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Politics, President

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Abstract

The election of General Dwight David Eisenhower to the Presidency in 1952 as well as his reelection in 1956 was instrumental in augmenting governmental and societal changes still evident today. His particular conservatism—“ dynamic conservativism” or “ new republicanism” was a unique philosophy that served the country in its transition from World War II and The New Deal to the turbulent sixties.

Biographical Background

Dwight David “ Ike” Eisenhower was famous and famously liked by America before he was elected President in 1952. Born in 1890, he spent his childhood in Abilene, Kansas, where “ family life was based on solid religious convictions and a strong belief in duty, integrity, and hard work” (Eisenhower Library, Biography). He graduated from the United States Army Military Academy (West Point) in 1915, and rose through the ranks as a career Army officer. He was promoted to Brigadier General just before the U. S. entry in World War II, and was considered a highly skilled “ strategist and organizer” (Biography). The Army Chief of Staff, General George Marshall, appointed Eisenhower first to planning for the Pacific War, then chief of the War Plans Division, and then sent him to Europe; he was named Commander in Chief, North Africa Allied Forces, and then Supreme Commander, Allied Forces

Europe in 1943. (Biography). He directed the D-Day Invasion, and was promoted to General of the Army in 1944.

After World War II, Eisenhower was “ an international figure, loved and respected around the world” (Biography). He succeeded General Marshal as the Army Chief of Staff, a position he held until he resigned his commission in 1948, after thirty-three years of service. His duty and service to the country would continue, however, as he remained an influential advisor to both the Pentagon and White House. Interestingly, both the Republican and Democratic Party attempted to lure him to run for the presidency. He refused, and spent two years as president of Columbia University, until President Truman asked him to command the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). As was usual, he served with distinction. In 1952, he accepted the Republican Party’s nomination for President of the United States and was inaugurated in January, 1953 as the thirty-fourth President of the United States; “ it marked the election of, arguably, the world’s most popular figure to the world’s most powerful office” (Biography).

The Country, the World, and the Election of 1952

There were several events of national and world importance that were a backdrop to and a factor in the presidential election of 1952. Domestically, a variety of scandals had discredited the Truman Administration, and many voters were simply tired of what they considered President Truman’s version of Roosevelt’s New Deal (Branyan, 13). The rabid anti-communist Senator Joseph McCarthy was making headlines, finding “ commies” and fostering

paranoia. The Korean War, euphemistically called a “ police action” at the time, was dragging on with no seeming end in sight. This was also the beginning of The Cold War, and America found herself in potential peril from the communist giants, Russia and China. Directed by President Truman to be the NATO Commander, General Eisenhower was not only still in the nation’s heart as well as headlines, he was also intimately aware of America’s role and influence throughout the world.

By 1952, he was making up his mind to run for the presidency in 1952. His popularity was great and his reputation unblemished; he was not only a military hero, but an intellectual as well. He was in the enviable position of not having “ to run” for the office; rather, he was sought by those who would do the running for him:

Private conversations with him held at Columbia University had already convinced his backers that he was a Republican. During the summer of 1951, the General’s supporters assumed that he would run, although he absolutely refused to commit himself. Under the adroit leadership of Eastern leaders like Thomas E. Dewey, Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr., and Herbert Brownell, there emerged a nationwide organization, “ Eisenhower for President” patterned after the “ Dewey Streamroller” of earlier campaigns. (Branyan, 15)

Even though General Eisenhower was a political novice, he had the advantage not only of his own popularity, but of an opponent hamstrung by

being divorced in an era when that was far less common, and accepted, than it is today.

Eisenhower's slogan during the campaign was " K1C2": " Korea first, communism and corruption second" (Schultz). He promised to end the Korean War, fight communism, and rid the government of corruption. The voters agreed: " he carried 39 states, including some in the South, won the electoral vote 422 to 89, and the popular vote by a plurality of 6, 621, 242" (Branyan, 19).

