

Eisenhower and the Birth of the Modern White House

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Abstract

Over the last several decades, presidency scholars' attitudes have change significantly on two interrelated subjects: the evaluations of Eisenhower's presidency and the impact of presidential persuasion. While Eisenhower's reputation has gone up, faith in presidential persuasion has gone down.

This paper argues that Eisenhower's most enduring impact on the modern presidency is the effective organization that allowed him to bring a broad range of leadership tools to bear on the challenges he faced and the system of delegation he used to balance the conflicting demands of the presidency. Eisenhower's delegation and "hidden-hand" leadership coupled with the lack of evidence of presidential persuasion suggests that presidency scholars need to focus more broadly in search of the presidency's impact.

While his speeches may not have always been dramatic or his legislative victories as epic, Eisenhower organized his presidency around the principles of delegation that allowed him to maximize the full range of tools modern presidents need while maximizing time for thinking strategically. This paper argues that Eisenhower may be the first and best exemplar of the modern presidency because he was the first president to fully embrace the institutionalized nature of the modern White House

Eisenhower and the Birth of the Modern White House*

“Leadership is the ability to decide what is to be done, and then to get others to want to do it.”

Dwight Eisenhower¹

“...we need to think more about how presidents actually marshal resources to bring about change.”

George Edwards²

The half-century since Dwight Eisenhower left the White House has seen a dramatic reevaluation of his presidency. Portrayed as a lightweight by many contemporary critics, Eisenhower now finds himself ranked as one of the nation’s most respected former presidents. Most recently, the 2009 C-SPAN poll of historians found Eisenhower ranked as the eighth best president, just behind Thomas Jefferson and ahead of both Woodrow Wilson and Ronald Reagan.³ While his rise in the standing of history may be dramatic, the case for Eisenhower’s greatness is more nuanced as our understanding of his leadership evolved along with his ranking. The meaning of Eisenhower’s legacy reaches beyond academic debates and historical rankings because his style of governing remains central to the White House today and the lessons learned from Eisenhower’s presidency could be important to presidents today.

The last decade has seen a significant change in the way political scientists view the powers of the presidency. Support for Richard Neustadt’s assertion that presidential power is the “power to persuade” has faded in the face of evidence of a limited impact of president on the public and Congress. “Going public” seems to have a limited impact and Congress seems uninterested in presidential leadership on most issues. The rising polarization of the public and the political system will only make presidential persuasion much harder.

In this light we need to reexamine the role of the president as manager of resources and acknowledging that studying presidential power goes beyond what the president does. Dwight Eisenhower’s presidency is an excellent starting point. This paper focuses on the Eisenhower’s speechwriting and relations with Congress to bring focus to some of the characteristics of Eisenhower’s presidency that demonstrate how resources are best managed to best marshal them and to allow the president the most time to think strategically. As we look at how Eisenhower worked to write speeches and pass laws we see a president selectively engaged in the process, neither detached from its direction nor bogged down in its details. This

approach, labeled the “autopilot presidency,” reflects how Eisenhower made effective use of his personal skills and the abilities of his White House staff and has proven to be an enduring model for effective governance.

Delegation and the Autopilot Presidency

The “autopilot presidency” label was originally chosen to reflect Eisenhower’s ability to create an effective White House organization, staff it with trusted advisors who understood his goals, point it in the right direction and then let it run, taking personal control only during critical moments.⁴ Pilots use an autopilot system to keep the plane on course during routine portions of a flight so they can tend to other functions. They must check the functioning of the plane, ensure that they have charted the correct course, and monitor passenger safety. Pilots are in command of the plane while it is on autopilot because they control the settings on the autopilot mechanism and can retake the controls of the plane at any moment if it strays off course. Applying the autopilot label to the Eisenhower administration is not intended to imply that the president did not utilize hidden-hand leadership or bring other techniques into the White House, only that the general administrative philosophy of delegation explains more of what he did during his presidency. The label is designed to bring focus to the organizational principles that enabled Eisenhower to focus his personal efforts on critical issues and strategic thinking. Exploring the role of delegation is central to understanding Eisenhower’s skills because it draws attention to the way in which he chose to lead. As Eisenhower prepared to enter the presidency he was shocked to find so little organization in the White House efforts. Looking ahead to the legislative proposals and strategies in the fall of 1953, the President defined a “need for effective decentralization within each department.” Eisenhower’s went on to outline his rationale for decentralization.

My own interest in this matter arises not merely from the hope of saving wear and tear on principal assistants--it is essential to me that the group, both individually and collectively, preserves to itself the maximize time for thinking and for study. This can be done only only through skillful delegation of authority and responsibility to subordinates. ... I am sure we all understand that the marks of a good executive are courage in delegating work to subordinates, and his own skill in coordinating and directing their efforts (emphasis in original)⁵

Eisenhower understood that both the complexity and number of issues coming into the White House called for a systematic approach to governing. Eisenhower saw the need to reserve to himself the decisions he

was best equipped to make and to allow him to give those decisions the careful consideration they merited. As he told one member of his staff, "After you spend a certain number of hours at work, you pass your peak of efficiency. I function best in my office when I can relax in the evenings."⁶ The advantages the autopilot approach goes beyond basic efficiency because delegation allowed the president to disengage from the process so he could more thoroughly engage the principle. The wisdom that many ascribe to Eisenhower did not spring spontaneously or quickly and was built on careful reflection. In this regard, the autopilot presidency was not about delegating work to lighten the President's work, it was to intended to shift his efforts deeper thought and strategic thinking.

At the same time, passing many of the routine tasks of political maneuvering to staffers allowed Eisenhower to preserve some of his personal bipartisanship by avoiding minor political battles that could draw the presidency in every power struggle. In this regard, the autopilot mechanism of staffing allowed Eisenhower to avoid the overt displays of presidential power he saw as counterproductive and focus his efforts on more subtle uses of power. The plaque on this desk declared "Suaviter in modo, fortiter in re" translating into gentle in manner, strong in deed.⁷ Fred Greenstein has described Eisenhower's "hidden hand" leadership with the President as an activist who avoided the appearance of involvement in day-to-day politics.⁸ Greenstein dispelled the idea that Eisenhower was an inactive president by revealing a brand of leadership that brought much needed attention to a frequently overlooked component of Eisenhower's style. Eisenhower's approach to presidential power might be called modest and the perfect cure for a nation looking to rest after the turbulent 1930s and 1940s. Understated leadership also naturally suited Eisenhower's respect for the separation of powers. As one veteran of the Eisenhower presidency described it, "He had a great respect for the role of Congress-it was almost a reverence for the notion of separation of powers."⁹

Eisenhower asserted the need to delegate tasks as soon as he arrived at the White House after the inaugural parade. When the White House Chief Usher Howell Crim handed him a sealed envelope marked "Confidential and Secret," Eisenhower replied, "Never bring me a sealed envelope; that's what I've got aides for."¹⁰ The creation of the role of chief of staff was the heart of this system of delegation and Jim Newton has argued the position redefined the modern presidency.¹¹ While Eisenhower left some staffing and

organizational decisions to Sherman Adams or others. he was insistent on decentralizing the functioning of the administration. Eisenhower emphasized that ideas should not be given to him but directed to the proper departments so that they could be followed up.¹²

