

Contents

- Introduction by Melvyn Leffler, University of Virginia .......................................................... 2
- Review by Kathryn Cramer Brownell, Purdue University ....................................................... 5
- Review by Darren Dochuk, University of Notre Dame ........................................................... 8
- Review by Geoffrey Kabaservice, Niskanen Center (Washington, D.C.) .............................. 15
- Review by Kathryn C. Statler, University of San Diego .......................................................... 19
- Author’s Response by William I. Hitchcock, University of Virginia .................................... 23

© 2019 The Authors. 
Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 United States License.
William Hitchcock has written a superb synthesis of presidential decision-making during the Eisenhower era—on this point all the reviewers agree. The book is both analytically incisive and gracefully written. It is clearly organized and well researched, especially in the collections at the Eisenhower Library. It is tailored to please a popular audience as well as geared to a scholarly community. It deals extensively with foreign policy and military strategy, but contains interesting chapters on President Dwight Eisenhower’s handling of Senator Joseph McCarthy, the economy, and, most of all, the civil rights of African-Americans. Hitchcock crafts a satisfying middle ground between the early critics of Eisenhower and the subsequent revisionists who heaped great praise on the president’s skillful decision-making. Moreover, the book situates the president’s decision-making adroitly in the larger socio-economic-political context of mid-century America.

Hitchcock’s overall theme is that Eisenhower was one of the most ‘consequential’ presidents of modern U.S. history. Hitchcock shrewdly elides simplistic praise or criticism. Instead he crafts a textured portrait illuminating Ike’s accomplishments and failures, his insights and shortsightedness. Eisenhower, the reviewers agree, was a conservative, traditional man who struggled to overcome his own limitations. In so doing he bequeathed a ‘consequential’ legacy: the warfare state; the welfare state; and the disciplined presidency.

The reviewers embrace Hitchcock’s contention that Eisenhower embodied the contradictions of his age. “Rather than simply chronicling a man in power,” writes Kathryn Cramer Brownell, “Hitchcock provides a portrait of a nation that was well intentioned but hypocritical; proud and anxious; prosperous for some but poverty-stricken for others; religious but bereft of a moral compass.” Geoffrey Kabaservice agrees, quoting Hitchcock: “Eisenhower’s success lay in his ability to balance, in his own person and in his policies, the contradictions in American society.” Eisenhower, stresses Kabaservice, “presided over an age that was both moralistic and materialistic, nostalgic and progressive, and attached to old-fashioned nostrums and individual self-reliance as well as committed to a robust social safety net and permanent government intervention in the economy.”

The reviewers point out some weaknesses in the volume. Kathryn Statler notes that some of the big themes of the book disappear in the historical narrative. She also disagrees with Hitchcock’s analysis of Eisenhower’s handling of the crisis in Indochina in 1954, stressing that the president consciously deepened the U.S. commitment in the region even while avoiding direct military intervention in behalf of the French. Kabaservice highlights Hitchcock’s overall ambivalence about Eisenhower’s foreign policy: the author’s positive overall assessment of Eisenhower’s leadership, Kabaservice suggests, is “undercut by his negative judgment of the Cold War as a whole and aspects of Eisenhower’s leadership of it.” On the one hand, Eisenhower perpetuated the containment strategy that eventually led to victory in the Cold War, but, on the other hand, he overcommitted the United States in the Third World, left a bitter legacy, and revealed a failure of “moral imagination.” Likewise, Kabaservice notes that Hitchcock praises Eisenhower as a shrewd manager of the nation’s economy but does not really analyze how the president achieved success. More significantly, Darren Dochuk emphasizes that the reader “is left to wrestle with why and how—beyond the president’s death—the Age of Eisenhower went away. It is left to the reader to ponder the degree to which Eisenhower himself helped sow the seeds of that age’s demise.”

Notwithstanding these passing criticisms, all the reviewers concur that Hitchcock has written the best volume that has so far appeared on the Eisenhower years. Even more importantly, Kathryn Cramer Brownell
concludes, Hitchcock vividly shows that “the field of political history is thriving,” partly because Hitchcock so skillfully links diplomatic history—his specialty—with urban, legal, cultural, and social history. I would agree: Hitchcock has gifted us with a book that not only vividly illuminates American life and presidential decision-making in the 1950s but that also serves as a model for writing the presidential history of many eras.

Participants:

William I. Hitchcock is the William W. Corcoran Professor of History at the University of Virginia. He received his B.A. degree from Kenyon College in 1986, and his Ph.D. from Yale University in 1994. His work has examined the international, diplomatic and military history of the 20th century, in particular the era of the world wars and the cold war. His 2008 book, The Bitter Road to Freedom: A New History of the Liberation of Europe (New York: Free Press), was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize, and the winner of the AHA’s George Louis Beer Prize. His most recent book, The Age of Eisenhower: America and the World in the 1950s (Simon & Schuster) appeared in March 2018.


Kathryn Cramer Brownell is associate professor of history at Purdue University and co-editor of Made by History at the Washington Post. Her first book, Showbiz Politics: Hollywood in American Political Life, examines the institutionalization of entertainment styles and structures in American politics during the twentieth century and the rise of the celebrity presidency. Along with contributing book chapters to recent edited collections that explore the American presidency and the role of media in American political history, she has also recently published articles in Journal of Policy History, Presidential Studies, and Modern American History. She is now working on a new book project, Republic of Entertainment: Cable Television and the Transformation of American Democracy, which examines the political origins and implications of policy transformation regarding the cable industry from the Nixon administration through the Clinton years.

Darren Dochuk is Associate Professor of History at the University of Notre Dame. He studied at Simon Fraser University and Queen’s University in Canada before completing a Ph.D. at Notre Dame in 2005. He has authored and co-edited several books, including From Bible Belt to Sunbelt: Plain-Folk Religion, Grassroots Politics, and the Rise of Evangelical Conservatism (New York: W.W. Norton, 2011), and most recently, with Jerald Podair, The Routledge History of the Twentieth-Century United States (New York: Routledge, 2018). Basic Books will publish his new book, Anointed with Oil: How Christianity and Crude Made Modern America, in spring 2019.

Geoffrey Kabaservice is director of political studies at the Niskanen Center in Washington, D.C. He has a Ph.D. in history from Yale University, where he has taught as a visiting assistant professor of American history. He is the author of, among other works, The Guardians: Kingman Brewster, His Circle, and the Rise of

Kathryn C. Statler is Professor of History at the University of San Diego. She is author of Replacing France: The Origins of American Intervention in Vietnam (The University Press of Kentucky, 2007), co-editor (with Andrew Johns) of The Eisenhower Administration, the Third World and the Globalization of the Cold War, 1953-1961 (Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), and contributor to numerous journals and compilations. She is currently at work on a history of the Franco-American alliance, from the American Revolution to the present, titled Lafayette’s Ghost.
Few academics would call themselves presidential historians. Those who claim that title are overwhelmingly outside of history departments—Michael Beschloss, Jon Meacham, and Doris Kerns Goodwin, for example. With their bold stories of presidential leadership, they command a broad public readership. But they also avoid engaging in the historiographical discussions about institutions, movements, and ideas that shape cutting-edge academic research. The result is a divide between what the public reads about history and what historians are writing.

William Hitchcock has bridged this divide by digging into a topic that many academics would dismiss as a ‘dead’ field of inquiry: the presidency. In an engaging, beautifully written, and extensively researched book, Hitchcock hits both his academic and popular marks by fusing a study of dynamic personalities with the social and cultural structures that influence their leadership choices.

*The Age of Eisenhower: American and the World in the 1950s* traces the life of President Eisenhower, but it is notably not a biography. It chronicles international relations and the Cold War, the influence of corporate forces in American political life, the celebration of American democracy, and the reality of its fruits being given almost exclusively to white men. Readers of traditional presidential history will be happy with the way the book brings Eisenhower the person to life. However, Hitchcock also deftly shows how the president embodied the possibilities and contradictions of the postwar period as America joined the international stage. Eisenhower, like so many Americans, was shaped by the Great Depression and his experiences during World War II. He connected to the majority of white Americans who cast votes for his election during the 1950s by professing a commitment to masculinity, individualism, and religiosity. He was comfortable with promising democracy abroad while maintaining the reality of oppression for women and minorities. He hosted stag parties at the White House to pursue ‘men’s’ business of government while his wife Mamie was proudly feminine, domestic, and on a budget. He struggled to stand up to Senator Joseph McCarthy and stalled on civil rights, although he knew that both were a stain on the morality of the nation. Rather than simply chronicling a man in power, Hitchcock provides a portrait of a nation—one that was well-intentioned but hypocritical; proud but anxious; prosperous for some but poverty-stricken for others; religious but bereft of a moral compass.

