

## **THE AGE OF EISENHOWER: AMERICA AND THE WORLD IN THE 1950S**

(WILLIAM I. HITCHCOCK)

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I have always had a fascination with the 1950s, even though they ended many years before I was born. But I know little that is not trivia or surface knowledge. My excuse is that it seems difficult to find good histories of the 1950s that are not either narrowly focused or crammed with ideological claptrap blended with Baby Boomer preening (David Halberstam's awful *The Fifties* is an example of such a combination). This book, William Hitchcock's *The Age of Eisenhower*, seemed like a reasonable way to try to expand my knowledge.

Dwight Eisenhower presided over the 1950s, since he was President from 1953 until 1961. For the most part, Hitchcock's book is a good overview. True, despite the title and the author's claims, it's really mostly a biography of Eisenhower's presidency, not a tale of the age. But that's fine; the reader should not be heard to complain if he get a lot about Eisenhower in a book where the man himself stares into your eyes from the cover. Nor should the reader complain if the author focuses mostly on two topics, the Cold War and civil rights for African Americans. After all, as far as areas where the federal government was involved, those were the most important topics of the time, at least in retrospect, and while certainly those were not the whole of people's lives, or for many people of the time even very important, it's a reasonable choice to focus on those two areas to illuminate Eisenhower and his presidency, though it doesn't tell us much about society as a whole.

Hitchcock is a great admirer of Eisenhower, and it very evidently pains him how nasty and contemptuous the intellectuals of the 1950s and following decades were to him. They criticized Eisenhower as unintelligent, lacking taste, provincial and given to lowbrow pleasures like golf and poker, lazy (he took a lot of vacations), and inadequately ideological. Those intellectuals, legion and led by mediocre and nearly forgotten men like Norman Mailer and Arthur Schlesinger, hated Eisenhower in and of himself, and more so in comparison with John Kennedy, whose boots they licked even during the Eisenhower presidency, a groveling that turned to pure hagiography when Kennedy did himself a favor by

getting shot and thereby achieving apotheosis in spite of his middling abilities. One way to make someone look good is to run down his predecessors, so for decades, until Baby Boomer intellectuals were finally shoved into nursing homes, Eisenhower was treated like historical dirt.

Hitchcock's basic point is that Eisenhower was the right man for the right time—not perfect, to be sure, but pragmatic and flexible in an age when that was what was needed. In contrast to the stereotype peddled by the intellectuals, the author goes to great lengths to show that Eisenhower was disciplined and attentive to all the key matters of his presidency. That doesn't mean he always made the right choices, from the perspective of the time and even more in hindsight. But Hitchcock makes a compelling case that he did an excellent job, and that he was neither detached nor lazy.

The author deftly, and as far as I can tell accurately, covers in detail all the relevant hot spots of the Cold War during Eisenhower's terms in office: the big ones, such as Korea, the Soviet Union, the U-2 program, and the "missile gap," and the small ones, such as Guatemala, Suez, Hungary, Iraq, and Cuba (where Eisenhower endorsed and moved the Bay of Pigs invasion forward, but Kennedy inherited and bungled it by being too cowardly to provide the air and sea support Eisenhower had envisioned). In Hitchcock's telling, Eisenhower was far from a pushover, but he was loathe to endorse the aggressive recommendations that were the norm among both the professional military and his civilian advisors, such as Allen and John Foster Dulles. Still, Eisenhower and most of his generals casually assumed that in any conflict, such as with the Red Chinese over Quemoy and Matsu, that they would use tactical nuclear weapons. The United States tested twenty-eight bombs in July, 1957 and thirty-six in October, all on the surface of the Nevada desert. These things seem bizarre today.