To explore the role of delegation and the enduring legacy of the autopilot presidency, this paper focuses on two essential functions of the modern presidency: speechwriting and congressional relations. While Eisenhower was not the first president to delegate some responsibility for these functions to specific aides, his presidency institutionalized these functions to a degree very similar to the White House of the Twenty-first century. Eisenhower created the first White House office focused solely on dealing with Congress and while speechwriting would not get its own place on the organizational chart until the Nixon Administration, Eisenhower began to round up and tame the somewhat unruly creative forces behind speechwriting. According to Eisenhower speechwriter Arthur Larson writing in 1968, by late 1957 “the systematizing of presidential of presidential speech writing may have been carried to a peak never achieved before or since.”¹³

Eisenhower’s Words

The choice of a president’s words is good place to begin an exploration of any modern presidency. By the time Eisenhower took office, presidential speeches had become a central part of presidential leadership and the growing attention to a president’s words demanded that they be chosen carefully. Franklin Roosevelt had brought the president’s voice to the nation’s homes through radio and the arrival of television would broaden the president’s use of media by bringing his face into the nation’s living rooms. The competition that the expansion of commercial radio and television programming brought could create its own problems as citizens had more and more sources of information and entertainment. In fact, Eisenhower’s speeches would be eclipsed from the first words of his presidency. As the man who led the Allied invasion of Europe assumed the his place as leader of the American people, the 29 million of them tuned in to watch his inauguration paled in numbers to the 44 million people who had turned into watch the birth of Ricky Ricardo, Jr. on *I Love Lucy* the day before.¹⁴

Help with presidential speeches goes back to George Washington and by the 1950s presidential ghostwriters may have been Washington's worst kept secret. Eisenhower brought more order and organization to the process in response to the growing demand for presidential speeches and the scrutiny those speeches faced. Robert Schlesinger cites Emmet Hughes as the first presidential assistant to hold the position of speechwriter in that his job was narrowly primarily as speechwriting (rather than a policy advisor who also assisted with speeches).¹⁵ Some of Eisenhower's speeches would be drafted by staff members like Bryce N. Harlow or C. D. Jackson who were political and policy advisors. Bryce Harlow, considered by some as Eisenhower's favorite speechwriter¹⁶ and described in one memo as the "custodian of the President's voice,"¹⁷ may not be a household name, but he was a close advisor who spent much of his time working on congressional relations for the administration.¹⁸ Jackson, was an expert on psychological warfare and his expertise and experiences in foreign policy suggests that his work for Eisenhower went well beyond simple speechwriting. Jackson worked closely with Secretary of State John Foster Dulles and Atomic Energy Commission chair Lewis Strauss shaping key foreign policy speeches like Eisenhower's "Atoms for Peace" speech that reflected both his engagement in policy development as well as the contributions of major policy advisors to speechwriting.

The growing complexity and technical nature of many issues generated their own set of checks on the poetic license exercised in speeches. In one case, speechwriter Arthur Larson found himself drafting an address on the race into space. Not familiar with rockets and their design, Larson requested a nose cone be brought to the White House to serve as a visual aid before finalizing the draft of the speech.

As I approached the Oval Room I discovered that the place was in an uproar, as a huge object was being maneuvered by a crew into the President's office. They finally managed to get the nose cone in, and to wrestle it into place beside the President's desk. The President said, "Let's go over the paragraph about this thing." No chance to change it now. Dramatically, Eisenhower read aloud the first sentence of the paragraph: "The object here in my hand is a nose cone that has been to outer space and back."¹⁹

If they did not fully realize it before they had to squeeze a nose cone into the Oval Office, this adventure helped Eisenhower realize that the challenges and complexity of the post-war world demanded a rigorous speech drafting and reviewing process. E. Frederick Morrow, a part-time speechwriter and the first

African-American to work in the White House, described how the Eisenhower White House brought some order to the speech writing process.

The old hodgepodge method of developing presidential speeches was out. Under that system, the President had first accepted invitations to speak and it would later be decided what area he would cover. For example, if the speech was to be about agriculture, the Secretary of Agriculture would send rough notes over to the White House for possible use in the speech. If it was to be about civil rights, the Attorney General's office would offer suggestions, etc. Various staff members versed in these subjects would try their hands at developing certain segments of the speech. There was always a mad rush to make the deadline, and each speech had to pass through a half dozen hands before it was ready to go to the President for his approval.

Larson's idea is to have on hand up-to-date material and rough drafts on all vital areas on which the President might wish to speak. For example, a speech developed on civil right would be ready when the proper occasion arose. In other words, except in national or international crises, the subject matter of the speech would determine when the President spoke.²⁰

The order Eisenhower brought to the speechwriting process was a natural extension of Eisenhower's more carefully structured White House organization and while the speechwriting process might not be fully institutionalized, Eisenhower clearly expected that relevant executive branch staff to be consulted. For example, preparing the President's speech on farm policies in October 1953, Bryce Harlow told Eisenhower that he had incorporated suggestions from Robert Humphreys of the Republican National Committee, Senator George Aiken (Republican, Vermont), Representative Clifford Hope (Republican, Kansas), as well as Agriculture Secretary Benson and his staff.²¹ Eisenhower, as he often did, supplemented his formal advisors with advice from his brother Milton.

The key to Eisenhower's success was to create an effective speechwriting process without being limited by it. As Charles Walcott and Karen Hult point out, Eisenhower shifted speechwriting away from high-level policy advisers to aides who were speechwriting specialists but were not primarily heavily involved in advising.²² While assistants involved in policy development might be experts in the area of a speech they were drafting, the President generally shunned having visible, high-level advisors like cabinet secretaries draft the speech and this helped Eisenhower minimize the need to battle for control of the speech. Some speechwriters wanted to have more impact on policy and their relationship with Eisenhower suffered as a result. Arthur Larson who admitted that, from time to time, he forgot that "the man at my right elbow was the

President of the United States, and would insist on my own ideas of style and arrangement, and perhaps even sometimes of content, much longer than was seemly.”²³ After Larson had proven stubborn on a couple of occasions, Chief of Staff Sherman Adams took Larson aside and told him that the President “wished I would write down his ideas instead of my own.”²⁴

One case that illustrates delegation in writing minor messages began as Larson was preparing to address a Republican group and the organizers discovered that President Eisenhower’s telegram of an official greeting to the meeting had been lost. They were relieved when Larson told them that, since he wrote and sent the telegram in the first place, he could compose a replacement the spot.²⁵ As Larson was being introduced, he quickly wrote a message from the President which he then read as a preface to his own speech. Clearly, Larson and the President shared a understanding of the speechwriters’ authority and could exercise certain discretion when the situation demanded.