Too frequently, popular histories of presidents get lost in anecdotes, stories of quirky personalities that engage the reader by diversion. As a result, the focus on biography can undermine efforts to understand the presidency as an institution and overlook the range of individuals—advisers, staffers, CIA operatives, or grassroots activists—who ultimately shape decisions that are made in the White House. Hitchcock’s book does the opposite. In fact, with vivid prose, he uses a range of personalities to show how deeply connected the presidency is to the legal, international, and social structures of American life. Eisenhower’s informal Kitchen Cabinet of an advertising executive, the founder of the Master’s golf tournament at Augusta, an oil entrepreneur, and an executive from Coca-Cola illuminates the exclusive social structures of white male power during the postwar era, as well as the very industries that ushered in what Lizbeth Cohen has called the “Consumers’ Republic.” Secretary of State John Foster Dulles and his brother Allen, who headed the CIA, personify the contradictions of Eisenhower’s foreign policy. They both pushed for the idea of peace and used

---

personal diplomacy to calm tensions with the Soviet Union, but also simultaneously used covert operations of
torture, murder, and even assassinations to undermine these very goals. Through Attorney General Herbert
Brownell, Hitchcock reveals the ways in which the presidency is intertwined in the legal structures of society.
A frustrated Brownell wrote legal briefs and pushed for the nomination of Earl Warren as Chief Justice on the
Supreme Court in an effort to reshape a justice system that had put the law behind segregation and the forces
of white supremacy.

Throughout the book, Hitchcock addresses the questions that have long captured the attention of presidential
historians: Was Eisenhower a hawk or a dove? Did he advance or thwart civil rights? Did he bring down
Senator Joseph McCarthy or aid his rise? As a leader was he indifferent, dynamic, or conniving? These
questions, which have animated scholarship on Eisenhower since the late 1960s, have focused on the man—
his attributes, his qualities, and his impact. While Hitchcock acknowledges these questions, the strength of
this book is in how he reframes them to provide a more nuanced and insightful examination of the “Age of
Eisenhower.” He does not simply praise or critique Eisenhower. Rather, by connecting archival research from
the Eisenhower library—some of it newly declassified—with more recent scholarship in the field of American
political history on civil rights, corporations, religion and conservatism, Hitchcock makes a convince
argument about how the President exposed the deeper problems of the country. “The key to Eisenhower’s
success lay in his ability to balance, in his own person and policies, the contradictions of American society…. By
personifying and reconciling these contradictions, he made Americans believe that they, like him, could
have it all” (245).

These contradictions are not only central to understanding America in the postwar period as the country
celebrated its defense of freedom abroad while sustaining oppression and inequality at home, but they also
help us understand the paradoxes built into the modern American presidency during Eisenhower’s
administration. Hitchcock shows how Eisenhower’s military background made him disciplined in how he
used his authority. But, he did expand the power of the presidency and ingrain a precedent of taking action
“largely hidden from the scrutiny of Congress or the public” (174). As a result, he set a “pattern that would
bedevil America for decades: the closing off of national security decision-making from even the most cursory
review by elected officials or the public.” Likewise, he also supported violent authoritarian regimes to contain
Communism, believing that the “ends justified the means” (433). By doing so, he created executive
institutions and practices—using the CIA and its reliance on “spies and saboteurs” to fight the Cold War for
example—that his successors used for their personal advantage. For all the institutional power he built into

---


As Hitchcock notes, Stephen Ambrose’s Eisenhower scholarship has been under scrutiny for fabricating
interviews and quotations. More recent work on Eisenhower includes Peter G. Boyle, Eisenhower (New York: Pearson,
2005). Hitchcock explores all of these works and more in a terrific and thorough “Note of Eisenhower Scholarship,” at
the end of the book, 523-529.

3 For example, he builds on scholarship in a flourishing field of American political history including: Mary
Dudziak, Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy (Princeton: Princeton University Press,
2001); Kim Phillips-Fein, Invisible Hands: The Making of the Conservative Movement from the New Deal to Reagan (New
York: W.W. Norton, 2009); Darren Dochuk, From Bible Belt to Sunbelt: Grassroots Politics and the Rise of Evangelical
the presidency, he also showed how political pressures and fears—like retaliation from McCarthy or white segregationists—could limit his “moral imagination” (434). And so, while he eagerly expanded the role of the federal government in Americans’ lives when it came to infrastructure and middle-class entitlements, he was reluctant to do so when it came to securing the rights of African Americans.

Hitchcock uses these contradictions to tell us not just about Eisenhower, but about the limitations of the presidency. He demonstrates how inextricably bound the man and the office are to the broader social, cultural, and political context and how partisan pressures, political calculations, moral blinders, and bureaucratic pressures shape the options the White House occupant considers. In his chapter on civil rights, Hitchcock shows how influential social movements and activists can be in pushing a recalcitrant president into action. It was the pressure from figures like Fred Murrow, the only African American member of Eisenhower’s administration, and activists like Martin Luther King Jr. and Roy Wilkins, that pushed him to use the federal government to intervene in passing legislation and in committing troops to mandate the integration of Little Rock High School in Arkansas. As Hitchcock argues, Eisenhower was a “social conservative, a man unused to change, wary of challenging hierarchy… and yet—and here is the real story, Eisenhower overcame his limitations” (347). As Hitchcock shows, he did so not because he had a conversion experience, but because the courts, the Justice Department, and the civil rights movement forced him to do so.

The field of political history is thriving, in part due to its intersections with diplomatic history and the fields of legal, urban, cultural, and social history. The presidency needs to be part of these conversations. As Hitchcock illuminates, it is a central source of power and authority because of the institutional changes that happened under Dwight Eisenhower. His presidency taught the country to accept not just a powerful federal government, but a powerful president, and the debate over the positive and negative effects of these changes has been at the heart of recent American history. The Age of Eisenhower shows how scholars can embrace presidential history, and it provides a model for exactly how to do so, in ways that combine both academic rigor and popular appeal.
William Hitchcock has written the definitive biography of President Dwight Eisenhower, displaying a measure of tact, acumen, fire, and grace that is only appropriate for a president who embodied those traits.

Until now, that rare authorial command has been lacking. Contemporaries often dismissed Eisenhower as a know-nothing, do-nothing president who golfed more (and better) than he governed (xii). Norman Mailer lambasted his White House as “tasteless, sexless, odorless sanctity,” while even John F. Kennedy had his own sharp opinion. When history had its chance to evaluate his predecessor, he surmised, the thirty-fourth president would likely rank near that number in leadership, “way below Truman; even below Hoover” (xiii). As Hitchcock instructively charts in the Prologue, that tune changed by the early 1970s: once written off as aloof, Eisenhower now appeared “malevolent and brilliant” (xiv). After the opening of his presidential library in the late 1970s, and with it unplumbed sources, the record began to shift yet again; not only was Eisenhower engaged, he also jumped off the pages of revised history as a highly effective leader, both principled and pragmatic—“a problem-solver who dominated his cabinet, the military, and the bureaucracy and put his imprint on the age” (xvi).

It is on that leveled foundation that Hitchcock approaches his subject, yet he does so with an intensity and high regard that also harkens back to the first generation of Eisenhower interpreters, those who wore their feelings for the man—positive or negative—on the sleeve. The Age of Eisenhower, in that vein, hoes a clear and direct argumentative path. Drawing on a trove of newly availed primary documents, as well as the scholarship of others, Hitchcock constructs a breathtakingly expansive and detailed—truly magisterial—rendering that provides ample and lively proof for his “decisive verdict”: “Dwight Eisenhower must be counted among the most consequential presidents of modern American history” (xvi). Why? Because he “shaped the United States in at least three lasting ways” (xvi).

