

A Conversation with DAVID EISENHOWER



David Eisenhower occupies a unique spot in American life. His grandfather, Dwight Eisenhower, was Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces in World War II and the 34th president of the United States. His father-in-law, Richard Nixon, became the 37th president of the United States. Through his family, David Eisenhower has directly viewed some of the nation's most important events since 1952.

But David Eisenhower's own work as a historian is becoming increasingly important. The first volume of his three-volume study of his grandfather, "Eisenhower At War: 1943-1945" was released by Vintage Press in 1986. The second volume, which deals with the Eisenhower years from 1951-1957, is now being completed. In this interview at his home in Pennsylvania's Delaware River Valley, Eisenhower discusses with Forum editor Bill McKenzie the effect World War II had on the current American-Soviet relationship, the legacy of his grandfather's presidency, the meaning of Watergate, the modern Republican Party, and 1988 elections. In light of the recent Moscow summit and the upcoming general election, his insights provide relevant commentary.

Ripon Forum: Your grandfather, Dwight Eisenhower, served as president of the United States from 1953-1961. As a historian of his presidency, what do you consider his most important legacy?

Eisenhower: There were two currents at work in the 1950s. One was forward-looking and involved talk about missiles, space exploration and control of the Atomic Bomb. World War II had unleashed a technological revolution, and the United States and its allies were attempting to control, as George Kennan put it, the runaway horse of technology. The other current was backward-looking: how do we resolve the political impasse left over from World War II?

These two currents came together in the high point of the Eisenhower administration, which was the 1955 Geneva Convention. This meeting was the first gathering of the Big Three Powers—the U.S., Great Britain, and the Soviet Union—since Potsdam in 1945. France was asked to attend, but Germany was not, and the meeting, which is relatively obscure in summit history, let people know that the political division left over from World War II would not be allowed to ignite a hot war between East and West.

At the same time, the summit set the tone for the future by discussing how the Big Three plus France would try to harness and control atomic development.

The fact that those discussions took place—and all that they implied—was the culmination of the Eisenhower years.

Ripon Forum: The summit pointed us from the past to the future?

Eisenhower: Yes, and that is what Eisenhower was elected to do. He was a military hero, but that doesn't explain why the military man was elected. The

military man was elected because he was perceived to be the best equipped to solve the leftover problems of World War II. Russia's capability to build an A-Bomb, the Chinese revolution, and the Chinese attack on Korea left Americans with a conviction that much was still hanging in the balance.

Another important accomplishment as president was building a bipartisan foreign policy. Although he embraced much of the New Deal, Eisenhower was a Republican and not a closet Democrat. That's been debated because he built a foreign policy that was supported by even most Democrats. He was a Republican president in a Democratic era. After he was reelected in 1956, the Eisenhower administration was very much on the wane. The international issues became less important and civil rights became the critical issue.

Now, in turn, Democrats are today attempting to make Reaganism a bipartisan policy. The Democratic Leadership Council is looking for a moderate who will ratify and embrace elements of Reaganism.

Ripon Forum: You write in your book "Eisenhower At War: 1943-1945" that it was "the complex Allied-Soviet relationship that forced Eisenhower to think as a politician." Could you elaborate upon that statement?

Eisenhower: He had to look at things as politicians did. The Allies faced a manpower problem, the key to which was sustaining American energy and willingness to fight the war in Europe. The United States almost didn't get involved in the war, but after Roosevelt mobilized the country Eisenhower had to manage the war in a way that sustained both the American war effort and the Alliance.

Some people think I disparage my grandfather's credentials as a military strategist by arguing this political thesis. But his military strategy was well-tailored to serve the campaign's political objectives. Certain imperatives had to be met, such as building the Alliance, meaning the Anglo-American Alliance and the Allied-Soviet Alliance. His strategies were tailored to meet Alliance objectives—so long as American forces advanced towards those objectives, victory was assured.

Ripon Forum: The historian Stephen Ambrose, who has also chronicled your grandfather's military career, disagrees with you. He contends that Eisenhower was not a political strategist, but rather a military strategist.

Eisenhower: My thesis is a little different from his. Dr. Ambrose began as a military historian, and he started with my grandfather's military career and worked on toward his presidency. I began studying my grandfather's presidency and realized that to understand it I had to first understand his military record. The logic of Eisenhower's position in the war carried over into his political career. The question I asked is why did he become president?

Ripon Forum: And the book you are working on now is about Eisenhower's first and second terms?

Eisenhower: That's right. The first term was when the real work takes place, although it is during the second term that granddad becomes more vivid. For the first time, things begin to slip away from him. When that happens, you become more explicit. That is why his speeches from that period are so well remembered.

Ripon Forum: Let's return to the Soviet-Allied relationship. In your book, you contend that the success of the 1944 Allied invasion of France depended upon the Soviets occupying the Germans on their Eastern front. And because of that Soviet presence, we could do little to stop them from moving through Eastern Europe.