While Eisenhower’s military experience is often cited as an influence on his presidency, it is important to note that some years of Eisenhower’s military service was spent ghostwriting for Secretary of War George H. Dern and General Douglas MacArthur.²⁶ Like any good speechwriter, Eisenhower understood the perils of having too many people involved in his speeches. After the frenzy of the 1954 campaign, Eisenhower vented at Bryce Harlow who had been primary architect of his campaign speeches:

I don’t see how you write a goddamned thing with so many people telling you what to do. I used to write speeches for MacArthur out in the Philippines. And one thing I know: if you put ten people to work on a speech, they’ll kill anything in it that has any character. Now the next time you write something that has any character, you bring it right in here. Don’t you show it to anybody.²⁷

Based on his experience as a speechwriter Eisenhower knew he needed to make sure that speeches did not suffer from too many edits from too many sources. While his speechwriters were not well known outside Washington, they were respected enough within the administration to effectively negotiate speech drafts with high ranking officials. Bryce Harlow recalls working on a state of the union speech and with one Cabinet official in his office working to get their department’s priorities in the speech while four more waited to see him with similar wish lists.²⁸ Just as Sherman Adams was allowed to serve as an effective gatekeeper to

those trying to get into the Oval Office, Harlow was able to gather feedback from around the administration while still barring unwelcome intrusions into presidential speeches.

Eisenhower took his speeches seriously, realizing that he would be judged by every speech and that he might impact every audience, no matter how small. In 1985, Ralph Williams, who assisted Eisenhower with his farewell address told a staffer at the Eisenhower Library: "Ike may not always have said the right things, but he never ever put anything into a formal speech that he didn't believe and fully intend to say..."²⁹ Eisenhower brought a level of precision into speechwriting and his staff carefully tracked the content of his state of the union addresses and the reaction they received. For example, one table summarized the word count of each speech as well as the percentage of each address dedicated to the economy, welfare, or foreign/defense topics.³⁰ Another document reported the 27 items that drew applause in the 1959 State of the Union Address in case that information might help prepare for the 1960 address.³¹ While not as formalized as in subsequent administrations, the vetting process for the State of the Union message was already extensive. For example, a December 1956 Cabinet meeting to go over a draft of the 1957 message was chaired by Vice President Nixon and notes of that meeting fill 27 pages.³² Today, it would be highly unusual for members of the cabinet to meet as a group to labor over the wording of a speech and discuss the sections relevant to other cabinet members. However, members of the cabinet still receive multiple drafts of the speech and departments spend the months before the annual address trying to get their agenda into the speech.

While imprint of a military-style organization on the White House is clear, flexibility was a trademark of Eisenhower's approach to his presidency. He preferred that staffers not venture into each other's areas, but he never let organizational boundaries keep him from putting the best-qualified person on a task. For example, Ed McCabe, whose primary responsibility was labor policy and relations with Congress, wrote multiple drafts of Eisenhower's August 6, 1959 labor speech since he knew the issue better than the staff usually assigned to write speeches.³³ When the President's "Atoms for Peace" speech, originally labeled "Candor" inside the White House, became bogged down, the administration modified the process with Emmet Hughes being put in charge of "word editing" and department and agencies told to list their objections rather than offering edits. This adaption was designed to prevent the speech from, "speech is slowly dying from a

sever attack of Committee-itis"³⁴ and helped produce one of the most important and effective speeches of Eisenhower's presidency.

Eisenhower exercised a little "hidden-hand" leadership in the speechwriting process as he had in legislative affairs. Writing to his brother Milton in November 1953, the President expresses his enthusiasm for Milton's approach to farm problems but wanted to make sure that Secretary of Agriculture Ezra Taft Benson did not feel left out:

Of course I could send your letter over to Ezra, but I think it would be better - - if you are to be imposed upon again - - for you to call up Ezra when you get this letter, give him your idea and let him bring it to me with an outline of each talk that is proposed in the series. That way he will probably have the enthusiasm of a partial originator of the scheme and you could on your own part volunteer to read each of the talks before they are given for the "appeal" value.³⁵

Drawing on his experience with MacArthur and his own personal insistence on precision, Eisenhower was an aggressive editor who oversaw a speech preparation process that was as careful as it was orderly. Arthur Burns, Chairman of the Council of Economic Advisors under Eisenhower, remarked in a note attached to a speech draft: "Here is a draft of the tax piece. I shall not be surprised if you tear it to pieces."³⁶ Most of Eisenhower's speeches would go through six to eight drafts while major speeches would go through twelve to fifteen revisions.³⁷ There are times when the President seems to energetically dive into speeches and become heavily involved in every detail of speech. For example, in late November 1953, Eisenhower wrote a six-page memo to his brother, Milton, outlining what he hoped would be in the upcoming State of the Union address. This included detailed sketches of what he wanted included by departments like Agriculture and Interior.³⁸ Eisenhower's edits went beyond adapting speechwriters' drafts to his style and he often rewrote entire sections, added new sections, and moved around large portions of the text to change the organization of the speech. In fact, the examination of almost any speech turns up Eisenhower's extensive editing marks on several drafts. As one assistant described, Eisenhower's editing frequently involved significant additions and redrafting of entire sections.

His style was to come into the speech after it had been all laid out. Then he would find some things that he would throw out and other ideas that he would think about, and he would scribble them into the marginal notes. He'd call in Ann Whitman and he'd dictate maybe two or three pages of new material. And so, draft by draft, it literally became his own speech from the beginning to the end.³⁹

According to Chief of Staff Sherman Adams, the staff learned to make sure that Eisenhower got the draft of a major speech at least two weeks in advance “so he could put it into his desk drawer and brood over it at his leisure.”⁴⁰ Eisenhower may not have “brooded” over every speech, but many received a lot of attention. Reflecting on the demands upon the President’s time, Eisenhower’s personal secretary Ann Whitmann estimated he spent twenty to thirty hours on each major speech.⁴¹ His commitment to a speech was not contingent on it having global implications. For example, the President went out of his way to edit a speech on National Vegetable Week, hand writing out additions to tell viewers that “The first money I ever earned was the result of a venture of this kind – 55 years ago.”⁴²

The President’s role in speechwriting went beyond finding whatever words best suited events scheduled for him or editing the drafts handed to him. Eisenhower occasionally became involved in the early planning for a speech. Emmet Hughes describes how the President wanted to speak in his own terms about the need for peace. Rejecting the expectation that speeches on foreign policy should be about highlighting the evils of the enemy, Eisenhower was insistent on weaving an argument that committed the nation to the pursuit of peace, and aching the room, “began talking with the air of a man whose thoughts, after a permissive spell of meandering, were fast veering toward a conclusion.”⁴³ He then spelled out the heart of his argument:

Here is what I would like to say.

The jet plane that roars over your head cost three-quarters of a million dollars. That is more than a man earning ten thousand dollars a year is going to make in his lifetime. What world can afford this sort of thing for long? We are in an armaments race. Where will it lead us? At worst, to atomic warfare. At best, to robbing every people and nation on earth of the fruits of their own toil.

Eisenhower’s idea would turn into a speech (“The Chance for Peace”) that Stephen Ambrose would call the finest of Eisenhower’s presidency.⁴⁴ While often overlooked, it is effective and dramatic in both its rhetorical style and the boldness of the policy itself:

Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed. This world in arms is not spending money alone.

It is spending the sweat of its laborers, the genius of its scientists, the hopes of its children.

The cost of one modern heavy bomber is this: a modern brick school in more than 30 cities.

It is two electric power plants, each serving a town of 60,000 population.

It is two fine, fully equipped hospitals. It is some 50 miles of concrete highway.

