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STANDING NEUSTADT ON HIS HEAD:

THE LEADERSHIP STYLE OF DWIGHT D. EISENHOWER

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The presidency of Dwight D. Eisenhower was in its next-to-last year when Richard E. Neustadt, a 40-year-old Columbia University associate professor and former aide to President Harry S. Truman, dispatched the manuscript of a book entitled *Presidential Power: The Politics of Leadership* to its publisher.

In the previous quarter century, the United States had become a world power and a welfare state; the size and importance of the federal government had increased dramatically; and the presidency had been transformed from a largely reactive institution to the principal engine of national policy making.¹ Neustadt's premise was that the responsibilities and circumstances of American presidents in the era that began with the accession of Franklin D. Roosevelt were so different from those of their predecessors that the evidence for his analysis would have to come from only three chief executives -- Roosevelt, Truman, and Eisenhower. Indeed, because Neustadt's special concern was with the stalemated politics of the post World War II period that he referred to as "mid-century," his case studies were taken only from the latter two. Neustadt knew the Truman presidency from the inside, but his references to the ongoing Eisenhower presidency were necessarily based largely on the then-public record.

¹ Richard E. Neustadt, *Presidential Power: The Politics of Leadership* (New York: Wiley, 1960). The final edition of Neustadt's book includes the original 1960 text and adds five *Presidents* chapters examining episodes in post-1960 presidencies. It is entitled *Presidential Power and the Modern Presidents: The Politics of Leadership from Roosevelt to Reagan* (New York: The Free Press, 1990). My citations of the book are from this edition. Neustadt's analysis was anticipated in his essay "The Presidency at Mid-Century," *Law and Contemporary Problems* 21 (1956), 609-645.

Looming in the background of Neustadt's effort to distill lessons on effective presidential leadership was what he referred to as "the shadow" of Franklin Delano Roosevelt.² The operating methods of that political virtuoso provide many of the premises for Neustadt's argument about how chief executives can get results in the intractable American political system.

In the formulation of Neustadt's 1960 classic, an effective modern chief executive must constantly be alert to maintaining his (and someday her) power and influence. To advance that end, the president has three broad resources. The first is the formal powers of the presidency, which Neustadt refers to as "vantage points." The second is "professional reputation – the perception of other members of the political community that the president is a skilled, determined political operator. The third is the president's popularity, which Neustadt refers to as "prestige." In Neustadt's Washington-centered analysis, a president's public approval is important not in itself, but for the evidence it provides to other members of the policy-making community of how their own constituents will respond positively if they support the president's policies.³

Contemporary students of the presidency have at their disposal a wealth of evidence that was not at Neustadt's disposal in the 1950s. They can draw on the experience of the presidents from John F. Kennedy to Barack Obama, and they also have at their disposal a rich archival record on many past presidencies, including the one on which Neustadt had the least inside information – that of Eisenhower. The archival record of the inner workings of the Eisenhower presidency did not become available until the 1970s, when Eisenhower's personal secretary, Ann

² Neustadt, *Presidential Power and the Modern Presidents*, 4.

³ For Neustadt's fullest discussion of these resources, see *Presidential Power and the Modern Presidents*, 150.

Whitman's files were opened to scholars. The so-called Whitman Diary is a documentary mother lode that includes Eisenhower's confidential correspondence and personal diary, detailed notes on his meetings and telephone conversations, and even secret recordings of his one-to-one conversations.

EISENHOWER AS POLITICAL LEADER

The now-available record virtually reverses the view held by Neustadt and other 1950s political observers of Eisenhower's conduct of the presidency. It shows the thirty-fourth president to have had a leadership style that stood on its head the precept in *Presidential Power* that to be effective a chief executive should take pains to demonstrate that he is a skilled and determined political operator. Eisenhower proves to have gone out of his way to *avoid* drawing attention to his political skill.

