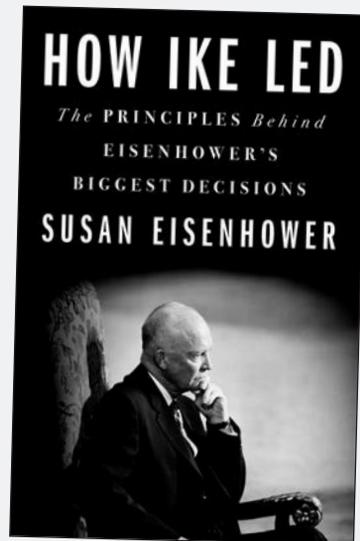


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## How Ike Led: The Principles Behind Eisenhower's Toughest Decisions

by Susan Eisenhower  
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Reviewed by Walter M. Hudson



Part memoir, part historical recounting, part leadership lesson, Susan Eisenhower's *How Ike Led: The Principles Behind Eisenhower's Toughest Decisions* is not only the sum, but the product of its parts, in keeping with her grandfather's own "Great Equation." Each part magnifies and amplifies the other: exploring Eisenhower in such a personal way helps us understand his historical period; delving into the historical context informs us about the man; providing the strategic insights illuminates both Ike and his times. This is a rich, multiform yet still cohesive book.

We see a variety of angles of the private Eisenhower—as portrait painter (better at portraits than landscapes, and fittingly so), as bridge player (a good one, so good and intense during a game that nobody but his longtime partner General Alfred Gruenther would play with him), as golfer (his blood pressure would rise so alarmingly when his good friend Arnold Palmer would play that his doctors almost banned him from watching) and more importantly, as grandfather and father, husband, brother, son, and friend.

All these are brought bear on Eisenhower the leader, both wartime general and Cold War

president. In fact, this book is a good place to start as a complement to the work of so-called Eisenhower revisionism, that reappraisal of Ike that began in the late 70s and that has culminated in Ike being seen as one of the greatest of presidents and most recently, with a national monument in Washington.

Famously, Fred Greenstein, one of the key revisionists, posited the "hidden hand" theory of the Eisenhower presidency. According to Greenstein, contrary to common perceptions that a president must be seen as "tough, skilled politician," Eisenhower instead, "went to great lengths to conceal the political side of his leadership." He did it so well that in fact, his reputation suffered as a result for at least a decade and a half: "[M]ost writers on the presidency viewed him through the lens of his 1950s liberal critics as an aging hero who reigned more than he ruled and [who] lacked the energy, motivation, and political know-how to have a significant impact on events."

Susan Eisenhower provides a more personal and more revealing theory than Greenstein's. Eisenhower, after all, was not an inaccessible

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Walter M. Hudson is an Associate Professor at the Eisenhower School of National Defense University, and a Global Fellow at the Wilson International Center for Scholars. The opinions expressed in this review are his alone and not those of the Department of Defense or National Defense University.

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mystery to those who loved and knew him. To his granddaughter, his actions as a leader were less the product of orchestrated calculation and more those of a lifetime of hard fought experience, some of which she herself observed up close. And what she saw was a successful struggle for self-mastery. Ike had a terrible temper even as a child. He sought to master it, and for the most part, he did. He was raised to take responsibility for one's own actions. At critical moments in his life, he took it.

And Ike learned that *always* seeming to act, *always* seeming to persuade, was itself a deeply flawed model, not only of leadership, but of basic human behavior. Of course an entire presidential theory of leadership spawned at Harvard argued the opposite. presidential power, argued Richard Neustadt in his now-classic study, was very much determined by the president's power of persuasion. But this really wasn't Ike's way. Once, as Susan Eisenhower recounts, when Ike was being harshly criticized for "moving too slowly," he was visited by the great American poet Robert Frost. Perhaps to bolster him, on the flyleaf of a book that he left for the president, Frost aptly inscribed the concluding line of one of his declarative verses: "The strong are saying nothing until they see."