Republican and Eisenhower Conservativism of 1952

The traditional Republican values and doctrines were in evidence in the Republican Party Platform of 1952. Claiming the Democrats had " sought to curb, regulate, restrain, harass, and punish" the free enterprise system for the last twenty years, the Republicans promised " to aid small business in every practicable way" (Platform). Describing an environment replete with corruption, high taxation, and onerous regulation, the Republicans declared " neither small nor large business can flourish is such an atmosphere" and they " will end the hostility to initiative and enterprise" (Platform).

Believing the Democrats had " imposed the most confiscatory taxes in our history"; the Republicans advocated a variety of measures: a revision of the tax code; a " reallocation of fields of taxation between the Federal, State, and municipal governments...to minimize double taxation"; a balanced budget and " a general tax reduction" (Platform). It was a platform, and policy, consistent with Republican conservative philosophy to date: shrink

and make more efficient the central government so less taxes are necessary, and what taxes that do remain are administered in such a manner as to strengthen, not stifle, the economy. The Platform also listed a variety of other “ typical” Republican ideals relative to returning authority and autonomy to the States in numerous areas, including land and water use and other natural resources. Additionally, the “ traditional Republican public land use policy” would be restored, thus “ providing opportunity for ownership by citizens to promote the highest land use” (Platform).

Eisenhower, consistent with his humanitarian public image, advocated “ dynamic conservativism” also known as “ modern Republicanism: “ I will be a conservative when it comes to money matters and a liberal when it comes to human beings” (Schultz). In practical terms, this philosophy included, but was not limited to budget cutting, the aforementioned “ enterprise” environment to support business, and a realignment of power, shifting authority away from the federal government and towards the States and municipalities (Shultz). To many commentators of the time, it appeared to dovetail exactly with the policies of Herbert Hoover.

It is important to note that at the time there was no “ conservative academy” or strongly oppositional “ liberal-conservative” arguments as exists today. Further, the polarization of political factions and the convenient labeling as “ conservative” or “ liberal” is essentially a post-sixties fashion. Such labeling and positioning has led to the common, if potentially incorrect, assumption that “ democrat” denotes “ liberal” and “ republican” denotes “ conservative”, with further conventions, if not

confusion, with appellations of “ fiscal conservative” or “ social liberal”. The landscape was entirely different in during the presidency of Dwight Eisenhower; according to Russell Kirk of The Heritage Foundation:

This fell recrudescence of conservative thought at the end of the Forties and the beginning of the Fifties was paralleled chronologically by the decline and fall of the New Deal Democrats, and the abrupt ascent of Dwight Eisenhower to the grandest seat among the seats of the mighty. But there was next to no connection between these two political phenomena, except that they both may have been provoked in part by a general American boredom with the clichés of the New Deal and by the obvious feebleness of what remained of New Deal measures during the Truman administration. (Kirk)

There was no massive influx of “ conservative” scholars or activists into the Eisenhower Administration; in fact, Eisenhower selected a bipartisan assortment of capable men he had met through his years in the Army or while serving as president of Columbia University. Because “(m) any members of the new Cabinet had directed large corporations, Democratic critics attacked Eisenhower for forming a ‘ businessman’s government’” (Branyan, 53). While it was anticipated the new administration would be a “ swing toward the right” and away from the Truman version of The New Deal, there was no massive ideological “ swing” (Branyan, 53) While there certainly was a “ conservative school of thought” the “ new conservatives” were not in evidence:

Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. endeavored to taunt the " New Conservatives" for their failure to be appointed to office by President Eisenhower; for Mr. Schlesinger himself yearns always after " place," as eighteenth-century politicians called it. But the writing conservatives of the Fifties were not disconcerted by not having been appointed Eisenhower placemen. Some of the " New Conservatives" were Democrats; and of the Republicans among them, most had preferred Robert Taft to Dwight Eisenhower. So far as we conservative writers had anything in common, it was this: we were social critics, innocent of any design for assuming personal power. For one thing, we set our faces against political centralization, so that a cushy appointment in Washington would have been a repudiating of our own convictions. (Kirk)

Of particular interest and a portent of likely unexpected things to come was a segment of President Eisenhower's first State of the Union Address, February 2, 1953: " I propose to use whatever authority exists in the office of the President to end segregation in the District of Columbia, including the Federal Government, and any segregation in the Armed Forces" (Branyan, 103).