In the first place, Hitchcock argues, Eisenhower “dramatically expanded the power and scope of the 20th-century warfare state and put into place a long-term strategy designed to wage, and win, the cold war” (xvi). Hitchcock spends considerable time charting the heavy lifting his subject performed in this sphere of power. He does so because it is the sphere in which Eisenhower was most comfortable, effective, and active. Relatively frugal elsewhere, Eisenhower spared no expense in constructing a massive, modern military, and in expanding a military industrial complex that “mobilized science, universities, and industry to boost American military power” to the extent of militarizing space itself (xvii). On the ground, but still out of sight, he committed the United States to an aggressive mode of covert operations around the world that facilitated coups d’état and regime changes in service of its interests. His “military colossus of a scale and lethality never before seen” annually cost the nation an unprecedented ten percent of its GDP, and thrust the man himself into a web of ironies he would never escape. His approval of the U-2 reconnaissance flights, and simultaneous coup plotting of 1953-1954 (in Guatemala and Iran), Hitchcock observes, “set a pattern that would bedevil America for decades: the closing off of national security decision-making from even the most cursory review by elected officials or the public” (175). It would also reveal an enduring paradox in the former General’s presidency: that a man who sold democratic values as the nation’s bedrock easily flouted them in the name of national security.

There would be other paradoxes in Eisenhower’s presidency, of course—another being his late career denouncement of the military complex he himself built, but while Hitchcock points to these, he does not
dwell on them, instead underscoring the brilliance of Eisenhower the tactician. As evidenced here and in his previous writings, Hitchcock is comfortable and proficient in this field of exploration, suggesting another possible reason for the *The Age of Eisenhower*’s extended treatment of the president’s world turns. Whatever the case, Hitchcock makes his assessment perfectly clear: “Eisenhower’s approach to international affairs was masterful” (516). With the exception of his use of covert operations, which showed “less restraint,” the Commander in Chief pursued a policy of “patience rather than provocation”—one of deliberateness, robustness, and calculation in the construction of a mobilized state and liberal democratic international system, and containment of Communism (109).

The two longest chapters of Hitchcock’s book nimbly map out separate examples of that approach. In one he offers a blow-by-blow account of the critical spring of 1954, when Eisenhower dealt with escalating uncertainty in Indochina. Decisive, and fully in charge, the president was adamant that U.S. troops would not be sent to Indochina to replace the defeated French and occupy the frontline of containment in the region. “This war in Indochina would absorb our troops by divisions!” he predicted in one critical confab, foreshadowing what was to come a decade later (185). So, how to respond? Eisenhower carefully weighed every option, Hitchcock writes, and “used every other tool at his disposal”: he sent support to the French, explored a multi-national military response, ratcheted up public talk about falling dominos, and practiced “nuclear brinkmanship” in order to deter the Chinese from filling the gap left by the departing French—all of this in hopes of pursuing “his broader goal of containment while avoiding war” (179; 209). Dealt a difficult hand, in other words, Eisenhower handled the crisis as well as possible; yet by relying on these tactics, which, Hitchcock allows, were insufficient in their totality, he “also sowed many of the seeds that would yield a harvest of sorrow in later years” (179). Eisenhower is not to be let off the hook, in other words, for the tangled, deadly politics of the region in which the U.S. would become increasingly embroiled; whether he was restrained by external forces such as U.S. Congress or the British government (a line of argument that Fredrik Logevall has recently underscored), or his own cautious grappling—the fact is he acted with restraint, but only in the moment, with limited vision of damage already set in motion. Nor should he be praised (as some scholars have insisted) for single-handedly keeping the peace. Hitchcock’s measured assessment of Eisenhower’s actions in Asia “lies somewhere in between” (179): neither hawk nor dove, the president operated in the middle of a fury with a general’s ground-level aim simply to map the next immediate step through the fog.

Hitchcock’s appraisal of a second crisis rings with similarly balanced judgment but also higher praise. During October and November of 1956, amid the U.S. presidential election, Eisenhower faced two potential powder kegs of world war. At the same time that the British, French, and Israelis pressed forward to invade Egypt and reclaim the Suez Canal, Soviet tanks rolled into Budapest, Hungary to put down the country’s anti-Soviet revolt. Over a ten-day period in early November, Eisenhower deftly diffused both crises; he unflinchingly placed public (and economic) pressure on the British and French and compelled them to accept U.N. peace actions in the region, and in Hungary he finessed American support for the anti-communist protestors while staying above the fray. “Anyone wishing to make the case for Eisenhower as a master of the arts of politics and diplomacy,” Hitchcock writes, need only look to this remarkable sequence (320). In the closing paragraphs of this insightful chapter, Hitchcock underscores the degree to which Eisenhower’s actions in the Suez marked a wider watershed. In early January 1957, with the unveiling of the “Eisenhower Doctrine,” he made it clear

---

that the U.S. would assume control of matters and a place once overseen by the British and French. “It was as if a curtain had been pulled back on the real American strategy,” Hitchcock writes; “Eisenhower boldly asserted an American obligation to police the Middle East” (339).

For the rest of his second term, Eisenhower did indeed take charge of the region, in a manner and to a degree that Hitchcock might have spelled out a bit more, if only to reinforce his central point. One of the strengths of *The Age of Eisenhower* is its structure: while proceeding chronologically through Eisenhower’s presidency, its individual chapters cluster around core pivots and themes—McCarthyism in one, for instance; civil rights in another. That episodic approach serves Hitchcock extremely well, as it provides ample room for deeper interrogation of key junctures in Eisenhower’s political evolution. Yet at times it also forces him to cut short threads of development that wove seamlessly through Eisenhower’s presidency. The Middle East is a case in point, as Eisenhower’s January 1957 declaration that the U.S. would “fight to protect its interests” there (something the U.S. continues to do six decades later, Hitchcock rues in the chapter’s final line) was merely a prelude to a years-long effort to draw the region into American jurisdiction (340). As emergent struggles (like, for instance, Lebanon circa 1958) demonstrated, Eisenhower certainly policed the region with more resolve. But, as historians such as William Inboden, Nathan Citino, and Kenneth Osgood have shown, he also rejected a simple defensive posture.2 His was an active quest, facilitated by deft use of media—and even his own Presbyterian pastor, Edward Elson—to win favor in the Middle East through appeals to shared economic, political—and religious—values. Such propaganda was accompanied by the very public courting of Saudi Arabia’s King Saud as the West’s answer to the charismatic Egyptian nationalist Gamal Abdel Nasser. Military agreements and joint appeals to a Saudi-American ‘moral alliance’ based on shared monotheism followed, resulting in a rare—and in light of subsequent years, remarkable—acknowledgment of a Protestant-Catholic-Muslim brotherhood through which the U.S. could gain traction in King Saud’s home region. Eisenhower’s actions did not result in the long-term stabilization he sought, of course, yet they again demonstrated his willingness to weigh all options, maximize all resources at his disposal, and don all hats of responsibility—be it as political tactician or amateur theologian—to advance U.S. interests in the world.

Eisenhower marshaled those same traits to advance his agenda at home, on domestic turf. While offering a wide-angled lens on Eisenhower’s global interventions, Hitchcock also offers plenty of rich insight on matters closer to home. The second reason why Eisenhower was consequential, he argues, has to do with how he “recast domestic politics by strengthening a national consensus about the place of government in the lives of American citizens” (xvii). Pragmatic and centrist in his leanings, the president wished for the body politic to assume that same posture. Ideologically, with his “pendulum in the dead center,” he “made his peace with the New Deal” and governed with an eye to the common good and a “Middle Way”—emphasizing social welfare, public works and education, and even health care as worthy of his attention (xvii; 265). Yet, as Hitchcock emphasizes, Eisenhower “found a way to make government work without making it too big” (xviii). Case in point: his construction of the interstate highway system, a signature piece of his presidency. Rather than relying on the federal treasury, Eisenhower looked to user fees (through gas taxation, for instance), and in that way built a road system that Americans wanted, and would pay for, without Washington footing the bill.