Susan Eisenhower carefully weaves together incidents of child- and adulthood. His boyhood was something out of Huck Finn, in the creeks and fields around Abilene, Kansas. But he was always seen as bright, even as intellectual—as a boy his class yearbook "predicted he would one day become a renowned history teacher at Yale." Long downplayed or outright dismissed by the intelligentsia of his time, Eisenhower's mental powers were formidable. As anyone who has read his writings knows, he was a powerful, lucid writer. He possessed high order conceptual intelligence. Susan Eisenhower illustrates this well in her recounting of his masterful synthesizing, for forty five minutes straight, without a single note, of 1953's Project Solarium to the task

force experts who had plotted its courses of action. As George Kennan, one of the task force members, pointed out, Ike showed his "intellectual ascendancy over every man in the room."

As for his military career, his granddaughter points out that Ike didn't grow up with dreams of marital glory. He didn't come from a military family, but from one with pacifist roots. He went to West Point, as Susan Eisenhower notes, to get a free education. But having gone in the Army, he certainly did not lack ambition. He found his footing, being mentored by Pershing, Fox Conner, and MacArthur, and gaining leadership lessons along the way.

As for politics, Eisenhower was part of a generation of military officers who did not vote at all. And likely this apoliticism had beneficent effect. Political positions did not define his inner life in the slightest, and perhaps as a result he could distinguish the theater of politics from the workshop of policy. The former is filled with posturing and zero-sum outcomes—you either win or you don't; the latter is where analysis and compromise take place---and perhaps the place where outcomes with multiple winners are attainable.

Ike ultimately practiced leadership at the highest levels. As Susan Eisenhower puts it, her grandfather was a "*strategic* rather than operational [leader]. ... [H]is role was to receive all the inputs--across the entire enterprise: both internal and external, political and practical, fundamental and future oriented." This distinction between strategic and operational is critical and profound. Strategy is something that transcends long range planning and immediate action. It is orchestrating and synthesizing. At the highest levels, the strategic leader takes plans (inputs) and oversees actions (outputs), but more importantly, that leader consolidates and harmonizes, sometimes so subtly that one does not notice it, the welter of opinions and positions.

According to Susan Eisenhower, Ike was troubled when JFK dismantled his more formalized

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senior leadership system. JFK, largely influenced by Harvard academics, thought that the President needed quicker access, more ability to cut through bureaucracy, something that might be even considered a forerunner to contemporary organizational thinking about “flattened” organizations. As she puts it, what Ike feared was that JFK would be “so overwhelmed by diverse and second-order inputs that he would resort to governing like an *operational* leader rather than a *strategic* one.” Eisenhower’s more hierarchical system, on the other hand had its own qualities not only in what it permitted, but in what it disallowed.

This point is critical: much of Eisenhower’s leadership is characterized by what might be called negative evidence—by what Ike did *not do*. He didn’t immerse America in Indochina in 1954 during or after Dien Bien Phu, he didn’t push for a massive military budget when in 1957 Sputnik sent the country into panic, he didn’t dismantle the New Deal or call for tax cuts before he felt the country was ready for them. Such negations are the seeming antitheses of get-things-done type leaders, who want to be seen as doing something, anything, to prove they are the masters of the moment.

Instead, Ike’s grand strategies were rooted in ordinary, common-sense behaviors. Don’t dismantle the social safety net that FDR and Truman had established on the one hand. Don’t think America can create a European-style welfare state and still lead the free world on the other. Keep America strong, primarily through technological set-offs. But don’t immerse Americans in far flung conflicts. In fact, do everything possible to end them as soon as possible, as Ike did in Korea.

Susan Eisenhower calls this Ike’s “middle way.” It was, by definition, centrist, perhaps conservative with a small *c*, not really ideologically oriented. Eisenhower believed in an America that was rooted in the real and realizable. America could not “bear any burden.” It could not do the impossible. In his

final address he pointed out not only the dangers of the military industrial complex, but the “need for balance,” consistent with his calls throughout his presidency for both security and solvency.