Defining the New Republicanism and Eisenhower Conservativism

It is more than likely that a great deal of the substance of Eisenhower's philosophy on governance derived from his extensive and exemplary military career. Military men and women, particularly those who have seen combat in all its horror and know the potential for cataclysmic destruction once an army is unleashed, tend to be very serious pacifists. In other words, let the

politicians or economics or “ the people” sort out the problem without involving military might. However, when a battle is inescapable and inevitable, bring all forces to bear to facilitate a swift, decisive victory. To Eisenhower, the federal government was comparable to the military, in the sense it was a powerful giant that did not need to meddle in people’s lives. However, when the need was great, and the battle had to be one, sometimes it was only the power of the federal government that was sufficient to bring about the swift, decisive victory. In his State of the Union Message of January 6, 1955, he states:

The aspirations of most of our people can best be fulfilled through their own enterprise and initiative, without government interference. This Administration, therefore, follows two simple rules: first, the Federal Government should perform an essential task only when it cannot otherwise be adequately performed; and second, in performing that task, our government must not impair the self-respect, freedom, and incentive of the individual. (Branyan, 458)

He then went on with a “ laundry list” of programs including public housing, healthcare, education, assistance for the elderly, and programs to address juvenile delinquency. (Branyan, 458-460)

Early in the Message he states there are “ three main purposes of our federal government”; the third being “ to concern ourselves with the human problems of our people so that every American may have the opportunity to lead a healthy, productive, and rewarding life” (Branyan, 447). According to

Branyan, “ this view seemed to contrast with the fiscal conservativism expressed in his earlier State of the Union Messages”; this “’modern republicanism’ was not intended as a label for a whole Administration; rather, it evolved over a relatively long period of time and grew out of the President’s attempt to define further his own political philosophy” (447).

Eisenhower’s military experience likely shaped his personal philosophy as only time on a battlefield can do. Combat and war quickly eradicate notions of “ poor” and “ privileged”. The color of injury and death on the battlefield is the red of blood, not the color of the body from which it flows. Bullets and shrapnel have no concept of ethnicity. It is the strength and courage of the individual soldier that can change the course of battle from defeat to victory. It is the platoon leader, intimate with the terrain, troops, and opposition, executing a decisive tactic unfettered by the restrictions of battalion commander miles away, who gains objectives at the lowest cost to his soldiers. And it is the division general, aware of and responding to a fluid situation without the interference from stateside generals and politicians who will win the war. The analogy is of course to the merits of individual achievement, and the necessity for autonomy for municipalities and states. However, if the basic needs of the lowly private are not met, or he dies needlessly, it is foolhardy, time-consuming, and disingenuous to trace the responsibility upward, rank by rank. It is the Commander in Chief who bears the responsibility alone. According to Eisenhower, when the American citizen needs help, the burden falls on the federal government, as the only

authority with the power and ability of affecting each citizen regardless of State or municipality.

Other than “ the McCarthy problem”, President Eisenhower held office during a time of minimum political hysteria. (Branyan, p. 364-397) The inflammatory political rhetoric of division and derision were not yet created: there were no “ radical-libs” or “ arch-conservatives”; “ peace-niks”, “ tree-huggers” and “ militants” of any stripe did not yet exist. In the vernacular of the times, many of the policies borne of the “ new republicanism” would be seen as “ populist” or “ humanitarian”. His Annual Presidential Budget

Message of January 17, 1955 stressed the “(g)overnment must do its part to advance human welfare and encourage economic growth with constructive actions” (Branyan, p. 463). A month later in his “ Speech on Republican Party Principals” he asserted

Look at the Republican Party’s record of the last two years. Think of it! What have we done? Have we done it in the tradition of Lincoln who said that the proper business of government is to do for a community or for a person those things which it or he cannot do at all or so well do for itself or himself; but in all things which the individual or community can do best, government should not interfere. That is the guiding policy of this administration. (Branyan, p. 475)