Eisenhower's leadership was non-Neustadtian in another manner. He put a premium on explicit organization of his administration's deliberations. Neustadt was well aware of this much publicized aspect of Eisenhower's conduct in office, but he and other contemporary observers incorrectly held that the former supreme commander had "bureaucratized" the presidency, thus reducing his access to advice and information and depriving his administration of flexibility in its response to emerging events.⁴ The now-available Eisenhower record also points to the importance of a source of presidential effectiveness that Neustadt ignores by focusing on the *means* of leadership -- the value of having well-considered policy *ends*.

⁴ Neustadt's comments on Eisenhower's organizational methods appear in *Presidential Power and the Modern Presidency*, 135-144.

The following notes made by Mrs. Whitman on a March 1954 telephone conversation between Eisenhower and Secretary of the Treasury George M. Humphrey provide a striking illustration of one of Eisenhower's distinctive methods – hidden-hand leadership:

The President called Secretary Humphrey and asked him to speak to [Texas oil magnate and Eisenhower friend] Sid Richardson, who was really the angel for [Senate Democratic Leader] Lyndon Johnson when he came in. Ask him what it is that Texas wants. We help out in drought, take tidelands matter on their side, and tax bill. He tells Sid he is supporting us, then comes up here and disproves it. Perhaps Sid could get him into right channel, or threaten to get [Texas Governor Allan] Shivers into primary and beat him for Senate. Humphrey says this is this is exactly the time to do it, too, and if he [Humphrey] talks to Sid, it can't be said that DDE is taking advantage of [their] long-time friendship.⁵

As this document makes evident, the Eisenhower who Neustadt and other political observers of the time perceived to be a political innocent was in fact a political sophisticate. His knowledge extended even to obscure aspects of Texas politics, and he was determined to advance his policies. However, he exercised influence by working through a subordinate. Indeed, he further hid his tracks by seeing to it that his subordinate worked through an intermediary.

A more historically significant instance of Eisenhower's use of hidden-hand leadership occurred in the 1954 Army-McCarthy affair and the subsequent Senate censure of Senator McCarthy. Eisenhower's public position was that it was for the Senate, not the president, to discipline McCarthy. When his allies, including his brother and chief advisor, Milton, urged him

⁵ Phone calls, March 19, 1954, Whitman-DDE file, Dwight D. Eisenhower Library, Abilene, Kansas.

to confront McCarthy, he refused to do so. It was his view, Eisenhower explained, that the Wisconsin senator would profit from the attention he would receive if the chief executive were to tangle publicly with that political gutter fighter. When the occasion did arise for a member of the administration to speak publicly against McCarthy, Eisenhower assigned that task to Vice President Richard Nixon. But Eisenhower privately played a central part in the campaign that led to McCarthy's censure by the Senate in December 1954.⁶

Another of Eisenhower's leadership practices was verbal. He adapted his means of expression to circumstances, altering his language from context to context. Eisenhower's internal memoranda to aides were crisply analytic, advancing complicated arguments in clear, incisive prose. He went to great lengths to make his speeches dignified, while at the same time simplifying their rhetoric so that they might, as he put it, be understood by "the fellow digging the ditch in Kansas."⁷ And he was relaxed and colloquial in the news conferences that were notorious for his scrambled syntax.

Even the notoriously fractured prose of Eisenhower's news conferences was sometimes deliberate, as it was at one point in the standoff over the Nationalist-held islands just off the coast of mainland China. On that occasion, Press Secretary James Hagerty told Eisenhower that the State Department had requested that he decline to answer questions about whether the United States would defend the Nationalist –Chinese held off-shore islands if they were invaded by the communist Chinese. Eisenhower's reply was, "Don't worry, Jim, if that question comes up, I'll just confuse them." The question did come up, and Eisenhower made the following assertion:

⁶ For a detailed account of Eisenhower and McCarthy, see Fred I. Greenstein, *The Hidden-Hand Presidency: Eisenhower as Leader* (New York: Basic Books, 1982), 155-227.

⁷ Greenstein, *The Hidden-Hand Presidency*, 109.