Eisenhower: This isn't a question of gratitude. There was a military and political bargain at the 1943 Teheran Conference which put the Allies on a track to invade France. As I see it, we sacrificed certain

geographical objectives for the sake of less tangible objectives, such as claiming a decisive role in the defeat of Nazi Germany. If we played such a role, then we could influence later events. And this was impossible without fairly close coordination with the Soviets, who valued our assistance and recognized that we would share mightily in the prestige of liberating Europe.

In exchange for that coordination, there's a logic in the way peace in Europe unfolds. At the 1943 Teheran Conference, the assumption was that American and British troops in Italy would not press into Germany and thus Eastern Europe, that

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the U.S. and Britain would invade the Continent from England, and that Germany, attacked from the East and West, would be unconditionally defeated and divided. In other words, we would liberate the West and areas where we were going to stay, and the Russians would liberate the East and areas where they had a vital interest. This unfolded like clockwork, but cooperation depended upon minimum trust and confidence—in the closing months, upon the United States not using its growing might to take on the Soviets before the German defeat. Even the British were grateful for our restraint, recognizing that a settlement and reconstruction in Europe were not possible without a basis for mutual confidence.

Ripon Forum: How would you compare the Eisenhower and Reagan approaches to the U.S.S.R.?

Eisenhower: They have a lot in common,

but they also have a lot not in common. There are differences having to do with their times. The tone of the Eisenhower administration, even down to his farewell address, is the restraint of American power. We had overwhelming advantages and Eisenhower urged mutual respect and balance for the sake of converting that temporary advantage to our long-term benefit. Reagan's mission in the 1980s was not to restrain American power in the aftermath of victory, but to restore it after Vietnam. His rhetoric has therefore been more aggressive.

Ripon Forum: Eisenhower as president was aware that the Soviets paid a tremendous price in World War II, namely the loss of millions of lives, and that they retained a great deal of paranoia about foreign threats. Reagan, on the other hand, has been more willing to manipulate the Soviet fear of an outside threat and has been more of a saber-rattler.

Eisenhower: That may well be true. There is something unique about Eisenhower that people have not focused on. He is the only World War II European theater veteran who served as president. John Kennedy, Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford served in the Pacific, while Ronald Reagan served in the Army Signal Corps and did not go overseas.

The European War was different. In the Pacific, we faced Japan as a united nation. But Europe involved our civilization and war there was more akin to civil war. It also was controversial at the outset in America. Eisenhower recognized all this and knew the crucial role the Soviets played and would play in Europe. He saw how important it was to deal with them, and knew the trouble they would cause. Parenthetically, Eisenhower spent more on defense as a percentage of GNP than Reagan has in eight years.

Ripon Forum: So how was Eisenhower's approach to U.S.-Soviet relations distinct from that of other presidents?

Eisenhower: First, he was referring to why we had become involved in Europe. America had inescapably become a great power and could not renounce it. At the same time, America was a democracy and Eisenhower was mindful that historians have argued that democracy and great power are incompatible—one has to be traded for the other. Eisenhower rejected

that, as did Americans in World War II. Given our great power, to have ignored the suffering and aggression in Europe would have corroded democracy in the United States.

Times have changed. Unlike 1961, the great issue facing the United States today is not so much the East-West relationship, but rather the North-South issue. As a great power, the United States faces the same issue in a new setting: how are we going to relate to the great underprivileged masses of the world? Are we going to take a stand with the "haves," as opposed to the "have-nots?" I don't think our democracy can afford such a position.

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As part of the industrialized North, we cannot wall ourselves off from developing nations. That doesn't mean we must necessarily abstain from military involvement in such places as Nicaragua and Panama. Our willingness to sacrifice for objectives in an area can indicate our concern.

As I see it, Ronald Reagan has shifted the focus of American foreign policy away from the nuances of Europe toward those of Central America. I've felt from the moment that he took office, Reagan, a Californian, has had a very different perspective on foreign affairs. It's been logical and consistent, and he deals with a problem that is more immediate to the Western part of the United States, namely Central America and our hemispheric relations.

Ripon Forum: During your grandfather's presidential farewell address, he warned of a growing military-industrial complex, a term that has become part of our national vocabulary. How do you think he would view Ronald Reagan's five-year, trillion dollar defense buildup?

Eisenhower: I think he was stating the moral that his generation derived from the Depression-era. The moral had to do with Germany and the fact that an industrialized and civilized nation had surrendered to a military-industrial complex. But America's survival in the Depression and victory in World War II meant that our values applied to a modern, complex world. Afterwards, we remained a democracy as we waged the Cold War. The key in Eisenhower's mind was citizenship—to exercise the responsibility of citizenship so that we insist government be accountable and that the military-industrial complex justify what it undertakes in the name of the public good. He was not calling to dismantle it, but rather for politicians to hold it accountable.