His January 5, 1956 State of the Union Message continued the theme; according to Branyan, “ the President detailed ‘ the response to human concerns’ which he thought characterized his Administration and which more

and more formalized his concept of ‘ Modern Republicanism’” (p. 480). His Message was divided into five sections; the section titled “ The Response to Human Concerns” was the last and longest, detailing accomplishments and proposals on education, child welfare services, health programs, housing, veterans’ benefits, and discriminatory voting practices. (p. 493-498)

Arthur Larson, the Under Secretary of Labor, authored *A Republican Looks at his Party* in 1956; endorsed by the President (who preferred “ Modern Republicanism” to “ New Republicanism”); the book contained a chapter entitled New Republicanism. (p. 513) Larsen believed

The importance of essaying a summary of New Republican principles is magnified by the fact that the pattern does not fit any familiar past formulas…this does not slip comfortably into some well-worn niche like “ liberal” or “ New Deal” or “ prolabor” or “ probusiness” or “ left” or “ right” (p. 513)

Larson listed eight tenants of the philosophy: a belief in God; the individual “ is the pre-eminent object of all our political arrangements”; and “(G)overnment should be as local as possible” (p. 514-515. Economically, and succinctly, “(W)hatever can be done privately should be done privately”; private enterprise should be nurtured, not overwhelmed by governmental obstacles. (p. 516) the government must allow for and not interfere with collective bargaining or labor negotiations. (p. 517) “ The government has a responsibility for the general welfare of people…with a maximum of private and local content and a minimum of centralized control” (p. 517). Finally, “

America has its own political philosophy, not from the European left-wing, right-wing concept, but from the ideals of our Revolution and Constitution...” (p. 518).

In a letter to friends discussing “ Modern Republicanism” Eisenhower quotes from a letter he had received; by doing so he describes a much simpler era of politics and government. The ideal discussed was practical then, idealistic if not impossible today: “ he said that ‘ people are thinking of men and not of parties...we must nominate the men, and then get the voting public to know of their worth and ability.’” (p. 520).

New Republicanism and Civil Rights

It is crucial to understand the context of civil rights during the Eisenhower Administration; failure to do so, or to view the issue influenced by subsequent and most recent legislation and/or Supreme Court cases, is to do a disservice to the Administration and show an ignorance of the era. With few exceptions, segregation was the normal, accepted “ course of business”. Stores had separate entrances for blacks and whites. Drinking fountains were similarly labeled. Schools, colleges, and universities operated under the premise of “ separate but equal” education. Healthcare systems for blacks were either substandard or non-existent. Blacks were routinely denied the opportunity to vote. The very few blacks in corporate America were routinely denied advancement; indeed, there were few, if any blacks in any sort of position of power or influence in society at large. While whites certainly enjoyed the music of Nat “ King” Cole and Lena Horne, they would

not allow them to eat in their restaurants or stay in their hotels. There was little, if any, true communication between the races; it was simply an accepted fact of life. As bizarre and revolting it is to the sensibilities of the Twenty-first Century, place the era within the context of the 1952 Republican Platform, which advocates “ federal action toward the elimination of lynching” (Platform). The disparity between the races was considerably more severe in southern states:

Eisenhower viewed the problem of southern blacks on two levels: public segregation and the right to vote. In 1956 he concluded that, as a first step, the Federal Government should act promptly to protect black voting rights. His legislative proposal passed the House but failed to overcome a Southern filibuster in the Senate. The next year, following his reelection, and even more intensified effort by the President finally bore results...Eisenhower’s ability to dramatize publicly the issue for several months increased pressure on Congress for enactment. (Branyan, p. 1051)

The same year the Supreme Court handed down its opinion in *Brown v. Board of Education* declaring the “ separate but equal” doctrine of education was, in fact, a myth. The separate education the states afforded blacks was anything but “ equal”; usually the facilities, faculty and curriculum were deplorably substandard. More importantly for purposes of precedent and federal involvement, the doctrine was contrary to constitutional rights. The specific case involved a relatively small number of students in a specific state and school district, however, the Supreme Court’s holding in the case became the new federal “ law of the land”, applicable to all of the states.

