Books

Review: *Eisenhower in War and Peace*

By Jean Edward Smith '64GSAS (Random House)

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Dwight Eisenhower greets students and the press from the steps of Low Library shortly after his appointment as Columbia University president in 1948. (Manny Warman / Courtesy of Columbia University archives)

Trouble was already brewing in Morningside Heights when Dwight Eisenhower arrived to succeed Nicholas Murray Butler as president of Columbia in the spring of 1948. Six months earlier, the University's Marxist Study Group had invited the legislative director of the American Communist Party to speak in Pupin Hall, just as tensions were steadily escalating between the US and the Soviet Union. When a member of the Pupin family objected to having "Kremlin agents" speak on campus, Ike responded immediately. "I deem it not only unobjectionable but very wise to allow opposing systems to be presented by their proponents," he wrote to the family. "Indeed, I believe that arbitrary refusal to allow students — especially upon their own request — to hear the apostles of these false systems would create in their minds a justified suspicion that we ourselves fear a real comparison between democracy and dictatorship."

What stands out about this letter, aside from its decisiveness and commonsensicality, is the quality of the writing. Eisenhower wrote well because he thought clearly, as we learn from Jean Edward Smith '64GSAS in *Eisenhower in War and Peace*. His mind was steady and judicious, not incandescent and original.

Eisenhower's backers in the interwar military establishment were intellectuals. He was the protégé of the US Army's two most brilliant generals, Fox Conner and George Moseley. Future British prime minister Harold Macmillan called Eisenhower "a jewel of broadmindedness and wisdom." Both de Gaulle (whom Eisenhower effectively installed as president of France in 1944, over Roosevelt's misgivings) and Stalin (with whom Eisenhower carried on a correspondence) trusted him more than they trusted any other American.

It is unjust, then, that the man who led Allied troops to victory in World War II and managed eight years of peace and steadily rising prosperity as president should so often be cast as an eponym of mid-twentieth-century American incuriosity. Arthur Schlesinger Jr., for instance, wrote the year after Eisenhower left office, "We have awakened as from a trance."

Although he left few traces at Columbia, Eisenhower put the University — which had been suffering from poor fundraising and a dwindling endowment — back on a solid financial footing, unified the campus by getting the city to close 116th Street between Broadway and Amsterdam, and impressed a faculty that included Jacques Barzun and Richard Hofstadter with his command of history. When Joseph McCarthy accused a Columbia professor of Communist leanings, Eisenhower defended him

publicly and “handed McCarthy his first setback.” Yet, as Smith puts it, Eisenhower had “mastered” Columbia within a few months. By February 1949, he was already taking his first leave of absence (to chair the Joint Chiefs of Staff), and by the spring of 1950 his support at Columbia “had all but evaporated.” Ike soon accepted an assignment from President Truman to go build NATO in Europe.

While there is a good deal of primary research here, Smith’s strength is his sense of where the existing Eisenhower literature is reliable and where not. Smith served as an infantry officer in Berlin in the 1950s and has written biographies of Ulysses S. Grant and Lucius Clay; he is able to do justice to Eisenhower because he knows the military milieu intimately. He understands not just what it must have felt like for an officer to await weather reports on the eve of D-day but also what it felt like for Mamie Eisenhower and other Army wives (“no segment of society is more rank-conscious”) to dismantle a short-term apartment before moving on to another posting.

Smith, a political scientist at Marshall University, helps us to understand why Army chief of staff George C. Marshall promoted Eisenhower over 228 generals in June 1942 to make him commander of the European theater. Partly through intelligence and partly by accident, Eisenhower had accumulated the perfect resumé for directing the largest war effort in history. He had a gift for, and a fascination with, logistics. He was one of the rare officers of his generation — Patton, de Gaulle, and the German general Heinz Guderian were among the others — to have recognized during World War I that the tank would revolutionize warfare. He had commanded one infantry unit (the 15th) that had spent more than a decade in Asia, and another (the 24th) that was all black. His work in the 1920s surveying World War I battlefields for General “Black Jack” Pershing gave him a firsthand familiarity with the military terrain of northern Europe.

And like a straight man in a screwball comedy, Ike was unthreatened by the megalo-, mono-, and egomaniacs one meets at the top levels of competitive organizations. The lessons he learned working for the narcissist MacArthur and managing Patton’s uncontrolled outbursts would come in handy when reining in Richard Nixon, his vice president, whom he neither understood nor liked nor trusted.

No strategic genius, Eisenhower was a great manager of military and bureaucratic forces, as well as a patient and fast learner. He was versatile, too: in Normandy after D-day, grateful local farmers lent Eisenhower’s headquarters a cow so that the

officers might have fresh milk during the Allied advance. Eisenhower was the only one who knew how to milk it.

Smith is much stronger on Eisenhower's military achievements than on his political ones. There is something in Eisenhower's unflappability, in particular, his unwillingness to get too riled up about either the Cold War or domestic Communism, that Smith admires a lot. He clearly believes that we, living in an age of partisan extremes, tend to underestimate moderate presidents. Ike was decisive enough to desegregate Little Rock's schools with federal troops in 1957 but cool enough to avoid a confrontation with the Soviets over Berlin the following year. Eisenhower ended Truman's war in Korea and didn't start any of his own, consolidated NATO, kept taxes high, nominated Earl Warren to head the Supreme Court, built the interstate highway system, and brought the federal government into the business of local education.

Eisenhower governed at a time of unprecedented confidence in leadership. He was largely responsible for it. Triumph in World War II had lent enormous prestige to the US military, the hierarchical organization par excellence. The 1950s saw the institutions of politics, culture, and business reformed to imitate the military, particularly as those institutions filled up with returning veterans. American life became more organized, scientific, bureaucratic, uniform, pyramidal. The American system was capable of great feats, but it exacted a high price in individuality. It was inevitable that the next generation would revolt against it. Eisenhower, though, managed the system so that it not only produced few abuses but left a mostly positive legacy. He may have been the only person who could have done so.

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