After reviewing several intermediate drafts of that speech, I concluded that Eisenhower's farewell address, couched as a warning about the future, was essentially a retrospective. He had grown up in the horse-and-buggy era in Central Kansas, and had seen the dawn of a more complex world. Moon probes were being planned, the atomic era had begun, and the world's population had doubled. He was saying that civilization had once succumbed to the savageries of a new complexity, and we need not do so again. Our struggles had proven that we could be both free and modern, but it's up to us. He didn't say "dismantle the military-industrial complex," but rather that we need to remain an alert citizenry. Good citizenship in his mind was caring about and believing in a free way of life that can be made to work.

Ripon Forum: After his administration, we went into a period of rapid social change and political upheaval. Do you see the same thing happening in the 1990s? After all, we are living through another era of "good feeling," but under the surface lie some real structural problems.

Eisenhower: I don't think the Reagan era is over. I think this election is more like 1940 than 1960. I predict that 1988 will be like a reelection, not an election. Reagan was elected in 1980 to deal with deep-seated economic problems, such as stagflation, and those economic problems are not yet solved. We are not dealing with the trade problem and retooling the American economy. There's more to be done, and Bush represents continuity. Ordi-

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narily an elected president offers new themes, but Bush is like Roosevelt going into his third term. Roosevelt was not elected because the Depression had been solved and the American people were grateful. Rather, the Depression was *being* solved, and the American people wanted more of the Roosevelt remedy. This is what's going on this year.

Ripon Forum: But underneath the era of "good feeling" lies what seems to me growing racial and economic tensions. There seems to be a greater psychological tension between haves and have-nots.

Eisenhower: That's what the Jackson candidacy shows. And Republicans should be aware, because if the Democrats cannot resolve the fragmentation within their own party, which is a hint of a larger fragmentation in society, then the next Republican administration will have to confront it. There should be no cause for complacency and Republicans ought to be thinking about ways to remedy the almost unanimous allegiance of blacks to the Democratic Party.

Ripon Forum: Let's shift to another subject—Watergate—which you might have an unusual view of. As a historian, you have to deal with facts objectively, yet you are also Richard Nixon's son-in-law. What lessons did you learn from that ex-



perience and what lessons did we learn as a people?

Eisenhower: It was a serious constitutional crisis, as opposed to the Iran-contra affair, which is an effort to recycle Watergate. History never repeats itself.

For our family, Watergate was a very painful and unsettling thing to go through. But it was not as unsettling and painful as wondering when and how the Vietnam War would end. Watergate exposed the strain our representative government goes through in a prolonged war. I also see it as the last chapter of the Vietnam War.

I can recall a James Reston column in February 1973 saying that since the Paris Peace Accords had been signed, we could look forward to another era of "good feeling." I could remember thinking to myself, "not yet." Too much had been said during Vietnam, and too many positions had been taken. It seemed likely that the end of the war would lead to a Watergate of some kind. That accounts for a certain amount of Mr. Nixon's fatalism. He defended himself beyond the limits of human endurance in 1973 and 1974, but he stopped well short of using in his self-defense the full extent of the powers of incumbency.

Ripon Forum: Did Nixon recognize that even resolving Vietnam was not going to lead to an era of good feeling?

Eisenhower: I think he did. I'm not sure he'd say he did. But there was a fatalism that meant the resources of the office of the presidency would not be used as efficiently and effectively in Nixon's defense as they could have been. Watergate was the next phase of the Vietnam War debate,

and it was going to have to be worked out, not stopped or throttled.

In the end, important constitutional questions were faced. And many litigational precedents were set. Nixon's resignation was itself a precedent. All of this is distinguishable from the current Iran-contra affair.

Ripon Forum: But isn't the Iran-contra affair similar in that some members of an administration thought they knew best and attempted to place themselves above the law?

Eisenhower: I think it was a cyclical situation where a lot of people saw a potential Watergate. The parameters superficially resembled Watergate, but it was an altogether different affair. Iran-contra involved an overture to a foreign government, which is clearly a presidential prerogative. It also involved an apparent loophole in the Boland Amendment, which Congress deliberately put there. Congress didn't want to decide about the Nicaraguan contras, and may have been content to allow the administration to decide. Anyway, the congressional probes lacked conviction and this made it possible for North and Poindexter to become national heroes. I'll be very surprised if they ever serve time for violating the Boland Amendment. Nobody I know favors Oliver North or John Poindexter going to jail.

Ripon Forum: But there is also the revelation by *The Washington Post's* Bob Woodward that the late CIA Director William Casey wanted to establish a shadow government to carry out foreign policy.