We pay for a single fighter plane with a half million bushels of wheat.

We pay for a single destroyer with new homes that could have housed more than 8,000 people.

This, I repeat, is the best way of life to be found on the road the world has been taking.

This is not a way of life at all, in any true sense. Under the cloud of threatening war, it is humanity hanging from a cross of iron.

Thus, Eisenhower went beyond being editor in chief and at times placed himself firmly in control of his communications strategy. In a draft letter to a friend, Eisenhower reflected on the growing demand for presidential speeches and the need for additional help with public relations:

Almost everybody who comes to my office with a worry or recommendation on his mind begins or ends his conversation with, "Now you are the only one the people believe, so you must get onto television." If I could and would respond to all such suggestions, I would be spouting more words each week than came out of the recent Senatorial filibuster.

Yet it is quite clear that a number of things of importance to the Administration and the country are not being properly placed before the public. These include solid accomplishment of the past 18 months, basic reason for action taken or recommendation made, and, by and large, the fact lying behind the problems that today engage the attention of this nation and of the world.

With these facts in mind, the need for an overall design or pattern to guide process in the kind of information distribution is crystal clear. Authoritative statements should be constantly going to the public from a variety of sources; only one of which would be me. The governing plan should be devised as to achieve coordination and appropriate emphasis.⁴⁵

Eisenhower's suggestion reflected both the understanding of limited presidential time and the reality that much of his message was still not getting out. As was often the case, his remedy involved some delegation and utilize a range of voices across the administration.

The President would become most deeply involved in crafting some of the messages closest to the what he hoped would become his legacy. As he noted in his diary, "I don't care much about the words if I can convey the ideas accurately."⁴⁶ One good example of the kind of direction he offered came in the form of a December 3, 1953 memo regarding the 1954 State of the Union speech—a speech that was still over a month away. Eisenhower tells Bryce Harlow:

The other day I sent Dr. Hauge several tentative paragraphs for the opening of the State of the Union speech. I understand he quite properly forwarded them to you since you are coordinating material for the message.

I now want to make an additional suggestion. It is that we definitely announce, right after the opening paragraphs, that I am bringing a message of hope. We might make the point that, if we remove ourselves far enough from the immediate scene to view our external and internal situations objectively, we will note a definite better all along the horizon.⁴⁷

The President was actively engaged early in the process and keenly interested in controlling the tone of the speech. He was content to leave Harlow to compile many of the facts and figures that would support his argument, but he knew exactly the kind of argument he wanted to make to the American people.

While some phrasing could be safely delegated to wordsmiths, some ideas were so deeply felt that they could not be left to others. Further, Eisenhower may not have been a political philosopher, but he may have thought more about the true costs of war and the dream of peace than anyone else in Washington. When a staffer asked Eisenhower why we dropped the term “Stalinism” in preference to “Communism,” the president said that the term “struck the wrong note” and, in some ways, might not be accurate. The President went on to say there was a practical concern: “Besides—it’s always possible I’ll be meeting and negotiating with him some day. So...”⁴⁸ Eisenhower knew that making a foreign policy argument more personal might win him some applause at home, but it could also put a further chill in the developing Cold War and push peace aside.

While Franklin Roosevelt and Ronald Reagan have received a great deal of credit for their ability to spread optimism, Eisenhower understood the need to give speeches that provided both arguments and emotion. As Fred Greenstein notes, the draft introduction to *Crusade in Europe* that Eisenhower resolved during his days commanding Allied Forces that “my mannerisms and speech in public would always reflect the cheerful certainty of victory—that any pessimism and discouragement I might ever feel would be reserved for my pillow.”⁴⁹ Ira Chernus, described how Eisenhower’s “Atoms for Peace” speech brought the government into “emotion management.”⁵⁰ Eisenhower’s calming message of peace and stability as the world settled into the cold war may have lacked the emotion of Roosevelt’s war messages and his economic conservatism may not have been as well suited for the kind of dramatic call for action that launched the New Deal, but this does not mean that Eisenhower’s strategy was any less thoughtfully constructed or appropriate

for the moment. In fact, the extensive editing evidenced in his numerous changes to drafts of his speech indicate that Eisenhower's communication strategy was the product of a measured approach to sharing his vision with the American people. Bryce Harlow argued that Eisenhower did not always need to seek out dramatic language since the fact that a president was saying something made it dramatic enough: "The president must understate his case, because the fact that he is saying it, in itself, overstates it."⁵¹

It may be fair to claim that many of his successors generated more memorable phrases than Eisenhower and that people liked Ike more than they quoted him. However, Eisenhower's delegation of some steps of the speechwriting process and the lack of flowery rhetoric should not lead anyone to believe that he was not intimately familiar with speechwriting and rhetoric. As a student he had excelled in English⁵² and he was the only president with experience working as a speechwriter. His understanding of the dilemma of too much help with speechwriting was revealed when he rejected staffing out his 1956 convention acceptance speech warning that such reviewing would make "all the zest go out of it."⁵³ Eisenhower seems to have never put aside his experience as a speechwriter. Some of the first advice that Lyndon Johnson got on a presidential speech came from Eisenhower who wrote a two-page letter to his predecessor the day after the assassination to suggest that the new President speak to a joint session of Congress. Eisenhower went on to suggest that Johnson use the occasion to accept the responsibilities of the office, cooperate with Congress, work with all sectors of the economy, and pledge to "implement effectively the noble objectives so often and so eloquently stated by your great predecessor."⁵⁴

Eisenhower's careful construction of these messages was made possible by his ability to successfully delegate drafting routine messages to his staff and entrusting them to draft other speeches, either at his specific direction or through their ability to anticipate his perspective. As Eisenhower speechwriter Ralph Williams concluded, "In other words, while the President had nothing to do with the first draft, he had everything to do with the last draft."⁵⁵ As Malcolm Moos, another Eisenhower speechwriter, reflected on their role in writing speeches, "we're carpenters, not architects."⁵⁶

Eisenhower and Congress

Parts of Ike's legacy not recorded in his speeches were written into law. And, as was the case with speechwriting, delegation was an important contributor to his success. Maintaining a friendly relationship with members of Congress that was as nonpartisan as possible was a key element of the Eisenhower legislative style. Eisenhower understood from his years of working with Congress as a military officer that congenial personal relations with members of Congress were indispensable to success in Washington, especially from members of Congress who still expected the military and the rest of the executive branch to respect the role of the legislative branch. Even before the Democrats reclaimed their majority in Congress, he understood that winning the votes of Democrats would be essential to his success and he hoped that "personal acquaintance would help smooth out difficulties inherent in partisanship."⁵⁷

Eisenhower is widely given credit for establishing the first office in the White House dedicated specifically to congressional relations.⁵⁸ Taking lessons learned from the Army's congressional relations office, Eisenhower brought in Wilton Persons to lead a staff of full time lobbyists to work with Congress and gave them a place in the White House organizational chart that would prove permanent. Eisenhower preferred to do most of his legislative business through White House liaison staff and party leaders. When he did talk to members face-to-face, he did not confront them nose-to-nose as Johnson often would and, in the words of Persons had "a great regard for the other fellow's point of view" and was adverse to pressuring Members of Congress.⁵⁹ The President and his legislative liaison staff were linked by Persons, whose daily briefings for the President seem to have focused on broad policy concerns rather than the specific tactics of the staff. Jack Anderson commented that "I don't believe the President knew how I operated or how other members of the staff operated. He assumed, or course, that we were doing our job and we were left free to do it."⁶⁰

