end their hopeless attempt to enforce colonial status on the Vietnamese, and refused to bring the whole weight of the United States into a new Korea; yet it was he who engineered the U.S.-policed division of South and North Vietnam which laid the ground for the war to follow.

Also like Roosevelt, he had a vision of using American know-how to build great projects which could transform deserts and devastated areas alike. Thus after the Korean war, he directed that aid be given to the South Koreans to develop

their country. Unfortunately, this, like his Atoms for Peace proposal, was deliberately sabotaged and allowed to die by default.

This is a sad book to read, because it is essentially the documentation of the American postwar failure to realize the great hopes which people throughout the world had, that victory would mean an American Century in the republican traditions of the American Revolution. The roots of the failure lie not in the Eisenhower presidency but in the way the Second World War was fought—the material covered in Ambrose's first book.

In 1942, according to the diary of Eisenhower's aide Butcher, Eisenhower said that Wednesday, July 22, 1942 could well go down as the “blackest day in history.” This was the day that he learned that Roosevelt had caved in to Winston Churchill's pressure, and postponed an invasion of continental France. Only two years later, after a militarily useless invasion of Africa and Italy, was the Second Front launched. Britain's purpose in prolonging the war was on the one hand to try to guarantee its colonial position in the Mideast and Africa and India, and on the other to prolong the war between the Soviets and the Germans.

The war was extended by at least one and probably two years, unnecessarily. An earlier conclusion to the war would still have left the United States hegemonic. The way it was fought laid the ground for the tragic failure of policy which followed. The postponement of the Second Front was just the first of many capitulations by the Americans to the British.

Directing the Allies to attack North Africa before landing in France, Winston Churchill tricked General Eisenhower into continuing the Vichyite fascist, General Darlan in political power. The United States opposed British strategic bombing policy, which from the first days of the war targeted German civilian populations. Yet the United States did not prevent their British allies from continuing these raids even to the deliberate fire-bombing of Dresden, a non-military target, just 12 weeks before the end of the war. Just four days before, on Feb. 9, 1945 the United States firebombed Tokyo, with results which were as devastating as the atomic attacks which followed in Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

With the death of President Roosevelt, the United States shrank into the role of dumb giant. Had Roosevelt lived, perhaps he would have succeeded in his plan to control both the British and the Soviets. Certainly Eisenhower did not succeed, despite his admittedly good impulses. The game was played way over his head.

About the book itself, it should be noted that its author, Stephen Ambrose, is both prejudiced and inaccurate on questions related to disarmament. While he is not explicit in his own liberal biases, they abound in the book, and suggest that some of his so-called documented evidence may be equally suspect. While the first book in the series was quite gripping, this second volume seems overlong for the taste of the average reader.