Eisenhower in War and Peace

by Jean Edward Smith

A New Biography Of Eisenhower

In his magisterial bestseller FDR, Jean Edward Smith gave us a fresh, modern look at one of the most indelible figures in American history. Now this peerless biographer returns with a new life of Dwight D. Eisenhower that is as full, rich, and revealing as anything ever written about America’s thirty-fourth president. As America searches for new heroes to lead it out of its present-day predicaments, Jean Edward Smith’s achievement lies in reintroducing us to a hero from the past whose virtues have become clouded in the mists of history.

Here is Eisenhower the young dreamer, charting a course from Abilene, Kansas, to West Point, to Paris under Pershing, and beyond. Drawing on a wealth of untapped primary sources, Smith provides new insight into Ike’s maddening apprenticeship under Douglas MacArthur in Washington and the Philippines. Then the whole panorama of World War II unfolds, with Eisenhower’s superlative generalship forging the Allied path to victory through multiple reversals of fortune in North Africa and Italy, culminating in the triumphant invasion of Normandy. Smith also gives us an intriguing examination of Ike’s finances, details his wartime affair with Kay Summersby, and reveals the inside story of the 1952 Republican convention that catapulted him to the White House.

Smith’s chronicle of Eisenhower’s presidential years is as compelling as it is comprehensive. Derided by his detractors as a somnambulant caretaker, Eisenhower emerges in Smith’s perceptive retelling as both a canny politician and a skillful, decisive leader. Smith convincingly portrays an Eisenhower who engineered an end to America’s three-year no-win war in Korea, resisted calls for preventative wars against the Soviet Union and China, and boldly deployed the Seventh Fleet to protect Formosa from...
invasion. This Eisenhower, Smith shows us, stared down Khrushchev over Berlin and forced the withdrawal of British, French, and Israeli forces from the Suez Canal. He managed not only to keep the peace—after Ike made peace in Korea, not one American soldier was killed in action during his tenure—but also to enhance America’s prestige in the Middle East and throughout the world.

Domestically, Eisenhower reduced defense spending, balanced the budget, constructed the interstate highway system, and provided social security coverage for millions who were self-employed. Ike believed that traditional American values encompassed change and progress.

Unmatched in insight, Eisenhower in War and Peace at last gives us an Eisenhower for our time—and for the ages.

Dwight David Eisenhower (1890 -- 1969) served as the 34th President of the United States (1953 -- 1961) following his career as the Supreme Commander of the Allied forces during WW II. His presidency and his generalship have been the subject of varied assessments over the years. I was a child in the 1950s and my first memories of a president are of Eisenhower. To many younger Americans, he may remain an obscure historical figure. Jean Edward Smiths new large biography, Eisenhower in War and Peace (2012) is an extraordinarily detailed study of Ikes public and private life. Smith is senior scholar in the history department at Columbia University, where Eisenhower served briefly as president. He has written extensively on American history, including biographies of FDR, Ulysses Grant, and John Marshall.

Although the book consists of over 760 pages of text and an additional 150 pages of notes and bibliography, the narrative flow of the story is absorbing. Smith recounts complex military and political history in a way that is both understandable and entertaining. His writing style, unbiased presentation, and detailed documentation made me inclined to trust his judgment. Throughout the study, Smith draws useful parallels between Eisenhower and other American military and political leaders. In particular, Smith often compares and contrasts Eisenhower with Ulysees Grant in terms of decisiveness, relationship to subordinates, and military accomplishments. The most telling parallel lies in writing and in ability to communicate. Although not having the gift for words that Grant displayed in his Memoirs, Eisenhower was an excellent, clear writer, especially of his own war memoirs, and, when he wished to be, a skilled eloquent speaker.

Smith presents Eisenhowers strengths as a leader and as a person as well as his flaws. The overall impression of Eisenhower that emerges is of a
strong, capable, politically masterful individual, as both general and president, who was a man of principle, decency, and common sense, whom the country could count on to do what was right. In both war and peace he gave the world confidence in American leadership. Eisenhower's accomplishments are inspiring in an America which frequently seems to be floundering for a sense of purpose and balance. Smith aptly describes Eisenhower as a progressive conservative who believed that traditional American values encompassed change and progress. Eisenhower's moderation, high sense of responsibility, and heroism will appeal to many readers.

The book begins with a perceptive treatment of Eisenhower's early life with its humble beginnings in Texas and Kansas. A military career and attendance at West Point were something of a surprise choice for Eisenhower as they had been for Grant. The first third of Smith's book describes Eisenhower's early life and the many seemingly interminable assignments Eisenhower held as a major in the peacetime army. Eisenhower showed a talent for hard work and for impressing his superiors. He developed an ability to advance himself subtly and to use his contacts with those who would help him. When the United States entered WW II, Eisenhower's rise was meteoric; but it had been prepared over a long course of time.

Smith shows Eisenhower as a political leader in WW II who had the daunting task of coordinating the allied effort against Germany and working with highly driven and egotistical leaders in the United States, France, and Britain. Eisenhower's tact and self-confidence were rare and essential qualities indeed. As a military strategist, Eisenhower had mixed results, but he made critical decisions regarding the Normandy invasion and the Battle of the Bulge. Smith shows that Eisenhower richly deserved the accolades he received at the end of the war.

Following WW II, Eisenhower served as president of Columbia and as the commander of NATO before, with a show of reluctance, accepting the Republican presidential nomination in 1952. With the end of Eisenhower's presidency in 1961, many historians were critical; but Eisenhower's stature as president has grown with time. Smith finds Eisenhower the most successful 20th century president with the exception of FDR. Eisenhower kept the United States out of war, balanced the budget, and displayed firm, subtle leadership that was not always apparent to the public. He acted with care and prudence in Vietnam against the hawkish advice of his staff and he dealt effectively with crises in Berlin, China and elsewhere. (Some of his foreign policy ventures in Iran and Central America were ill-advised and unsuccessful.) In a non-divisive, non-confrontational way Eisenhower helped lead to the discrediting of the red-baiting Senator Joseph McCarthy. He built the national highway system and the St. Laurence Seaway. In 1956, following a heart attack and in the middle of a reelection campaign, Eisenhower showed courage in resolving the most controversial foreign policy issue in his presidency -- the Suez Canal crisis which pitted the
United States against its allies, Britain, France, and Israel. In an understood, politic way, Eisenhower also did more to advance civil rights than is commonly acknowledged. His Justice Department argued before the Supreme Court in favor of school desegregation in the Brown cases. In 1958, Eisenhower sent troops to Little Rock, Arkansas, to enforce a desegregation decree against the recalcitrant state governor.

Eisenhower’s personal life and feelings remained enigmatical even to those close to him. Smith’s book concentrates on Eisenhower’s long marriage to Mamie Doud and the difficulties the couple endured over the years. Smith also describes the long relationship Eisenhower had during WW II with a young British woman, Kay Summersby. It appears that at the end of WW II, Eisenhower wrote to George Marshall about his intention to divorce Mamie and marry Kay. Marshall dissuaded him from this course in no uncertain terms, and Eisenhower ended the relationship in a callous, peremptory way.

This study of Eisenhower and of what was valuable and decent in him can bring hope and wisdom to a difficult time. Smith’s study deserves and surely will receive a wide readership and will stimulate much discussion. I am pleased that it was offered to interested lay readers for an advance review through the Vine program.

Robin Friedman

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