And how has history viewed the balance sheet? John Lewis Gaddis, in *Strategies of Containment* remarks that, contrary to Eisenhower revisionists, Ike was not a genius: “Still his strategy was coherent, bearing signs of his influence at every level, careful, for the most part, in its relations of ends to means, and, on the whole, more consistent than detrimental to the national interest.” While Gaddis notes this claim is “modest,” it was certainly preferable the more reckless strategies that immediately preceded and followed—the excessive spending of NSC-68 under Truman or the “flexible response” under JFK and LBJ, that sought monsters to destroy and instead lead to disaster in Southeast Asia. That “modest claim” would likely be for Eisenhower a fitting encomium. After all, a “middle way” eschews epoch-ringing boasts.

Was there, in the end, a kind of Eisenhowerian genius? Yes, according to his granddaughter. Ike’s genius lay, perhaps not in the art of strategy, but in the art of leadership itself. His special genius was not military wizardry, rhetorical skill or even political acumen, but something deeper, more personal. According to Susan Eisenhower, Ike had a capacity to know when to “deploy his ego” and, just as importantly, “when to suppress it.” He knew when to assert and lead, when to accept responsibility, and when to exhibit plain decency and humanity.

When needed, Eisenhower could be forceful, though not in a way that was anything other than a duty to the historical moment. As Alex von Tunzelmann writes in a recent study of the 1956 Suez Crisis, “Many feared at the time that it might even trigger World War III.” But “Eisenhower did not flinch. He just made it stop.” During the crisis, Eisenhower’s reelection hung in the balance (with the Hungarian uprising taking place

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nearly simultaneously, and where controversially, he did not intervene). In the end, it didn't matter. Susan Eisenhower notes Ike's mixture of fatalism, self-awareness, and self-assuredness about his place in time and in the world: "If I lose the election," he told his son John, "then so be it."

And then there were the moments when asserting his ego were of less importance. The great writer of soldierhood Paul Fussell, who personally experienced brutal combat as an infantryman in World War II, has written vividly about the waste and wickedness of war. And yet, as Fussell says, "despite the preponderance of vileness, not all are vile."

One of those exceptional moments in war he refers to is Eisenhower's, when, "alone with himself," Ike wrote his famous note in which he took full blame had the Normandy landings failed. If Eisenhower's armada had failed, in Fussell's vivid words, "his troops torn apart for nothing, his planes ripped and smashed to no end, his warships sunk, his reputation blasted," he would take full responsibility. "If any blame or fault attaches to this attempt, it is mine alone." Fussell highlights that "*mine alone*" as a "a bright signal in a dark time."

Susan Eisenhower recounts another such iconic event—her grandfather talking to paratroopers the night before D-Day (and now memorialized at his newly opened monument). We all know the photo—Ike, with his arms raised, with his eyes fixed on the men. His granddaughter rhetorically asks: "Was the firmness of his jaw and the look of determination in his eyes indicative of a rousing pep talk he was giving to the troops?"

That determined mid-air gesture, that focused gaze? Ike was not rousing the troops with a pep talk or inspiring them with a grandiloquent statement. The men knew what they were doing and why they were doing it. They knew the danger of it. When the famous photo was snapped, Ike was talking about fly-fishing, "making a hand gesture similar to that of a fly fisherman about to cast his line." He was

reminding them, reminding himself even, of the things back home, of ordinary pleasures that any one of them could perhaps have again, when the fighting was done.

Susan Eisenhower reveals in her fine book that such moments were not singular for her grandfather. They amounted to his genius, a genius that repeatedly emerged from principles that were learned and earned as a child, as a man, indeed throughout all of his life, as general, president, and leader.

*Walter M. Hudson is an Associate Professor at the Eisenhower School of National Defense University, and a Global Fellow at the Wilson International Center for Scholars. The opinions expressed in this review are his alone and not those of the Department of Defense or National Defense University.*