I cannot answer that question in advance. The only things I know about war are two things: the most changeable factor in war is human nature in its day-by-day manifestation; but the only unchangeable factor in war is human nature. And the next thing is that every war is going to astonish you in the way it occurred, and the way it is carried out. So for a man to predict, particularly if he has the responsibility for making the decision, to predict what he is going to use, how he is going to do it, would I think exhibit his ignorance of war; that is what I believe. So I think you just have to wait, and that is the kind of prayerful decision that may someday face a president.⁸

This display of obfuscation undoubtedly baffled the press, but it advanced Eisenhower's purposes by leaving the Chinese communists uncertain about whether the United States would defend those vulnerable outposts. Moreover, in confusing the communists about his intentions, Eisenhower was not leaving the American public in the dark. Who better to make such a “prayerful decision,” in their view, than the general who had led the nation to victory in Europe in World War II?

EISENHOWER AS HEAD OF STATE

Eisenhower's low-profile political methods were complemented by his studied means of fulfilling his obligations as head of state. The old soldier, who had not stinted on morale-building as supreme commander, was self-consciously attentive to inspirational leadership. The

⁸ "The President's News Conference," March 30, 1955, *Public Papers of the Presidents: Dwight D. Eisenhower: 1955* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1956). Eisenhower reports his statement to Hagerty in Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Mandate for Change: The White House Years, 1953-1956* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1963), 478.

Eisenhower smile and beaming public manner were so winning that they seemed to be wholly spontaneous, but his chemistry with the public was partly the result of calculation. He revealed his views of such matters in a document he did not expect to see the light of day -- a discarded draft of the introduction to his World War II memoirs in which he recalled the tense days that he spent in November 1942, awaiting the intelligence he needed to decide whether to order the invasion of North Africa.

"During those anxious hours," he wrote, "I first realized how inexorably and inescapably strain and tension wear away at the leader's endurance, his judgment and his confidence. The pressure becomes more acute because of the duty of a staff constantly to present to the commander the worst side of any eventuality." Realizing that the commander has the double burden of "preserving optimism in himself and in his command" and that "optimism and pessimism are infectious and they spread more rapidly from the head down than in any direction," Eisenhower made the following resolution:

I firmly determined that my mannerisms and speech in public would always reflect the cheerful certainty of victory -- that any pessimism and discouragement I might ever feel would be reserved for my pillow. To translate this conviction into tangible results, I adopted a policy of circulating through the whole force to the full limit imposed by physical considerations. I did my best to meet everyone from general to private with a smile, a pat on the back and a definite interest in his problems.⁹

President Eisenhower was as committed to instilling morale as *General* Eisenhower had been. In his final year as president, the sixty-nine-year-old Eisenhower embarked on a series of

⁹ The discarded introduction to *Crusade in Europe* can be found in the Eisenhower Library file that contains the drafts and manuscript of the book.

strenuous global goodwill tours, subjecting himself to an exhausting regimen of motorcades and official meetings. Eisenhower's concern with the public side of leadership even extended to giving tips on political self-presentation to the professional politicians with whom he appeared at campaign events. He would say "Here's what you do," his former aide Bryce Harlow reports:

Get out there. Don't look so serious. Smile. When the people are waving at you wave your arms and move your lips, so you look like you're talking to them. It doesn't matter what you say. Let them see you're reacting to them.¹⁰

EISENHOWER'S ORGANIZATIONAL METHODS

Far more than any other chief executive, Eisenhower was preoccupied with organizational aspects of the presidency. Eisenhower's concern with organization, as I have noted, was well known in the 1950s, but was assumed by Neustadt and others who were not in his inner circle that Eisenhower's highly developed staff arrangements were counterproductive because they made for bureaucratic delay and kept him from receiving a wide diversity of advice and information. The now available record shows otherwise. It also documents Eisenhower's mastery of informal organizational leadership. Consider the seamless steps of the transition from Eisenhower's election to his inauguration.¹¹ Eisenhower chose his White House chief of staff and budget director on election night. He then appointed a blue-ribbon committee to propose appointees to his cabinet which I soon did. By late November, Eisenhower had named his future

¹⁰ John Osborne, "White House Watch: Gabbing with Harlow," *New Republic* (May 13, 1978): 12-14.