---

Always the technician as well as the tactician, Eisenhower flourished in road building but less so in the pressing social issues of his day, race being the most critical. Exhibiting the same temperament as the elite businessmen with whom he rubbed shoulders (and leaned on for advice in his cabinet), Eisenhower championed individual rights and freedom, but preferred that government not be their sole arbiter and protector (89). That attitude did not serve him well when it came to civil rights struggles. At the outset, Hitchcock observes, Eisenhower was unprepared; not unlike most white, small-town Americans at his time, the Kansan “knew nothing of the crisis of black life in modern America” (214). Over time, as he grew into his military role and position among the elite, he changed little; “He had no black friends, no black teachers, no black role models, and no black colleagues,” Hitchcock notes, and he played golf at the white-male-only August National Golf Club (214-215). Practically speaking, “he simply had no inkling that the struggle for African American civil rights was going to become perhaps the defining social problem of his era and of the next half-century” (215). All that, Hitchcock argues, is reason both to critique the man and concede him some benefit of doubt.

It also demonstrates how far and quickly he moved on matters once in office. That was not immediately apparent; while campaigning in 1952, Eisenhower avoided taking a stand on civil rights, and when he did address the issue, his default position was to acknowledge that segregation was an “unpleasant and probably wrong” condition of society that required time—and changed hearts and minds, not government action—to address (214). As his presidency wore on, however, Eisenhower’s attitudes and actions began to change. He maneuvered his attorney general, Herbert Brownell, into the thick of federal court proceedings that tested Jim Crow laws, advanced initiatives begun in his predecessor’s presidency to desegregate the military, and resurrected a “little FEPC”—the Government Contracts Committee—to rid employment practices of racial discrimination (217, 220). By mid-decade, after Brown v. Board and as civil rights actions intensified, Eisenhower faced numerous challenges of a weightier sort. Caught between southern conservatives—many of whom were his friends and allies—and liberals in his party, he found himself in a tough spot, preferring to “go-slow” yet compelled to do something (229). He increasingly resented that fact, his “enthusiasm notably cooled,” and for a time he abandoned “those who yearned for some sign from America’s most powerful and popular leader that their struggle was also his” (232-233; 243). Yet, as Hitchcock details in a subsequent chapter, Eisenhower did not retreat altogether. During his second term he fought his natural impulses as a law-and-order and states’-rights man to marshal the federal government against segregation. He supported Brownell’s efforts to pass a Civil Rights act in 1957; and he sent federal troops into Little Rock, Arkansas, to enforce school desegregation (348). In the end, Hitchcock judicially concludes, Eisenhower may have “muddled through the racial turmoil” of his day, “and [yet] here is the real story, he overcame his limitations” (376; 347-348).

On another key social issue of the day—religion—the president was more animated and direct, and in Hitchcock’s eyes, successful. While he navigates Eisenhower’s racial politics gingerly—giving him slightly more credit for civil rights progress than most historians have offered, Hitchcock’s treatment of the president’s faith politics is unhesitant. Here he follows the lead of several historians, including Kevin Kruse, in stressing the instrumentality of Eisenhower’s faith.3 Although he grew up in a devout Protestant sect (River Brethren),

---

and would always look to Scripture for guidance, Eisenhower did not attend church regularly until he was 62 (245). At the urging of evangelist—and soon to be trusted confidant—Billy Graham, the new president picked Washington’s National Presbyterian Church, pastored by Edward Elson, as his home congregation; Elson baptized him, in fact, marking the first time a sitting president underwent that ritual. Thereafter, Eisenhower baptized the entire national project in an aura of Judeo-Christianity. Through his speechmaking, networking with clerics, and posturing and politicking, the president convinced Americans that their nation was built on a foundation of faith, and could only hold together if that fact was ritually observed. The religious decrees “In God We Trust” and “One Nation Under God” became America’s mantras as it fought godless Communism. Eisenhower and his partners purposefully linked those truisms to capitalism as well. “With God, prosperity, and individual freedom at work on America’s side,” he preached to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, “we cannot lose; we simply cannot lose” (252).

Such open displays of “public piety, moralism, and prophetic speech” gave Eisenhower direct access to the hearts of earnest and embattled Cold War American citizens, while also shoring up his image in their eyes—the crux of Hitchcock’s final core assertion (249). A third reason why Eisenhower was consequential, he argues, is that he “established a distinctive model of presidential leadership” that might be called “the disciplined presidency” (xviii). Raised in strict and modest conditions, Eisenhower internalized the bootstrap individualism and expectations of modesty embraced by his family, and as he rose through the ranks of the military and politics, he turned that philosophy into a social ethic. As president he insisted on “vigilance, discipline, restraint, and individual self-reliance” as key traits that the entire country needed to internalize. “Most significant,” Hitchcock writes, was the fact that “he believed, the American system could endure only if citizens willingly imposed self-discipline and prepared themselves to bear the common burden of defending free government” (xix). That bi-partisan morality did not always, or easily, translate into effective politics. In the age of abundance, self-control was not necessarily a popular message; and in the midst of heated partisanship, pledges for modesty and humility were not the best way to generate attention and votes. But it worked, Hitchcock writes, because Eisenhower was authentic, and at his core, moral and transparent.

And it worked, Hitchcock adds, because that authenticity registered with the times, and resonated with the American people as exemplary, and something to emulate. Not that Eisenhower’s genuineness was ever predictable or flat, as his critics liked to suggest; quite to the contrary, his own internal contradictions and flaws—and range or propensities—reflected the schizophrenic nature of 1950s America as a whole, and in that way deepened his connection to the people. On the one hand, Hitchcock notes, Eisenhower was a “paragon of masculinity,” a “beer-and-hot dog man” who loved to laugh and play golf, bridge, and poker with friends; on the other he was a sensitive man who felt crushed by the death of John Foster Dulles, his Secretary of State, fellow Presbyterian, and friend, and in formal settings enjoyed “pheasant under glass”; he was middlebrow to the core—conservative in dress, discipline, and manners—but also highbrow and refined, comfortable among the power elite of his time; he was all Texas and Kansas, yet also New York in his outlook on life (40; 245-246; 417). It was that very dynamic combination of traits, and his “ability to balance, in his own person and in his policies, the contradictions in American society,” Hitchcock astutely observes, that made him likeable and believable to so many (245). And, in turn, by that finesse “he brought Americans together” in a fashion rarely seen in U.S. politics (xx).

Hitchcock’s portrait of the man (and the age he defined), in this regard, is not only richly textured and fair, but timely, and thought provoking. Hitchcock could not have imagined his book would have so much reason to engage readers in their contemporary context; but it does, of course, because of what it has to say about the absence of the disciplined presidency (and disciplined citizenry) in the present day. “Now more than ever,”
Hitchcock asserts in his opening pages, it is incumbent on us to revisit an era and the leadership qualities of those who shaped it as a way forward (xvii). We should do so to better understand the differences between then and now, certainly; but also, perhaps, to ask when and how things changed.

On that latter score, Hitchcock’s book has slightly less to offer. Compelling from beginning to end, The Age of Eisenhower nevertheless concludes somewhat suddenly at the point of Eisenhower’s death—and with it his era of leadership—in the mid-1960s. In the final two pages Hitchcock wraps up the president’s legacy, as well as his own argument, and underscores again the degree to which Eisenhower provided the American people a “model of loyalty, dignity, and decency,” and worked “for the good of his country” (517). “Eisenhower lent his name to the age,” he concludes, “And his people knew they had lived in the presence of greatness” (517). It is left to the reader to wrestle with why and how—beyond the president’s death—the Age of Eisenhower went away. It is also left to the reader to ponder the degree to which Eisenhower himself helped sow the seeds of that age’s demise. Hitchcock certainly offers some clues throughout his text, for instance in his discussion of Barry Goldwater’s late-1950s critique of Eisenhower’s foreign policy as passive and weak—claims around which conservatives subsequently rallied. Yet already in the second term of his presidency, several constituents of the Eisenhower coalition had grown disillusioned, and, on account of the President’s action (and inaction), were determined to shift their political energies elsewhere.