Over time, Eisenhower's congressional relations staff refined their methods for maintaining friendly relations with members of Congress, keeping careful records to make sure that this goodwill was spread as evenly as possible throughout Congress. For example, they sent letters to members from both parties after each election, congratulating the winners and commiserating with the losers. While these letters varied little from member to member (for example, references to "the little lady" who helped them win election were

omitted for single members), they seem to have been warmly received by members of Congress and often brought warm, personal replies from members of both parties. The staff was as systematic as they were friendly with staffers circulating memos to Persons and the rest of the liaison office that reported their conversations in these meetings. White House staff members from outside the liaison office were advised to report “hints they gather in casual conversation” to members of the liaison staff.⁶¹

Eisenhower’s weekly meetings with the Republican congressional leaders was one of his most important legislative tools. Despite his problems with Republican leaders, Eisenhower told his Cabinet that meeting that “our long-term good requires that leadership on the Hill be exercised through the party organization there.”⁶² Eisenhower insisted on leaving as much as possible in the hands of Congressional leaders and generally assumed that congressional leaders were consulting with rank-and-file members and that they could speak for average members. This was not always the case, and some members found that they would not be involved in White House meetings on legislation that they had been taking a leading role in developing. In a draft of a letter to House Majority Leader Charles Halleck in 1953 Eisenhower discussed complaints he had received from lesser Republican Members of the House who felt detached from the White House. After several members of the House told Eisenhower that freshmen members of the House were never consulted on issues, his response was to suggest to Halleck that the Republican Leadership try to find ways to overcome these objections.⁶³ Eventually the White House staff began setting up their own meetings with members involved in the legislation. While Eisenhower’s work with Congress would be shaped by changes in congressional leadership he generally stayed out of internal congressional politics. In the House, the Republican leadership changed when Minority Leader Joe Martin was deposed and replaced by Charles Halleck in 1959. While some Members of the House accused some on the White House staff of playing a role in the ousting of Martin, White House aides denied this and suggested that Martin’s defeat was more closely tied to Republican frustration with Republican losses in the mid-term election. It appears that Eisenhower’s role was not so much a direct attempt to undermine Martin as it was the result of the President no longer asking Halleck to avoid a challenge to Martin.⁶⁴ This is consistent with the Administration’s approach of not tampering with internal Congressional politics.

Eisenhower showed little interest in the details of political maneuverings and held little regard for those who focused on such concerns. For example, Eisenhower seemed indifferent to Senate Republicans' efforts to appoint Mark Trice as Comptroller General, a candidate that the President felt was slightly less qualified than one backed by House members.

In any event, Knowland, Millikin and Ferguson are coming to have breakfast with me tomorrow morning to plead the case for Trice. I feel that the three Republican leaders of Congress (if they have any comprehension whatsoever of leadership) would have something better to do than to spend their time in petty patronage problems.⁶⁵

Although Eisenhower met primarily with Republican leaders in formal meetings, he occasionally held formal meetings brought the leaders of both parties together. These meetings were primarily on foreign policy matters and were used as a way of keeping congressional leaders apprised of actions the President had already taken. While these meetings played some role in building support for foreign policy, they were seldom used to deal with issues that could be resolved with legislation and rarely aimed to solicit the advice of members of Congress. Input from members of Congress was sparse and generally unwelcome.

Beyond seeing them in formal meetings of party leaders, Eisenhower hosted informal evening get-togethers at the White House with Speaker Sam Rayburn and Democratic Senate Leader Johnson about every six weeks. The three enjoyed a friendly relationship; with the only thing the Democratic leaders disliking about the President was that he had chosen to be a Republican.⁶⁶

The buffer between Eisenhower and Congress created by delegation suited Eisenhower's belief that the principle of separation of powers required that congressional independence should be protected. In addition, it freed him up to focus on broader issues to and to implement strategies like the "hidden hand" more effectively. While some might regard delegation or using an "autopilot" approach a weakness, it was a fundamental component of Eisenhower success that also reflected his respect for congressional prerogatives.

Ike's Partisanship

The failure of Eisenhower's speeches and legislative agenda to follow the established partisan lines may have unfairly contributed to the perception of Eisenhower as a weak leader. His inaugural address disappointed some Republicans who wanted to see Eisenhower to denounce Roosevelt's New Deal and the

new role America was taking in world affairs. He sometimes pushed legislation that often defied classification as part of the Republican or Democratic agenda. Failing to conform fully to the established partisan folkways of Capitol Hill, the Eisenhower administration was accused of being directionless. Further, since neither side saw the President consistently pushing legislation in their direction neither side gave him full credit for his efforts. Partisanship would not become a hallmark of Eisenhower's relations with the Congress for the simple reason that he frequently agreed with Democrats and disagreed with fellow Republicans. The Democrats faced similar internal problems as Southern and Northern Democrats seldom voted together after the election of the Speaker. Olin Teague of Texas commented in a note to Homer Gruenther, "I think we have too damned many Democrats now--we will be fighting among ourselves."⁶⁷Eisenhower often found much of his support among moderate and conservative Democrats and his most stubborn opposition among Republicans.

Further, working first with a narrow Republican majority and then a Democratic majority, Eisenhower had no choice but to seek bipartisan support. Eisenhower was busy rebuilding a party that had lost much of its identity in two decades out of power. Much of the Republican agenda remained a reaction to Roosevelt. Eisenhower believed that most congressional Republicans were no longer familiar with "either the techniques or the need of cooperating with the Executive" since only 15 of the 221 Republican members of the House had served with a Republican president.⁶⁸

I had hoped that the first Republican national victory in twenty years would provide a strong, unifying influence within the party and among its representatives in the Senate and the House. But my hope for unanimity was quickly shattered.

It was clear that habitual, almost instinctive opposition to the Chief Executive, as well as differences in political convictions, would create difficulties in Executive-Legislative relations.⁶⁹

Eisenhower differed with fellow Republican on specific legislative issues but also on the scope of executive authority. In part as a response to Franklin Roosevelt's long tenure and concerns about the expansion of the presidency's powers during wartime, the Republicans wanted to cut back on the size and the powers of the office. These changes took the form of limits on presidential terms and constraints on presidential power like the Bricker amendment. This left Eisenhower in the uneasy position of defending the presidency from his own party.