¹¹ For a valuable discussion of the importance of doing so, see James P. Pfiffner, *The Strategic Presidency: Hitting the Ground Running* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2nd. ed. rev., 1996).

cabinet and White House staff and departed on the trip to Korea he had promised to make during the campaign, bringing many of his future associates with him.

The official purpose of that journey was to make plans to bring the Korean War to a halt, but Eisenhower made it do double duty as a way of solidifying his team. On his return from Korea, Eisenhower arranged for additional members of his future administration to join his party at Wake Island, where they boarded a Navy cruiser and deliberated on matters on the administration's policies and procedures for several days as the ship sailed to Pearl Harbor. Not content with these pre-inauguration consultations, Eisenhower convened his associates-to be a second time at the Republican campaign headquarters in New York early in January for two additional days of deliberation.

Eisenhower conducted his presidency with same organizational skill that marked his transition. He systematized the machinery of the presidency, instituting a White House chief of staff, an office to manage relations with Congress, and a special assistant to coordinate national security matters. In a typical week, Eisenhower met at specified times with the Republican congressional leaders, the cabinet, and the National Security Council (NSC). He also created staff bodies that spelled out the diverse points of view in the administration and set the agenda for the cabinet and NSC meetings.

Eisenhower's NSC meetings provide an object lesson in what has come to be called multiple advocacy in foreign policy making -- sharply joined debate in which policy disagreements are aired in the presence of the president rather than being brokered at lower levels of the bureaucracy. To make that possible, Eisenhower required that the new assistant for national security be neutral on policy matters and concentrate on ensuring that all points of view

received a hearing by the NSC. At the meetings, Eisenhower sometimes waited until his colleagues had their say, but sometimes entered the discussion immediately to set the terms of debate. Whatever the case, he insisted that participants speak up and encouraged expression of disagreement.¹²

Eisenhower's institutional machinery provided the framework within which he consulted with colleagues, but his formal meetings were not occasions for decision making. Instead, he made his decisions in informal gatherings with a handful of aides, in the Oval Office. Still, by institutionalizing consultation, Eisenhower exposed his views to rigorous debate and consolidated his associates around the administration's program. All of this was anticipated by Eisenhower's practices in the military where he welded a disparate assortment of national interests and often contentious personalities into a formidable fighting force. As he once put it during his military years, "leadership is as vital in conference as in battle."¹³

A POLICY-DRIVEN PRESIDENT

Eisenhower was also noteworthy for his preoccupation with the content of policy. His characteristic response to an emerging problem was to view it in terms of an overall principle. Only then would his political skills come into play. From Eisenhower's devotion to policy much

¹² Alexander L. George, "The Case for Multiple Advocacy in Making Foreign Policy," *American Political Science Review* 66 (1972): 751-85. Fred I. Greenstein and Richard H. Immerman, "Effective National Security Advising: Restoring the Eisenhower Legacy," *Political Science Quarterly* 115 (2000), 335-345.

¹³ The quotation is from a February 7, 1948, memorandum from Eisenhower to Secretary of Defense James Forrestal with advice on the management of the recently created Department of Defense. *The Papers of Dwight David Eisenhower*, vol. 9, ed., Louis Galambos (Baltimore, MD, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978): 2250.

else follows, including his counter-Neustadtian tendency to take important actions without claiming responsibility for them, his tendency to shun political confrontation, and even his reluctant quest for the nation's highest office.