Not many would have predicted that outcome in 1952, when he ran for president, but the campaign itself presaged that turn. Hitchcock makes the shrewd point that Eisenhower campaigned differently than he governed; in 1952 especially he “jumped into the mess of electoral politics with gusto” and was “vehement, polemical, and partisan” in his crusading, excoriating President Franklin Roosevelt, New Deal liberalism, and “statism” at each juncture (66). Here was another contradiction to the gentleman statesman, one that Hitchcock acknowledges, yet does not fully plumb or flesh out (66). Two types of constituents responded especially well to Eisenhower’s sharp-edged overtures, and stayed with him for a while before the bitterness of unfulfilled promises wore them down: evangelicals in Billy Graham’s camp, and southwestern oilmen in Sid Richardson’s, both of whom helped recruit him to the GOP presidential ticket.

In the case of the former, Eisenhower most certainly stood out for his “public piety, moralism, and prophetic speech,” but also for his willingness to allow them a seat at the table of policy making and power. Whereas his successor lambasted Graham on one occasion for leading his team of evangelists in public prayer on the White House grounds, Eisenhower encouraged such gestures, and asked that the evangelist broadcast his beliefs to a nation in need of faith. Inspired by the president’s proclamations of a Nation under God, and empowered by their proximity to him, Graham’s allies in America’s pulpits and pews began coalescing into a cultural and political front that could extend the president’s mandate. Yet even as they marshaled a movement to ensure that their society stood for God, the courts started whittling away at their privileged standing in schools and public settings, and by his second term, Eisenhower himself seemed to be advocating a wishy-washy theology of inclusion over truth. Inspired and nurtured by Eisenhower, in other words, the evangelical culture war for Christian America rapidly—and seamlessly—turned against the ideals and structures of governance he sought to advance. Initially a paragon of Christian virtue, he and his presidency would soon become a symbol of secularism’s advance.

Richardson and his peers’ short dalliance with Eisenhower was no different, or any less consequential. In 1952 they gravitated toward Eisenhower—and for the first time, the GOP—because of his promises to protect their free access to offshore (tidelands) oil from Washington’s encroaching reach, and guarantee their economic viability in a rapidly expanding global corporate sector controlled by large, multinational major companies
and dictated by new drilling in Saudi Arabia and the Middle East. Despite their initial approval of Eisenhower as their heroic counterweight against Washington ‘land grabs,’ these independent oil producers found the president less likeable as his presidency unfolded. His lack of further decisive action on the tidelands, his vetoing of bills exempting them from rate controls and federal regulation (which hampered their ability to compete against big oil, they said), his ‘moral alliance’ with Saudi Arabia and its American-Saudi run oil conglomerate, and especially his unwillingness to impose tariffs on foreign oil led to their disillusionment. Eisenhower, meanwhile, mocked them: “their number is negligible and they are stupid,” he quipped, in response to the once-friendly Texas oil millionaires who now groused about him (259). By 1956, Eisenhower had lost their trust; Richardson’s protest vote for the Democratic ticket in 1956 was indicative of a wider backlash that quickly gathered steam, and in short order commandeered the Republican Party, dismantled the Eisenhower agenda, and created a new age in which we now live.

These are minor curiosities perhaps reserved for someone writing about these very topics; yet they also point to a wider line of questioning pertaining to Eisenhower’s politicking. As statesman and president with public grace, Eisenhower clearly appealed to America’s better side. But as crusading politician, comfortable working backchannels, he also stirred the passions and insistencies, courted the very people and their money, and triggered some of the very fights—over family values and corporate freedoms, energy independence and school prayer—that would linger well past his day, and undo the age of order and civility that he had worked hard to create. In this ironic sense he was even more consequential than William Hitchcock’s magnum opus allows.
William Hitchcock’s *The Age of Eisenhower* is a stellar, groundbreaking portrayal of the Eisenhower presidency. It pulls apart the analytical frameworks that previously had been used to examine the 34th commander-in-chief and puts them back together in a way that compels a rethinking of both Eisenhower and his era.

Up until the 1980s, academic historians typically had depicted President Dwight David Eisenhower as a genial incompetent. The revisionists who benefited from the opening of Eisenhower’s presidential archives, by contrast, saw him as an effective and brilliantly successful leader. Hitchcock’s account—perhaps appropriately for a biography of a president who relentlessly sought the political center—moves toward a middle ground.

Eisenhower, in Hitchcock’s measured and deeply researched view, was neither an oaf nor a bronze statue. He was “among the most consequential presidents of modern American history,” who dominated the country’s public life between 1945 and 1961 to such an extent that the period deserves to be known as “the age of Eisenhower” (xvi). At the same time, he shared the contradictions, limited vision, and flawed assumptions of most Americans of his era, which were reflected in his presidency. The Eisenhower of Hitchcock’s telling is not the paragon he appears in the revisionists’ versions, but still a leader of talent and greatness who had an enormous impact on the presidency, domestic politics, and world order.

Hitchcock begins with a moving vignette of President Eisenhower joining a group of injured Korean war GI’s and brushing aside his Secret Service protection, saying: “I know these men” (xi). But the reverse was also true: Those men knew him. Hitchcock takes Eisenhower’s fame and stature mostly as a given, zooming through his pre-presidential biography in a chapter that highlights his military leadership during World War II, his standing as “the world’s best-known and most-respected soldier,” and the personal qualities that allowed him to unify the Allied forces and guide them to victory (27). Hitchcock describes how in 1952 those same qualities allowed Eisenhower to wrest the Republican presidential nomination from the party’s conservative heir apparent, Senator Robert Taft, impose the cause of internationalism upon the GOP, and win the general election that fall.

Hitchcock accurately dismisses as “nonsense” outgoing president Harry Truman’s underestimation of Eisenhower’s political gifts, noting instead the ways in which the General’s wartime experiences gave him valuable preparation for the White House (90). He also puts appropriate emphasis on the political lines of division at the time, observing that Eisenhower won the 1952 election as a ruthlessly partisan critic of the outgoing Truman administration, while also needing to win support from the GOP’s right wing even as he alienated that wing in various ways.

---

Hitchcock’s chapters are largely thematic, though proceeding in roughly chronological order in a way that gives the story considerable narrative drive. An early chapter on Eisenhower’s relations with the anti-Communist demagogue Senator Joseph McCarthy is perhaps the weakest in the book, because it merely reiterates the old critique that Eisenhower pursued an inconsistent, ineffective, and morally timid approach to McCarthy, alternately seeking to ignore or coopt him.

Hitchcock does not refute revisionist claims about Eisenhower and McCarthy; he simply does not address them. He does not grapple with the contention that Eisenhower shut down McCarthy by, for example, cutting off the secret intelligence FBI director J. Edgar Hoover had once supplied to the rogue senator, or putting Army counsel Joseph Welch in a position to facilitate McCarthy’s self-immolation during the Army-McCarthy hearings. Indeed, there is no mention of Welch at all, and only glancing references to Hoover. Neither is there any serious consideration of the difficulties involved in attempting to either squelch or disregard a cynical politician, unbound by norms of truth and fair play, whose every false utterance was repeated and magnified by a largely uncritical media seeking ratings gold. The 2016 presidential election should have given political historians a bit more sympathy with Eisenhower’s dilemmas regarding McCarthy.

Elsewhere, however, Hitchcock does a splendid job of melding the traditional, critical thesis focusing on Eisenhower’s limitations with the revisionist antithesis focusing on his hidden-hand leadership to form an impressive new synthesis that encompasses both the president and his era. He points out that even Eisenhower’s phenomenal public popularity, for example, was not merely the result of his wartime glories, his personal appeal, and the peace and prosperity of the 1950s. Rather, “Eisenhower’s success lay in his ability to balance, in his own person and in his policies, the contradictions in American society” (245). Hitchcock persuasively demonstrates that Eisenhower’s renowned moderation and pragmatism were built on these contradictions, as he presided over an age that was both moralistic and materialistic, nostalgic and progressive, and attached to old-fashioned nostrums about individual self-reliance as well as committed to a robust social safety net and permanent government intervention in the economy.

Hitchcock’s balance is beautifully demonstrated in his chapters on Eisenhower and the civil rights revolution. Much of the traditional critique, in his view, is correct: Eisenhower was uncomfortable with racial matters, and ill-equipped by temperament and background to handle the racial turmoil that seethed below the placid surface of 1950s America. On the other hand, he was responsible not only for the appointment of Supreme Court Chief Justice Earl Warren, who delivered the unanimous 1954 decision in Brown vs. Board of Education, but also for the selection of Attorney General Herbert Brownell, whose creative advocacy of civil rights policies goes unmentioned in many histories of the period.