Eisenhower hoped to see the Republican Party strengthened, but on his own terms. While he did campaign on behalf of Republican candidates, the President often did so reluctantly and focused his speeches on the general progress of his administration.⁷⁰ Eisenhower explained his reluctance to involve himself in a partisan campaign to Thomas Dewey by telling him that, “there was nothing that Mr. Truman did that so shocked my sense of the fitting and the appropriate as did his barnstorming activities while he was actually the president of the United States.” He went on to explain that, “no president, regardless of his popularity, can pass that popularity on to a Party or to an individual.”⁷¹

Eisenhower held congressional Republicans responsible for the party’s failure to gain seats in Congress because they had refused to follow his leadership despite his popularity. The President complained that “there were ‘too many leaders’ running in too many directions at once.”⁷² In a letter to Thomas Dewey, the President portrayed Republicans as failing to contribute to the kind of policy victories that would build the party’s record: “I do believe that intelligent candidates can participate in a President’s popularity by asking only the opportunity to put their shoulders to the wheel in pushing forward the program for which the popular individual may stand. Instead of doing this, they too often ask for a Presidential arm to be cast protectively around them.”⁷³ Congressional Republicans were waiting for him to do more to lead, he was waiting for them to follow. The criticism that he received from some Republicans for not doing more did little to change Eisenhower’s view of the party. “What we need is less headline hunters and more Eisenhower supports.”⁷⁴

Eisenhower further muted partisanship by refusing to engage in the kind of personal attacks that had been part of partisan battles. While Eisenhower would be faulted for his failure to personally attack Senator McCarthy and others, his refusal to engage enemies publicly helped keep Eisenhower a safe distance from many partisan battles that would have won him neither public support nor congressional allies. Eisenhower emphasized this to Bryce Harlow when explained his reason for editing a speech:

A man will respect you and perhaps even like you if you differ with him on issues and on principle. But if you ever challenge his motives, he will never forgive you. Nor should he. So don’t ever again, in any document submitted to me, include a word which questions a man’s motives.⁷⁵

Eisenhower discussed this further in a draft letter to Indiana Governor George Craig, who wanted the President to “discipline the recalcitrant” (McCarthy):

A leader’s job is to get others to go along with him. To do this he needs their good will. To destroy good will, it is only necessary to criticize publicly. This creates in the criticized one a subconscious desire to “get even.” Such effects can last a very long time.⁷⁶

Most politicians must endure a long, slow rise before arriving in the White House and over those years they gradually come to be molded into the political system. Eisenhower lacked those years and burst quickly onto the political scene with little time to become encumbered by political norms or to let the political powers take full measure of him. While Eisenhower was not a veteran of political battles, he had watched them closely. Thus, he came to the presidency without some of the baggage associated with partisanship but well educated in the ways of the partisan battles in Washington. Further, almost every congressional leader knew and liked Eisenhower, giving him a foundation for friendly conversations and cordial relations. Since Eisenhower’s party identification was relatively new, his Washington friendships were built largely on his personality and military accomplishments. Presidents like Johnson or Truman would be known on Capitol Hill through years of partisan battles waged as they worked their way up the political ladder in DC. Consequently, Democratic leaders would have been unable to convincingly to portray the political process in “us versus them” terms, even if they have been inclined to.

Between elections Eisenhower was even less the partisan and even when he campaigned as a partisan, he governed as a non-partisan. In his diary, Eisenhower expressed his pleasure at the lack of such partisanship within his Cabinet

It is astonishing how infrequently anything of a partisan character is mentioned in the Cabinet; problems are discussed objectively and argument proceeds on the basis of bringing to bear every viewpoint on the specific project. Two of my most trusted advisor were, up until a few years ago, dyed-in-the-wool Southern Democrats. Yet this fact is one that I believe rarely occurs to any of the members of the Cabinet as we try to work out composite solutions for specific problems.⁷⁷

Lacking a great investment in the parties, Eisenhower valued ability over partisanship, and applied such criteria in his appointments throughout the executive branch. In fact, he avoided consulting with Republican congressional leaders or the Republican National Committee before making appointments.⁷⁸ In one meeting Speaker Martin “ruefully” noted that while Democratic administrations had let a Republican

member of Congress be the first to know of any action taken in a district, they were not getting similar treatment from a Republican Administration.⁷⁹

Eisenhower's popularity with voters made him an unlikely target for partisan attacks. This gave Ike an initial level of protection. However, it became apparent to Democrats that Eisenhower's popularity did not carry over to Republicans and their majority evaporated even as Eisenhower remained popular. Democrats soon realized that they could attack Republicans without attacking Eisenhower and Republicans found that they did not share their President's immunity to attack.

Labeling Eisenhower as somewhat nonpartisan should not be confused as apolitical. According to Bryce Harlow, Eisenhower chose to avoid extreme partisanship because he needed to be able to work with Democratic leaders,⁸⁰ making his bipartisan good politics. He was conservative and politically minded. However, Eisenhower's politics was personal more than partisan and his views often did not fit the political norms under which others operated. He had spent his life developing politically apart from the organized world of politics and this led him to be shaped independently of that world. The fact that he didn't fit easily into the Republican or Democratic party sometimes made his work easier, but it often led partisans to judge him harshly for failing to move along the lines they expected. Republicans often were disappointed by his failure to advance their causes and candidates more consistently while Democrats were frustrated by the President's association with Republican leaders who he often disagreed with and made governing difficult.

Eisenhower's partisanship predisposed him to write speeches and push legislation that led some of his contemporaries to underestimate him. Once we accept Eisenhower's own brand of conservatism, his style of governing and leadership more clearly come into focus.

Eisenhower, Governing, and Leadership

Central to Eisenhower's approach to governing was avoiding the appearance of dominating. The strength of "hidden hand" leadership as a strategy is that it does as little as possible to give members of Congress reasons to fear a strong presidency. This style was in evidence even before Eisenhower took office. When Brownell asked who intended to have as a running mate, Eisenhower replied, "Well, I thought that was up to the convention. I didn't realize that was up for me to decide."⁸¹ Later, when Nixon's finances created a

cloud over his campaign, Eisenhower let Nixon take the decision out of his hands and give it to the Nixon and the public. After the election, the president-elect drew on the political knowledge and skill of Herb Brownell and Lucius Clay for help putting together his cabinet.⁸² These decisions reflect Eisenhower's understanding that his knowledge of political tactics lagged behind his military strategy and his grasp of foreign policy.

Eisenhower's system of delegation was built around sharing principles rather than trusting personalities. The President entrusted Adams, Persons, Harlow and other to carry forth his ideas because he trusted these men to put aside their own political and personal agendas. As General Andrew Goodpaster described Eisenhower's foreign policy making, the President would carefully analyze a situation and spell out a direction thus "forging a single controlling idea that would dominate this administration." Goodpaster went on say that, "Having done that, it was no longer necessary for him then to try to influence every particular decision, every particular action that was taken."⁸³

Delegation allowed Eisenhower to focus his intellect as well as his time. As Arthur Larson reflected, "If Eisenhower was notable for his ability to make big decisions, then, this may be attributed in part to the fact that his energies were not consumed in making small or even medium-sized decisions."⁸⁴ The differences between Eisenhower's style of delegation and Lyndon Johnson's illustrates why Eisenhower was so effective. Johnson did delegate tasks to subordinates. However, he generally did not completely trust those he delegated tasks to and asked for frequent briefings and updates. This often left Johnson working long days and leaving him with large piles of night readings.