The Supreme Court has no “ enforcement” services; there is no cadre of “ Court Marshalls” prepared to ensure compliance with every decision. According to Branyan,

It was one thing to outlaw racial voting restrictions and another to integrate schools. Brown v. Board of Education initially involved only a small number of students, but, sooner or later, a serious confrontation seemed inevitable. It occurred in September, 1957, when Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus used the (state) National Guard to defy federal court instructions to admit black students to Central High School in Little Rock. The governor’s stand precipitated a major constitutional crisis, which caused Eisenhower to send federal troops to Little Rock to enforce the integration order (September 24). Federal power triumphed in spite of Faubus’ opposition, and the Federal Government’s interpretation of the Constitution remained supreme. (p. 1051-1052)

The Eisenhower Administration’s concern and movement toward federal legislation “ testified not only to a personal concern for the rights of blacks, but also to the growing political importance of civil rights” (p. 1078) Eisenhower’s personal concern is exemplified by the fact that Val Washington, the Director of Minorities for the Republican National Committee, “ who had long been one of the few blacks holding an important post in the Republican National Committee, suddenly found himself in a position where his views received considerable attention” (p. 1078). Additionally, E. Frederick Morrow, “ who had traveled with and worked for Eisenhower in the 1952 campaign” became “ the first black American to

serve as a presidential assistant” (1078). According to Branyan, “(t)he Eisenhower Administration, building on foundations laid by Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman, continued the progress towards the goal of equality for all” (1052).

It is extremely simplistic to view the civil rights movement as it existed during the Eisenhower years as a sort of ever-increasing ground-swell of public opinion and activism destined to result in federal action and legislation regardless of who sat in the Oval Office. Eisenhower was simply “ the right man at the right time” to assist the movement into what it was to accomplish in later years. He was not a politician; as a career military officer and commander, he was more than accustomed to setting and reaching objectives. He had the benefit of “ ivory tower” experience as well during his presidency of Columbia University. His appeal—as witnessed by the solicitations of both parties in 1948—crossed party lines served to allow him to win a second term. And his will, his certainty in facing down the crisis in Little Rock served as an example for later presidential action against state segregation.

Conclusion

As stated earlier, the “ new conservativism” was unique; perhaps as much a product of the times as it was clearly the product of President Dwight David Eisenhower. In retrospect, the eight years of his presidency oversaw a pivotal change in America. For the twenty years prior to his 1952 election, America had been devastated by The Great Depression, nurtured through it

by the programs of The New Deal, and awakened into industrial might and world leadership during World War II. The election of 1952 witnessed a very different America in a very different world. Prosperity continued, as did scientific and industrial developments assisted in no small part by educations provided by the GI Bill. Our leadership and influence upon the world was in its infancy, but no less formidable in comparison to other nations. Yet America was mired in the “ police action” in Korea, and the “ communist menace” of Russia and China was an ominous undercurrent. It was still an America of segregation, bigotry, and poverty.

America looked outside its normal political stables and elected Eisenhower. He was at once uniquely qualified and severely unqualified. He was immensely popular and an unquestioned hero and leader. Yet the fact was he had virtually no political experience, and was not a “ regular” in the trenches of Washington, D. C. Those are the very reasons for his success.

Having no “ correct” political orthodoxy—democratic or republican—he was not bound to accept either party’s entreaties for candidacy or to accept a specific party philosophy. He was unspoiled by a political past, and completely free to fashion a philosophy of “ Eisenhower Conservativism” without concession to political parties, party leadership, or special interests. It was a personal philosophy which fit him and America quite well at the time: “ liberal” in the sense of focusing on the needs of the individual, “ conservative” in the sense of financial and governmental policy. It was certainly not a lazy man’s philosophy of laissez faire; rather, it required complete attention and the judicious temperament to restrain from acting or

interfering if at all not necessary, and the strength to act with unswerving force when required.

In retrospect, it was a seemingly “ natural” transitional philosophy to take the nation from the bloated post-war New Deal government to the stream-lined “ jet age” of sixties policies and activities. His conservativism strengthened the nation with a new relationship between the individual, local and state governments, and the federal government. He set out to strike a balance for the nation which was sorely needed at the time, neither an intrusive, paternalistic government designed to be all things for all people, nor an absentee government willing to watch market and social forces work unbridled without regulation or regard for the individual. It was a unique era for America.

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