Hitchcock also covers in detail the civil rights movement, something that Eisenhower generally but not viscerally supported. He was an incrementalist, believing that people would eventually come around to the right way of thinking and that aggressive federal government action would likely backfire. In the event, his hand was forced by both atrocities such as the Emmett Till murder and by the constant pressure of men such as Roy Wilkins and Martin Luther King, Jr., such that he was willing to send federal troops to enforce court integration orders

in Little Rock and supported modest civil rights legislation in Congress (which was gutted by Lyndon Johnson). Today, we are constantly told how emancipation is necessary for every group except one, and such “struggles” are compared to the struggle for African American civil rights. But we are never told why, for example, Latinos suffered injustice in any way comparable to African Americans. As this book makes very clear, they didn’t, nor did any other group. The African American experience was unique, and uniquely bad, in America, and the reader necessarily draws the obvious conclusion that black people are the only group deserving of emancipation, and perhaps even compensation. Nobody else.

Aside from the terminal decline of the Baby Boomers, Eisenhower’s reputation has gained shine for two other reasons. One is that it is the fate of every Republican president, no matter how moderate, to be pilloried by the Left while in office, but praised after his death as a model of virtue compared to today’s Republicans, in order to attack today’s Republicans. For the same reason that Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush are no longer attacked as slaving Hitlers, as they were during their presidencies, and John McCain and Mitt Romney are now praised as moderates, when they were portrayed as fascist racists when they actually posed a possible threat to the Left, so Eisenhower is also praised today, in order to score points in current political debates. That’s standard politics, of course, especially when the Left controls the news-setting media. But the second reason is more pernicious: the Left, who utterly dominates today’s historians, likes Eisenhower because he laid the groundwork for their massive erosion of American virtue, and of America itself, in in the 1960s and 1970s.

How? Eisenhower initiated the venerable Republican tradition of claiming that he was opposed to leftist victories, in particular the New Deal, and running on that position, but in office doing exactly the opposite and instead expanding the power of the Left. He thought that was the road to Republican success; “The Republican Party must be known as a progressive organization or it is sunk.” Eisenhower was the prototype of sixty years of loser Republicans, unconvinced of their own principles and unwilling to fight for them. And Eisenhower and Congressional Republicans delivered for their enemies, with such gifts as a massive expansion of Social Security and expansion of government

on all axes. Given that the Republicans suffered major losses in Congress in each of 1954, 1956, and 1958, during a time of prosperity and confidence, this strategy pretty evidently wasn't working as an electoral strategy, but that doesn't seem to have affected Eisenhower's devotion to it. Worse, Eisenhower appointed extremists like William Brennan and Earl Warren to the Supreme Court, allowing the Left to completely rewrite the Constitution. The only area in which Eisenhower consistently opposed the Left was foreign policy. But they quickly managed to undo all his work there, and in any case the foreign policy concerns of the 1950s are gone today. Thus, overall Eisenhower governed in a way that put no roadblocks in the path of the Left, and in fact smoothed their rise to power. It is no wonder today's leftist historians find much to like in Ike.

The author's justifiable focus on the Cold War and on civil rights makes the 1950s seem like an era of anxiety and injustice, but on those rare occasions when Hitchcock's focus turns elsewhere, what is clear is that it was a golden age. Everybody did well, not just the Lords of Tech and the crony capitalists. "The prosperity of the 1950s ran both deep and broad." Children were everywhere (even if they grew up to be Baby Boomers, the worst generation ever). The hand of government was unbelievably light compared to today (though not nearly as light as before the odious Progressives got their hands around America's throat in the early years of the twentieth century). Optimism ruled the day. We are often told of the 1950s that despite the attractive glow that surrounds any accurate description of it, that we are wrong to think it was a high point for America. Why we are wrong is rarely specified, and if it is, the complaints take the form of pointing to injustice (real in the case of African Americans, supposed, or largely supposed, in all other cases) and claiming without argument that the whole decade must therefore have been dreadful. It is a form of magic incantation, told to ward off the reality that the Left has destroyed what America once was, and perhaps still could have been.

What the reader takes most of all from this book is that the 1950s were the last time one could legitimately claim there was such a thing as an American, or an America. Those days are gone now, replaced by a country with the same name, but little commonality among the people inhabiting it. A man like Eisenhower could not be President

today, because there is no way to bind together oil and water by will. That makes Eisenhower not a lesson, but a historical curiosity. The future is found not in nostalgia, but in something new, not incremental, that will slice off the barnacles of our polity and re-bind it in a fresh form. About what that form will be, unfortunately, the America of the 1950s has little to say.