Hitchcock’s judicious verdict is that Eisenhower did not lead on civil rights but also did not obstruct progress. Eisenhower’s failure to grasp the moral dimension of the civil rights struggle would strike later generations as obtuse. But he was able to overcome his limitations by supporting Brownell’s efforts to pass the first civil rights act since Reconstruction, as well as by taking an uncharacteristic political risk in sending federal troops to enforce the desegregation of Little Rock High School in Arkansas in 1957.

---

Hitchcock also is insightful about how Eisenhower’s moderation proved a disadvantage in dealing with Congress in this area: “Again and again on civil rights he expressed ‘moderate’ opinions in the face of men whose views were immoderate. He sought gradual change where others sought immediate progress or none at all” (358). Hitchcock points out that, despite what now seem Eisenhower’s shortcomings on civil rights, he won some two-fifths of the African-American vote in his 1956 reelection, and GOP strategists believed that further “modest progress on civil rights might win over blacks to the Republican Party for a generation” (348). It would be interesting to speculate about how much of the collapse in black support for the GOP was due to Eisenhower’s caution on civil rights, and how much to the conservative movement that took shape against him and his policies (including on civil rights) during his presidency.

Hitchcock’s specialization is foreign policy, so it is unsurprising that comparatively few chapters of The Age of Eisenhower focus on domestic policy—and the Cold War casts a long shadow not just over the sections dealing with McCarthy but even over budgetary matters. But then, as he explains, Eisenhower believed that in order for the U.S. to defeat the Soviet Union in a long confrontation, the nation would be required to defend freedom and liberty by building “a permanent strategic defense capability while also avoiding inflation, spending prudently, and encouraging private innovation and economic growth” (99). Hitchcock praises Eisenhower as “one of the shrewdest managers of the nation’s economy” but does not delve deeply into the means by which he accomplished these ends (517). Those contemporary politicians who still believe in fiscal discipline surely would like to know more about how Eisenhower managed to balance nearly all of his budgets while still making significant investments in defense, infrastructure (including construction of the interstate highway system), science and education, and social welfare.

Hitchcock believes that the Cold War context determined all of Eisenhower’s major accomplishments in reshaping the United States. Among these was his establishment of a disciplined model of the presidency, by which Hitchcock means that not only did Eisenhower impose order in the White House, he also emphasized to the public that American democracy would endure only if citizens embraced self-discipline—for example, by serving in the military and paying what later generations would regard as high levels of taxes in order to support a massive defensive capability. The relatively low inequality of that era, made possible in part by taxation, could be viewed as a necessary part of the unity needed to confront America’s Communist enemies. Eisenhower also recast domestic politics by building upon the securities offered by the New Deal state, thereby giving it bipartisan legitimacy. He did the same in the realm of foreign policy by amplifying Truman’s Cold War containment strategy. The result of all of these transformations was a dramatic expansion in “the power and scope of the 20th century warfare state” and the imposition of “a long-term strategy designed to wage, and win, the cold war” (xvi).

Hitchcock convincingly links the global struggle against Communism to nearly all developments, domestic and foreign, in the Eisenhower era. But his avowedly positive assessment of Eisenhower’s presidency—he allows that a recent historians’ ranking of Eisenhower among our top five presidents is “eminently sensible”—is undercut by his negative judgment of the Cold War as a whole and aspects of Eisenhower’s leadership of it (516). Hitchcock agrees with the revisionists that Eisenhower deserves praise for ending active hostilities with Korea, avoiding direct involvement in Vietnam, deterring China, negotiating with the Soviet Union, and

---

helping to end colonialism with his stand during the Suez crisis. But he sees Eisenhower as having been neither a hawk nor a dove, and that inconsistency is the basis for many of his critiques of Eisenhower’s foreign policy leadership.

Hitchcock considers Eisenhower’s eloquent 1953 “Chance for Peace” address, for example, to have been little more than “an empty gesture,” since the new president retained a basic posture of belligerence toward the Soviet Union (98). He disagrees with the revisionist view that Eisenhower’s ‘bluff’ during the Korean War—his threat to use nuclear weapons and expand the war to China—helped end the conflict, although he does find the president to have been shockingly cavalier about possible use of the nuclear arsenal. He concedes that Eisenhower exercised restraint in the face of pressures for direct military involvement in Vietnam, but believes that Eisenhower’s commitment of resources and prestige to Indochina in pursuit of containment “sowed many of the seeds that would yield a harvest of sorrow in later years” (179). Hitchcock judges Eisenhower’s actions in the Suez crisis to have been a master case study in the arts of politics and diplomacy, but also considers his grudging approval of U-2 surveillance flights over the Soviet Union in advance of his planned 1960 summit meeting with Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev to have been “a disastrous decision, perhaps the worst of his presidency” (456). And, though Eisenhower denounced ‘the military-industrial complex’ in his farewell address, Hitchcock considers him to have been its principal architect.

Above all, Hitchcock condemns Eisenhower’s support for the CIA’s covert struggles against Communism around the world, and particularly in the less developed countries. He sees executive and congressional willingness to delegate power and resources to the secret and unaccountable agency as a “pathology” of American democracy, and argues that “Eisenhower’s CIA did far more harm than good to American interests” (149, 433-34). The CIA’s malefactions, in Hitchcock’s view, ultimately were traceable to Eisenhower’s devotion to the logic of anti-Communist containment, his “failure of moral imagination” vis-à-vis the developing world, and his lack of empathy for those newly independent nations (434).

Hitchcock’s case would be more conclusive if he did not largely omit the history of Communist actions, covert and overt, to destabilize democracies and subvert the governments of those emerging nations. One suspects that if Cold Warriors like Eisenhower and his Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, could be resurrected to survey the modern world, they would repent of relatively little. Eisenhower believed Communism to be a mortal threat to the United States, on a par with the dangers of Nazism—a comparison Hitchcock seems to view skeptically but does not directly refute. The containment strategy Eisenhower pursued did, in the long run, achieve his goal of winning the Cold War—not without bloodshed, but without global conflagration. The extent to which the present ills of many less developed nations are traceable to the U.S. remains an open question.

Hitchcock’s penetrating analysis is likely to remain the definitive account of the Eisenhower presidency for years to come. There is considerable room to challenge many of his conclusions, but he has convincingly redefined the ground on which those arguments will take place.
William Hitchcock’s authoritative work, *The Age of Eisenhower: America and the World in the 1950s*, compels us to reconsider how we separate perception from the reality of presidential leadership. As Hitchcock reminds us, long gone are the days of historians, or the public, viewing Eisenhower as a do-nothing president. Yet, Eisenhower’s legacy, according to Hitchcock, remains understated. In response, *The Age of Eisenhower* forcefully lays out in 529 beautifully written pages why Eisenhower should be considered among the most consequential presidents of modern American history. According to Hitchcock, Eisenhower “dramatically expanded the power and scope of the 20th century warfare state and put into place a long-term strategy designed to wage, and win, the cold war.” He also “recast domestic politics by strengthening a national consensus about the place of government in the lives of American citizens.” Finally, he “established a distinctive model of presidential leadership” that Hitchcock designates “the *disciplined* presidency” (xvi-xix; italics in the original). This last point may resonate the most with readers, but one could argue that the first and second points are much more important when taking a long-term view of Eisenhower’s impact on the American presidency and nation.