Eisenhower's proclivity to think about the ends of collective action was evident well before he became a major public figure. His ability to formulate strategic policy led Army Chief of Staff George C. Marshall to send him to London in 1942 to head the American military effort in Europe. It soon became evident, however, that he also was exceptionally effective in coordinating the Allied war effort and that his radiant public persona made him an inspiring leader of troops. In short, he was a natural to command the entire Allied European Theater. After the war, that same persona made him attractive as a potential presidential candidate to leaders in both parties.¹⁴

In 1948, Eisenhower retired from active duty and assumed the presidency of Columbia University. During this period, he fended off the various efforts to draft him as a presidential candidate. In 1950, President Truman recalled him to active duty to serve as the first military commander of the newly constituted North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Eisenhower's diary for his NATO period documents the rear-guard actions of a professional soldier who does not want to seek the presidency, but who has concluded that he must do so to advance the policies to which he was committed. They also reveal the beliefs that informed those policies, including his conviction that the nation needed to restructure its defense effort with a view to reducing its

¹⁴ On Eisenhower's public support between the end of the war and his accession to the presidency see Herbert H. Hyman and Paul B. Sheatsley, "The Political Appeal of President Eisenhower," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 19 (Winter 1955-56): 26-30; and George H. Gallup, *The Gallup Poll, 1935-1971* (New York: Random House, 1973).

soaring military expenditures, which by fostering inflation weakened the economy and undermined the purpose they were meant to serve.¹⁵

Those diary entries foreshadow the economy-minded "New Look" strategic doctrine that was to guide Eisenhower's foreign policy. That doctrine was grounded on the premise that the health of the nation's economy is the bastion of its security and that the United States should base its national security policy more on its nuclear deterrent than on the costly conventional forces that required to engage in regional wars, such as those in progress in Korea and Indochina when he took office. The New Look informed much of Eisenhower's decision making, including his efforts to curb defense spending, his refusal to intervene in Indochina, and his resistance to demands for a massive missile buildup in the missile program in the wake of the Soviet launching of *Sputnik*.

THE HIDDEN HAND VERSUS THE BULLY PULPIT

Eisenhower's seemingly nonpolitical leadership style helped him maintain a high level of public support, providing political cover for holding down spending and engaging in international crisis management. However, it had a distinct negative side that is illustrated in his flat-footed actions in the missile-gap controversy. Assertions that the United States trailed the Soviet Union in missile development were first made in the mid-1950s. The missile-gap controversy was of modest proportions until the launching of *Sputnik* on October 4, 1957. The shock to Americans of the launching of *Sputnik* can be compared only to that of Pearl Harbor.

¹⁵ In an entry for October 18, 1951, for example, Eisenhower reflected at length about the need to "reexamine our whole philosophy of defense in its foreign and domestic aspects," with a view to achieving "security without paying the price of national bankruptcy." Robert H. Ferrell, ed. *The Eisenhower Diaries* (New York: Norton, 1981), 202.

What was worrisome was that in putting a satellite in orbit the Soviet Union had demonstrated that it now had missiles capable of reaching the United States with its nuclear weapons.¹⁶

Eisenhower's reaction to *Sputnik* was to stand pat. His administration's first statements were by his press secretary and the secretary of state, who minimized the Soviet accomplishment, declaring that the United States had never intended to engage in a space race with the Soviet Union. Other Eisenhower aides were dismissive of the Soviet achievement. Secretary of Defense Charles E. Wilson called it a "nice scientific trick" and White House chief of staff Sherman Adams referred to it as an "outer space basketball game."¹⁷

Eisenhower's first public response was in an October 9 press conference. It was a lackluster performance. His effort to convey a sense of calmness came across as complacency. At one point he seemed to disparage the Soviet feat, calling *Sputnik* "one small ball in the air." Eisenhower went on to make several rather general speeches designed to reassure the nation. They failed to do the job. There continued to be claims that there was a missile gap until the end of the Eisenhower presidency. This allegation figured prominently in the 1960 presidential campaign. When Kennedy became president, he learned that whatever missile gap there was favored the United States. He nevertheless presided over a missile buildup that spiraled into an arms race with the Soviet Union.