The "leadership" label has to be applied carefully since Eisenhower clearly not looking to provide the kind of leadership that Washington had come to expect during the drama of the Great Depression and the conflict of World War II. In fact, Eisenhower repeatedly renounced drama and "desk pounding" as a type of leadership. In a letter to his brother Milton, he attacked "...the false but prevalent notion that bullying and leadership are synonymous; that desk-pounding is more effective than is persistent adherence to a purpose and winning to that purpose sufficient for its achievement. For this particular kind of person there is greater satisfaction, possibly sadistic, in seeing their opponents reviled and cursed in the public prints than there is in the knowledge that the cause for which they themselves stand are being constructively advanced."⁸⁵ He saw

presidential leadership as constrained by a need to maintain the dignity of the office and restore some power to the Congress.⁸⁶

At the same time, Eisenhower was appalled by the “amount of caution approaching fright that seems to govern the action of most politicians.”⁸⁷ He argued that there were different ways to be a leader and seemed to expect more aggressive leadership from congressional leaders.

They do not seem to realize when there arrives that moment at which soft speaking should be abandoned and a fight to the end undertaken. Any man who hopes to exercise leadership must be ready to meet this requirement fact to face when it arises; unless he is ready to fight when necessary, people will finally begin to ignore him.⁸⁸

The “autopilot” label is not a criticism of the Eisenhower style of government. Given the Democratic majority that he faced during most of his time in office and the natural momentum of New Deal programs, Eisenhower probably considered slowing down the growth of government to be more realistic than dismantling existing programs or proposing his own. Knowing the odds against passage of his own legislative package Eisenhower may have been content to dedicate his efforts to obstruct the most objectionable portions of Democratic legislation.

In fact, Eisenhower recognized that this kind of organization was fundamental to success. In a letter Emmet Hughes Eisenhower argues that, “in our complicated political system, even with such an individual standing, success is going to be measured, over the long term, by the skill with which the leader builds a strong team around him”⁸⁹ (emphasis in the original). The autopilot approach to Congress was especially important to Eisenhower because it gave him the time to deal with foreign affairs. Sherman Adams reported that Eisenhower wanted to see more delegation of authority in the White House so that the president could be freed from routine matters and commit his energies to bigger problems of “world peace and disarmament, national security and domestic welfare.”⁹⁰ Eisenhower was committed to pursuing the goals of world peace. He had entered the race for presidency, in part, to keep Taft and the isolationists from taking control of foreign policy and he devoted most of his first inaugural address to foreign policy. Knowing that he had little that he could accomplish in Congress on domestic affairs, Eisenhower left those matters largely in the hands of his staff and the Republican Congressional leadership, freeing him to commit his efforts to “waging peace.”



Eisenhower: The Man of the Hour?

Eisenhower was the man of man of the hour. More than almost any person Dwight Eisenhower, through his military and then political leadership, had a remarkable impact on the second half of the twentieth century. His command of allied forces helped secure an Allied victory and end the rise of fascism in Europe. His victory over Senator Taft in the 1952 Republican nomination battle helped transform the Republican Party from a party of isolationists on foreign policy and anti-New Deal reactionaries on domestic policy into party ready to embrace America's new role in the world and restrain a host of programs too popular to simply end. As President, Eisenhower's restrained approach to the early tensions of the "Cold War" helped insure that more hot wars did not ignite. His refusal to use nuclear weapons and measured approach to diplomacy established the norm of the peaceful standoff in the balance of power. At home, President Eisenhower's quiet, behind-the-scenes bipartisan approach to governing suited the political climate when many Americans may have wanted to step back from rising presidential power.

The success of Eisenhower's presidency reflects how well suited Eisenhower was for the 1950s. The nation had invested heavily in the presidency during the crisis of the Great Depression and World War II. Many Americans were uneasy about the presidency's dominance of the political system but expecting Americans and their political system to go cold turkey after decades of looking first to the White House for answers. Even if Washington had been ready to embrace a long-term shift of power away from the presidency, giving up the political system's reliance on presidential leadership would take time. Eisenhower struck the right chord by working behind the scenes to give the policy process direction while not visibly looming over every decision and building the imperial presidency. His lack of visibility was noted and

bemoaned, but these complaints were the natural symptom of the political system weaning itself from dependency on a particular brand of leadership.

Eisenhower returned to Washington in a time when the cooperation behind the victories of World War II remained fresh in the memory of many Americans and when soldiers and sailors came to Congress to work along side those they had served with in the war. Members of the government held their peers in respect for their service during the war and all regarded General Eisenhower warmly. This era may have been one of the most bipartisan in the nation's history and Eisenhower's newly found identification with the Republican party gave him only the more tangential connections to any partisan grudges that hung over political affairs. His recent arrival into the world of Washington politics further spared him from the kinds of political cleavages that inhibited communication and negotiations. Had Eisenhower adopted a more partisan approach to leadership strong partisanship could have reignited and created gridlock in divided government just as Washington discovered its old animosities and partisan roots as the unity following the 9/11 attacks faded.

Washington in the 1950s was also relatively well suited for the secrecy that Eisenhower used to conceal his bipartisan meetings and hidden-hand leadership. The White House press corps of that era did not attempt to monitor a president's after-hours activities and lacked the pressure of the twenty-four hour news cycle to generate a steady stream of breaking news. While Barack Obama might have benefitted greatly from informal gatherings with Republican congressional leaders, sneaking leaders of the import of a Sam Rayburn or Lyndon Johnson in and out of the White House is increasingly difficult with a press corps vigilantly standing guard. Even if leaders slipped past the press corps, White House and congressional staff leaks have become more likely and would likely end these parties as soon as they began.

Congress itself was under less direct scrutiny and this gave Eisenhower several advantages over presidents today. Members of Congress could negotiate more freely. Members of Congress of this era realized that they could reach compromise with the president, cast votes on a bill, and then have time to return home to explain their vote before citizens made their judgments. Today, members of Congress see their votes scrutinized and categorized instantly before an audience coached by ideological media to be less tolerant of

any deviation from doctrine or the need for compromise. In addition, as Sam Kernell has noted, the practice of “going public” has made both sides less likely to bargain once their positions on issues have been staked out.⁹¹

Of course, much of what made both Republicans and Democrats in Congress compliant was Eisenhower’s personal popularity. Some of this was the hangover of the good will American felt toward their commander in victory. Eisenhower, as other generals before him, enjoyed the respect of the nation after a war and there’s no doubt that Eisenhower’s military successes provided a foundation for his political victories. However, it would be a mistake to attribute Eisenhower’s appeal to good luck and natural charm. Eisenhower had carefully cultivated his image just as George Washington before him and the style of governing he adopted was designed to insure that all this good will did not needlessly evaporate needlessly. Eisenhower realized that every political maneuver would help voters forget the battlefield maneuvers that made him a symbol of victory and unity.

Eisenhower’s response to the strategic setting was not an accident and he was clearly aware of the political environment he had to manage. Writing to a friend, Eisenhower spelled out both his personal dislike for a more dramatic style and why that style was ill-fitted for the political moment:

I deplore and deprecate the table-pounding, name-calling methods that columnists so much love. This is not because of any failure to love a good fight; it merely represents my belief that such methods are normally futile.