With respect to the expansion of the warfare state, although Eisenhower did originally trim defense spending, he had no intention of drastically reducing it. Rather, as Hitchcock notes, he “viewed democratic government as a collective enterprise in which great benefits came to a free people only through common effort and shared sacrifice. As long as the nation faced grave threats, taxes would stay high and citizens must remain on alert.” Indeed, he firmly believed in developing a defense program that could “carry the security burden for a long, long time if that is necessary…” (101-102). To do so, as Hitchcock so succinctly sums up, Eisenhower’s strategy was to “avoid quagmires and carry a big nuclear stick” (107). A long-term “geopolitical and ideological struggle with the communist bloc required a transformation in American capabilities and mentalities…Eisenhower laid down a blueprint for the warfare state—an official plan to mobilize the nation and put it on a permanent war footing. The military-industrial complex had begun to take shape” (109-110). It then expanded after the 1957 Soviet Sputnik satellite launch as the government invested heavily in Intercontinental Ballistic Missile and Intermediate Range Ballistic Missile production, relying on private industry to do so, which culminated in a massive American nuclear arsenal that became inextricably tied to the health of the economy (387-389). These actions, combined with the implementation of the National Defense Education Act, the National Aeronautics and Space Agency, and the Defense Reorganization Act, insured a “robust military-industrial-scientific collaboration on a nationwide scale, the sort of thing that only the federal government could direct” (394). This collaboration, enshrined in the Eisenhower years, continues unchecked more than sixty years after Sputnik.

Hitchcock also demonstrates that although Eisenhower had eight years to dismantle a much more activist government begun with Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal and furthered under Harry Truman, Eisenhower declined. Americans continue to vehemently debate the place of government in their lives; what remains uncontested is how prominent that role is. According to Hitchcock, the American public has Eisenhower to thank, or curse, for it. In his first term, Eisenhower appointed Herbert Brownell as Attorney General and Earl Warren as Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, actions that would solidify careful progress on civil rights. As Hitchcock surmises, “Eisenhower did not lead the nation toward civil rights reform, but he could sense which way history was moving and did not wish to be left behind” (226). Eisenhower also embraced social security, health care and insurance, housing, and highways; in other words he locked in place the infrastructure that would allow for a continued basic safety net or “middle way” between New Dealers and conservative Republicans (267). In his second term “Eisenhower overcame his limitations,” lending support to Brownell’s
efforts to pass the 1957 Civil Rights Act and enforcing desegregation in Little Rock, Arkansas, which, according to Hitchcock, demonstrates Eisenhower’s ultimate decisiveness in advancing civil rights (347-348). Others could certainly disagree with Hitchcock here, but much of the recent scholarship gives Eisenhower more credit for civil rights progress than previous interpretations.¹

As for the “disciplined” presidency, few would dispute Eisenhower’s iron control as he reacted to a series of crises, both in his military career and two term presidency. The more intriguing part of this idea is that Eisenhower had very high expectations for the public to maintain discipline as well. As Hitchcock reminds us, Eisenhower spoke eloquently about the need for sacrifice, a word completely missing in the current political lexicon. Moreover, Eisenhower actually expected Americans to sacrifice in deed. The opening vignette in *The Age of Eisenhower* is a case in point. American soldiers, suffering grievous injuries from the Korean War, rallied around Eisenhower as he reminded them that, “even with all they had already given, they must yet be prepared to give more, for they were symbols of devotion and sacrifice and they could never escape that role and its responsibilities” (xi). Eisenhower expected Americans to continue to sacrifice in order to win the Cold War but he did so from a position of “optimism, decency, and experience,” a winning combination in unifying the American people (494).

Despite the excellent outlining of Hitchcock’s three major themes in the introduction, the book follows a standard chronological format, and these themes often disappear for many pages at a time. This vanishing is offset with numerous captivating narratives about critical moments in U.S. foreign relations, including the Suez and Sputnik crises, Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev’s rocky 1959 visit to the United States, and the administration’s dealings with Cuban revolutionary leader Fidel Castro. In terms of primary and secondary source material, Hitchcock has, for the most part, done an admirable job of grappling with the vast documentation, especially given the wider audience for which the book is intended. His “Note on Eisenhower Scholarship” at the end of the book is valuable, though he misses Chester Pach’s excellent edited volume, *A Companion Guide to Dwight D. Eisenhower.*² In assessing Eisenhower’s reaction to Stalin’s death in 1953, Hitchcock insists that “Stalin’s death did nothing to alter the fundamental ideological and geopolitical rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union” (98). Given the far-reaching consequences of this claim, engagement with some of the literature that argues the opposite would have been welcome.³ Hitchcock also downplays Eisenhower’s callous indifference to Julius and Ethel Rosenberg’s trial and execution and the overwhelming international outcry so capably covered in Lori Clune’s *Executing the Rosenbergs* (another book

---


not addressed in *The Age of Eisenhower*. Instead, Hitchcock explains away Eisenhower’s actions through his fear that stopping the executions would have been a triumph for Communist propaganda and that an example needed to be made of Julius and Ethel (122-125).

The most disappointing aspect of the book, from my perspective, is Hitchcock’s interpretation of Eisenhower’s decision-making with respect to saving the French military garrison of Dien Bien Phu in the spring of 1954 and his subsequent support of South Vietnamese Premier Ngo Dinh Diem. Hitchcock could have made much better use of the vast innovative literature on these subjects. Despite his claim that most scholars have praised Eisenhower’s wisdom and restraint in debating American intervention at Dien Bien Phu, the scholarship remains evenly divided on this issue (178). He also overplays Eisenhower and Secretary of State John Foster Dulles’s perplexity and despair as Dien Bien Phu fell, claiming that “the Eisenhower administration had no plan for what to do next” (202). They in fact had a plan, they were going to take over from the French in South Vietnam, and that is exactly what they did, which Hitchcock briefly acknowledges (204). Analysis of Ngo Dinh Diem’s authoritarian rule is also one-sided, with little deviation from the standard view that Diem’s increasing repressiveness and refusal to listen to American suggestions resulted in South Vietnamese political instability and doomed the Eisenhower administration’s efforts there. Hitchcock lets Eisenhower off too lightly in deepening the American commitment to South Vietnam in the 1950s, overlooking the three of the most important books on Eisenhower’s Vietnam policy in doing so: Jessica Chapman’s *Cauldron of Resistance*, Jessica Elkind’s *Aid Under Fire* and my own book, *Replacing France*. I recognize that in a book trying to cover the entire Eisenhower presidency, this might seem unfair criticism, but Hitchcock does spend 35 plus pages on Vietnam and more of the relevant secondary literature could have easily been incorporated.

In reading *The Age of Eisenhower*, it becomes irresistible to avoid drawing comparisons between the 34th and 45th American presidents. There are some superficial similarities: neither one had ever been elected to office before their presidency; Eisenhower played more than 800 rounds of golf during his two terms; and in his 1952 presidential campaign he supported the reelection campaigns of right-wing zealots Joseph McCarthy and William Jenner and made few attempts to restrain this loathsome faction of the Republican Party once he was president. The differences, however, are much more compelling. Eisenhower was a self-made man with an astonishing military career. His commitment to military and political service despite repeated serious physical ailments (back and abdominal pain, heart attack, ileitis) makes bone spurs as an excuse for not serving all the more farcical. Most important, Eisenhower’s masterly organization, attention to detail, and careful institutionalization of consultative bodies, so thoroughly detailed by Hitchcock, could not stand in greater contrast to current ad hoc policy-making. In Eisenhower’s case, perceptions of inaction or wrong-headed action at the time came nowhere near to matching the reality of his vigorous presidential leadership. Perhaps


5 See Kathryn Statler, “Eisenhower, Indochina, and Vietnam,” in *A Companion Guide to Dwight D. Eisenhower*, 494-516, for the most up-to-date overview of the state of the field.

Hitchcock overplays his hand just a bit in highlighting the contempt contemporaries and scholars had for Eisenhower’s supposed lack of intellectual acumen and governance. Certainly this denigration has dissipated over time as the historical record came into focus. One can only dream of a similar mischaracterization of today’s presidential decision-making. Ultimately, Hitchcock’s *Age of Eisenhower* leaves us with a mostly balanced and carefully crafted analysis of the enduring importance of Eisenhower’s presidency, and it does so with engaging eloquence and style. Questions linger on how much credit or blame Eisenhower should receive for shaping an entire “age.” For example, how do we differentiate Eisenhower’s influence on the nation from the evolving nation’s impact on Eisenhower? Still, Hitchcock’s persuasive argument that Eisenhower deserves to be remembered as one of the most consequential American leaders of the twentieth century, not least because of his ability to bring Americans together and to place the common good above the individual, should be read by everyone reflecting on what presidential leadership means today.
I am writing this a few days after Thanksgiving, a day that brings Americans together for a long weekend of family, feasting, and football. In our household, temporarily expanded for the holiday, there is a good deal of political chatter along with the turkey, and a variety of strong opinions are to be heard on the subject of President Donald Trump. Portentous assertions about the fate of American democracy joined the clinking of plates, and many a conversation ended with the sadly sarcastic epigram “but her emails!” This year, discussion of our contemporary political travails was so constant that the Chief Executive himself seemed to have become a guest at the table. I half expected to find him at the sideboard, spooning sausage and rosemary stuffing onto his groaning plate.