Eisenhower: I have always felt that this was the potentially serious aspect of Iran-

contra. If Congress had come up with proof that Iran-contra was one of many efforts to fund right-wing causes and a shadow government through arms sales and other means, then you would have something bigger than Watergate. That has not been the case.

Ripon Forum: In a recent article for *The New York Times Magazine* you wrote that "1988 will be an ideological contest, a test of whether America is, in fact, living in the conservative era Republicans forecast as long ago as 1971." Could you elaborate upon that statement?

Eisenhower: The Goldwater slogan in 1964—"in your heart you know he's right"—was an attempt to say that Americans really are conservative, even if they say they're liberal. And by 1971 or 1972, people were saying that somehow liberalism was violating or going beyond common sense. The Republican Party vic-

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tory in 1980 was proof that liberalism had done so. The question for 1988 is whether the conservative movement represents the common sense of the country.

One thing that will decide the question is whether the Democrats are really serious about winning the 1988 election. So far, they haven't shown many signs that they are. I suspect that many Democrats don't have a real quarrel with what is going on. Lacking one, they really have to invent one. That's a very hard thing to do, because natural leaders don't just fall out of the sky. Leaders and parties rise with causes over long periods of time.

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Ripon Forum: Is this where Jesse Jackson’s candidacy fits in?

Eisenhower: That’s an interesting question. The long range danger Republicans face is that they will become smug about the victory I think they will win in 1988. It’s good for the Republican Party to have a rush of Democrats trying to jump on the Reagan bandwagon, if that means Republicans have captured what the Democrats had in the 1930s, which was being the party of opportunity. That spirit is now in the Republican Party instead of the Democratic Party.

If the Republican Party is simply an assertion of the white middle and upper-middle class against everybody else, then the Republican majority will fade quickly. It will corrode us in the long run. That’s why George Bush’s theme of the ‘politics of inclusion’ is important.

Ripon Forum: But what about such Democrats as Al Gore, Sam Nunn and Bill Bradley, who are preaching from the center of the spectrum? Shouldn’t Republicans be aware of their attempt to restructure the Democratic Party?

Eisenhower: I don’t think they will. They simply confirm the status of the Republican Party as the governing party. Maybe it’s like Republican moderates in the 1940s who wanted to make the New Deal

a platform for a Republican administration. The “me-too” element of the Republican Party never really elected anybody, even my grandfather. His strength was that he combined the common sense of Roosevelt with what is really Republican in his emphasis on private enterprise and private remedies.

The next Democrat to be elected president will probably hail from their liberal wing. Like Reagan, the next Democratic president will have the complete trust of the party’s core elements. The Democrats probably can’t elect someone who’s trying to throttle the party faithful.

Ripon Forum: What about the so-called “baby boom” vote, which is made up of many socially progressive yet economically conservative voters? Many are in the political center and are independent voters. Shouldn’t the GOP also be concerned about capturing that vote?

Eisenhower: I think they have a large share without knowing it. The baby boom grew up during the 1964 Johnson-Goldwater race, so they had an adjustment to identify with the party of Goldwater. But I think they have. Reaganism is popular across-the-board.

Ripon Forum: But look at the voters that identified with John Anderson and Gary Hart in 1980 and 1984. Many of them were in the political center but without a particular party. In fact, the “baby boom” vote seems to wander aimlessly between parties.

Eisenhower: It’s a progressive perspective. Anderson, as I understand it, appealed to a leadership element within the Republican Party. They were problem-solvers and decision-makers. Hart was trying to appeal to them in 1984, but I’m not sure he was successful. Reagan has captured it by providing bright, energetic leadership in the Republican Party.

What has surprised me is how easily Republicans of all shades have found a home in the Reagan era. The Ripon Society may be an example, because there has not been the break with Reagan that occurred in the Democrat’s Lyndon Johnson-Bobby Kennedy split.

Ripon Forum: What about the moderate Republican “Gypsy Moths,” who pre-

vented too many deep cuts in the domestic budget in 1981 and 1982?

Eisenhower: There was a little bit of it, but it didn’t reach Johnson-Kennedy proportions.

Ripon Forum: My final question is about your chosen vocation. What led you to become a historian? Was it that you saw a lot of history first-hand at a relatively young age?

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Eisenhower: It was an accident. The Nixon question was still so intense in 1976. My wife, Julie, and I were both aware that many of the basic questions coming out of the shocks of the 1970s, such as the unhooking of the White House and the fall of Saigon, were still unanswered. We wanted to explore these questions and have a say.

But my initial research led me to Eisenhower, and within two months I had discovered that his war record was the basis of his presidency. I found myself going back to the Teheran Conference, which is the place where the Eisenhower presidency, and maybe even the modern presidency, began. The modern president now speaks for the NATO Alliance, and many of the issues the Alliance faces today had their roots in that Conference. We now take it a year at a time. We are now working on a project about 1968. ■