Speaking from a more distinctly personal point of view, the present situation is, I think, without recent precedent in that the particular legislators who are most often opposing Administration views are of the majority party. People like to think of Mr. Roosevelt as a leader; in the situation where his own party was delighted to hear a daily excoriation of the opposite political party, his methods were adequate to his time and the situation. As of today, every measure that we deem essential to the progress and the welfare of America normally requires Democratic support in varying degrees. I think it is fair to say that, in this situation, only a leadership that is based on honesty of purpose, calmness, and inexhaustible patience in conference and persuasion, and refusal to be diverted from basic principles can, in the long run, win out.⁹²

Eisenhower’s political victories were as carefully constructed as his military victories. And, both were accomplished by Eisenhower’s ability to manage a large organization while carefully avoiding the impression that he was grasping for too much power. While Eisenhower may have been well-suited for the moment, his success was far from happenstance.

Eisenhower and the Modern Presidency

“Any attempt to assess Eisenhower’s eight years as President inevitably reveals more about the person doing the assessing than it does about Eisenhower.”⁹³

Stephen Ambrose

Even as we take measure of Eisenhower’s presidency, his legacy challenges our notions of leadership and it is interesting to ponder how he would fare in the politics of the early twenty-first century. While Eisenhower refused to publicly engage McCarthy, he was clear about his view of McCarthy’s brand of politics. He privately expressed outrage that he was able to make “a few extraordinary and outlandish charges in the papers, and the whole United States abandons all consideration of the many grave problems it faces in order to speculate on whether McCarthy has it within his power to destroy our system of government.”⁹⁴ Today, the presidency faces a swarm of McCarthy-like detractors who, even when they might be judged irrational or wrong, are afforded the media spotlight and allowed derail meaningful policy debates. Whether the fascination is with the fringe political voices like conspiracy theorists or products of the world of entrainment like Honey Boo Boo, the airwaves are increasingly clogged with irrational or irrelevant voices. Citizens make their contribution by tuning in even as they profess disdain for such coverage. Americans seem captivated by political sideshows and are hard pressed to devote themselves to a meaningful debate on real issues of public policy. Eisenhower’s lesson of not being dragged into debates with lesser voices would help preserve the integrity of the presidency but also leave a president’s attempt to engage the public in a meaningful debate lost in a blizzard of voices.

While leadership might be difficult, a leader of Eisenhower’s stature might prove invaluable to his party today. Eisenhower was clearly willing to make the most of his military background and confront the isolationist heart of the Republicans of his day. Rather than trying to recreate himself to fit in the mold of his party’s base Eisenhower was willing to lead his party in new directions on fundamental issues. While the resistance to his new direction was initially strong, by the time he left office the party had come to embrace much of what he stood for. Early in his administration, Eisenhower was clearly uncomfortable with the party he led and sometimes mused about whether or not he should be in the party. Over time, the GOP became a

more comfortable fit for Ike because he helped the party grow with him as he embraced the changes in the nation and the world.

Scholars, journalists, and the public at large are often transfixed by the mass appeal and the spectacle of presidential rhetoric. This has contributed to the prominence of Franklin Roosevelt and Ronald Reagan as models for the presidency of the 20th century. While these cases remain instructive, the more nuanced skills of a president like Eisenhower are easily overlooked. While Eisenhower was a skilled writer, he seldom aspired to deliver the kind of dramatic speeches found on the highlight reels used to summarize presidential leadership. As noted, this resulted from both Eisenhower's preference for working behind the scenes and the realities of the Cold War in foreign policy and the emphasis in austerity in domestic policy. The rhetoric used to rouse an isolationist nation to become the arsenal of democracy or stir the nation to go to the moon would be inappropriate for a nation learning to live with fears of the nuclear age and unsettled with unimaginable consequences of the atomic age. On the domestic policy front, Eisenhower avoided harsh partisanship and engaging himself too frequently in political battles. In a note to Bryce Harlow, Eisenhower warned that the speech draft "too frequently puts me in the position of either being too partisan or taking personal credit for a lot of accomplishments." He went on to make a suggestion that seems unlikely in today's partisan, presidency-center politics: "I don't mind an occasional reference to Administration accomplishments, but they should be infrequent and rather impersonal."⁹⁵

Eisenhower both suffered and benefitted from comparisons to FDR. At times, he was seen a dull and inactive by a media and public accustomed to grand displays of presidential persuasion. At the same time, the shadow cast by FDR allowed Eisenhower to be seen as somewhat apolitical because the nation neither expected nor recognized more subtle exercises of power. Eisenhower embraced a gentle, modest style. This suits a president who was, in the words of Evan Thomas, "the first person in history to have the means to wreck civilization."⁹⁶ What was not evident to many at the time was the degree to which Eisenhower cultivated the image of moderation and caution.

In a conversation between several members of Eisenhower's White House staff, Andrew Goodpaster talked about his time with Eisenhower and the way in which the President delegated responsibility and

suggested that Eisenhower was initiating a broader and somewhat deeper kind of leadership.⁹⁷ Raymond Saulnier agreed with Goodpaster and explained:

The President must provide leadership, but that is not inconsistent with having a staff which will bring up proposals, specific proposals, which in the light of this man's philosophy and experience and style, as Andy say, he will select or select from various options.⁹⁸

The idea that leadership in an administration can emanate only from one brilliant point of light in the Oval Office is misguided. While we may initially prefer to think that our president knows all the answers, a study of speechwriting reveals the degree to which the words we attribute to our greatest presidents result from collaboration. Eisenhower needed help with his speeches, but no more than Franklin Roosevelt, John F. Kennedy, or Ronald Reagan. As speechwriter Arthur Larson concluded, "it would be naive to assume that, given the incredible complexity of the areas with which he is expected to deal, he would generate all ideas, projects, and arguments out of his own head."⁹⁹

Eisenhower was more than capable of managing the policy and politics behind any issue, but sometimes chose not to. While this might be read as a criticism by some, it reflects Eisenhower's grasp of the nature of the modern presidency. Based on his experience as commander in Europe, Eisenhower understood the need for effective delegation and the need to find time to both relax and reflect. While Eisenhower was definitely an all-American boy, spending so much of his time overseas may have given him just enough detachment from the quibbles of American politics to transcend factionalism and define issues based on his principles rather than his peers. Similarly, his effective use of delegation gave him a broad, battlefield view of issues detached from the petty grievances generated by minor skirmishes. In this regard, Eisenhower drew upon his military experience and chose a path that allowed him to think in strategic terms.

Eisenhower deserves a great deal of credit for creating his presidency. While other presidents have experimented or left the organization of their White House to others, Eisenhower entered the presidency with a clear sense of how it was to operate. Beyond his overall number eight ranking in the 2009 poll of historians, it is telling that Eisenhower's administrative skills earned him his highest ranking at number five—just behind heavy favorites Washington, Lincoln, and both Roosevelts.¹⁰⁰ In *The Presidential Difference*, Greenstein concludes that when it came to effectively organizing the offices of the presidency, Eisenhower

“was in a class of his own”¹⁰¹ While he may not deserve credit for every word or every legislative maneuver, Eisenhower deserves full credit to the White House structure that authored them. Further, the organization he developed contains the fundamental organization in place today. Eisenhower’s mastery of the conflicting demands of the presidency make him the first president to fully understand and embrace the institutionalized nature of the modern White House.

Notes

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