It turns out that many of us care—a great deal—about the president. And not just Trump. It is easy to start a lively conversation with your neighbor or colleague about the legacy of Barack Obama: historic figure or disappointment? When it comes to contentious topics, how about George W. Bush and the Iraq War? Or Bush v. Gore? Or Bill Clinton and impeachment? These topics, just to name a few, generate real heat. Let’s face it, most of us are deeply engaged in the lives, actions, and policies of our presidents.

And yet, as Kathryn Cramer Brownell asserts with pinpoint accuracy, “few academics would call themselves presidential historians.” Indeed, the label is openly mocked by scholars. It is associated with court history, soft soap, and hagiography. It is also linked to the Arthur Schlesinger-inspired “presidential synthesis” in which the nation’s history is recounted through the actions and blunders of Great Men doing Important Things. Above all, the term has been tarnished by a small band of over-exposed talking heads who can be found on televised news programs serving up a predictable hash of lukewarm tales about former White House occupants. This leaves historians of politics and foreign policy in a curious bind. On the one hand, we care deeply about who is president; on the other, we abjure presidential history. What a paradox!

No doubt, there have been good reasons for academic historians to move away from a historical methodology that places sole focus on the chief executive. Presidential history of the past has been notorious for its failure to incorporate social movements, class conflict, ideology, and the politics of gender and race—in short, many of the areas of inquiry that have been at the cutting edge of our work. Still, if we drop presidents altogether, we make two mistakes: first, we lose an opportunity to use the presidency as a window into U.S. political history; and second, we cede the field to non-scholarly bloviators in the media.

The challenge, then, is to find a way to write about presidents—who after all have enormous power to shape their times in enduring ways—in a manner that is methodologically rigorous and capacious enough to incorporate multiple voices and perspectives. Presidents matter, but they are not the only thing that matters: can one find a balance? I tried to walk this line when writing *The Age of Eisenhower*. I’m gratified that these four outstanding historians, while finding faults with the book here and there, gave me credit for the effort while acknowledging the intimidating obstacles one faces when trying to produce serious presidential history.

Brownell rightly notes that *The Age of Eisenhower* is not a biography. This is something I had to hide from my editor for a while because the book-buying public likes biography a great deal, especially presidential biography. But I found that the greatest flaw in treatments of past presidents was precisely their dependence upon a biographical and chronological formula. Biographers, not concerned with arguments, instead must unfold the story of a life. Historians, by contrast, have no obligation to recount the tick-tock of a single life, but we must advance and defend an argument. I wanted to find a way to blend the biographical details of
Dwight Eisenhower into a broader argument about the nature and evolution of fifteen year period from the end of World War II until the election of John F. Kennedy. The predominant themes of the period—America’s rise to superpower status, the unprecedented material progress of the time combined with racial and social crisis, and the ideological anxieties of the era—these patterns were embodied, in all their maddening complexity, in the person of Eisenhower. Both as a solider and as a statesman, Eisenhower reflected the promise and the shortcomings of America in the 1950s, and so his presidential story, I hoped, would be a useful means to relate those broader developments. With this experience in mind, I strongly endorse Brownell’s call here to blend presidential history with other genres of political history.

Books that blend and synthesize will always fall short of the expectations of specialists. Darren Dochuk is right to point out that I had to “cut short threads of development that wove seamlessly through Eisenhower’s presidency” because I constructed my chapters around a dominant topic (McCarthyism, covert operations, civil rights, etc.) while trying to respect a rough chronology. It is a tricky balancing act and in some areas, like U.S. policy in the Middle East after Suez, I was unable to follow through. Dochuk also helpfully identifies ways in which the book could have done more to illuminate post-Eisenhower ripple effects. Why did the GOP, so in love with Eisenhower in the 1950s, turn away from his brand of moderate conservative politics? Why did the Christian evangelicals who in the 1950s thrilled to his clarion call to put religion at the center of American identity later turn against Eisenhowerism? How did the 1950s shape and perhaps spawn the rebellions of the 1960s? These are excellent questions that I simply felt were beyond the reach of my book and my talents; they remain to be more fully addressed by other scholars.

Presidential history, by wading into topics that are both well-known and high-stakes, exposes its practitioners to fire from many directions. Geoffrey Kabaservice is drawn to the debate about McCarthyism, and no wonder: it is a touchstone for the historiography of postwar conservatism, which Kabaservice has immeasurably enriched with his own work. The Eisenhower-McCarthy story is irresistible: what should a presidential aspirant do about a demagogue in his own party whom he loathes, but on whose supporters his own election depends? Eisenhower’s answer was tactical and cynical: he swallowed hard, bit his tongue and campaigned alongside Senator McCarthy in Wisconsin in 1952. But once in office, surely Eisenhower would use his immense power and prestige to deflate the bilious red-hunter? Kabaservice seems to favor the view that Eisenhower worked cleverly behind the scenes to stymie McCarthy. My own study of the evidence led to a less decisive conclusion. Eisenhower, I thought, bobbed and weaved, unsure of how to tackle McCarthy and hoping someone else (Richard Nixon came to mind) would do that distasteful job for him. Only after a prolonged stalemate did Eisenhower use his executive privilege to restrict officials from testifying before McCarthy’s committee; and only after the Army compiled a damming dossier on McCarthy about his abuse of power did Eisenhower (and his wily chief of staff Sherman Adams) use the incriminating details to light a backfire against McCarthy. In my view, this was no profile in courage; yet the episode showed how skillfully Eisenhower could play bureaucratic politics when he had to.

Another area of pressing interest to historians of the postwar United States is the Vietnam War. Did Eisenhower hasten or delay America’s slide to war there? Kathryn Statler, whose own work has shone a bright light on this question, wanted me to spend more time on this matter, and I can only say that I sympathize.

---

The choices Eisenhower made with respect to Indochina are knotty and tangled, and the consequences of his decisions echoed through the years. The subject deserves the extended treatment Fredrik Logevall gave to it in his brilliant account, *Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America’s Vietnam*.\(^2\) Put briefly, the issue has at least two dimensions: first, why did Eisenhower choose to avoid an American commitment to war in 1954, as the French forces fought their final battle at Dien Bien Phu; and second, what did Eisenhower do after that episode to deepen America’s commitment to South Vietnam?

The evidence is abundant that Eisenhower wanted to avoid intervening in Indochina in 1954 and did so. He said repeatedly in private and in public that he would not send American troops into battle in Vietnam so soon after bringing them home from Korea. In private discussions, he even dismissed the domino theory he himself had coined. But Eisenhower’s steadfast refusal to send U.S. troops help the French at Dien Bien Phu did not restrict the United States from embracing the new South Vietnamese government that emerged from the wreckage of the First Indochina War. On the contrary, Eisenhower and Secretary of State John Foster Dulles felt unencumbered by any colonial past. They gladly larded the Ngo Dinh Diem regime with military supplies, economic aid, and secret intelligence. They transformed South Vietnam into a test case of American know-how while Diem transformed his country into a dismal police state. Statler feels I let Eisenhower “off too lightly” and should have been more condemnatory. But what interests me is what the story reveals about the character of the man: how could a leader who so astutely judged the risks of war in 1954, and wisely steered clear of it, later commit American resources and prestige at such a pace as to make an American war there much more likely? It is a question that haunts the age of Eisenhower.

I’d like to end by thanking these four scholars for their comments and careful reading of my work. They agree that scholarship about presidents need not be shunted off to the sidelines of our profession. Presidents are touchstones for the times. To historians, they serve as an organizing framework with which to develop an interpretation of an era. And to citizens, they provide plenty of fuel to sustain debate and disagreement across the holiday table.

---