As it happens, Eisenhower knew from highly secret U-2 spy plane flights over the Soviet Union that there was no missile gap. He did not make the U-2 findings public, because doing so

¹⁶ Peter J. Roman, *Eisenhower and the Missile Gap* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995.)

¹⁷ Robert A. Divine, *The Sputnik Challenge: Eisenhower's Response to the Soviet Space Satellite* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.)

would compromise the program of surveillance of the Soviet Union from the stratosphere. Eisenhower also had a more fundamental reason for holding the line on missile development, which remained valid after the Soviets shot down a U-2 plane in May 1960 and the flights over the Soviet Union were halted. In Eisenhower's conception of national security, the United States did not need to equal the Soviet Union in all areas of military endeavor. What it needed was sufficient retaliatory power to deter the Soviets from aggression. Eisenhower's corollary was that excessive military expenditures *reduced* national security by weakening the economy. This thesis was eminently suited for public enunciation by a respected former supreme commander, but persuading the nation of its validity called for the bully pulpit, not the hidden hand. (This is failing of Eisenhower's that Neustadt did not address.)

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE PRESIDENTS

The Eisenhower experience suggests the need for a number of amplifications of the advice Neustadt provided for American chief executives. One derives from Eisenhower's practice of emphasizing the president's role as head of state and playing down his more political actions. It is possible for future presidents also to do this, but within limits. The goldfish-bowl nature of contemporary American politics gives today's presidents less leeway than Eisenhower had for hiding his hand. Still, even if presidents cannot adopt Eisenhower's methods, they may find it in their interest to *adapt* them to their own circumstances. The potential payoff for stressing the president's role as head of state and de-emphasizing public displays of presidential political prowess would be in a currency that has often been in short supply for American presidents –

broad-based public approval. The trade-off, of course, would be allegations that the president was being overly passive.

Eisenhower's organizational practices also suggest a corrective to Neustadt's precepts for presidents. A number of his specific institutional innovations commend themselves, but the spirit that animated his organizational leadership is more important than the machinery he employed. From the deliberations that led Kennedy to authorize the landing of Cuban exiles in the swamps of Cuba's Bay of Pigs to the bureaucratic politics that abounded in the White House of George W. Bush, many of Eisenhower's successors have suffered from inadequate organizational practices.

Eisenhower's preoccupation with policy also has implications for other presidents. In *Presidential Power*, Neustadt stresses the importance of a president's political skills. However, presidents need to be more than able political practitioners. The most single-mindedly political of the modern presidents, Lyndon B. Johnson, is a case in point. In the first six months of 1965, Johnson responded to the threat of a communist triumph in Vietnam by transforming the American advisory presence in that nation into a full-fledged military intervention, doing so with such political finesse that he encountered minimal opposition. By 1968, a half million American troops were in Vietnam and the intervention had translated into an epic political failure for the Johnson presidency and the nation.

Johnson intervened in Vietnam without pausing to conduct a close analysis of the nation's stakes in Southeast Asia or the probable extent and duration of the American military commitment. Eisenhower's response to the threat of communist victory in Indochina in 1954 provides a striking contrast. In his administration's first NSC discussion of what to do about the

communist encirclement of the French garrison at Dien Bien Phu Eisenhower, framed the debate with a decisive policy analysis, indicating that he had a principled objection to using the American military on the Asian mainland and adding "This war in Indochina would absorb our troops by divisions."¹⁸

The distinctly non-Neustadtian presidential leadership style of Eisenhower is less well known than the leadership styles of most other presidents. If future presidents drew insights from Eisenhower's leadership, it would lead to a constructive paradox. A mid-twentieth century chief executive who was once thought not to offer positive lessons in leadership would be providing guidance to presidents of the twenty-first century.

¹⁸ John P. Burke and Fred I. Greenstein, *How Presidents Test Reality: Decisions on Vietnam, 1954 and 1965* (New York: Russell Sage, 1989), 32.