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Presidential biographers always face the daunting task of writing a continuous narrative of a life that merges an individual’s earlier years with his years in the highest office of the land. The temptation to read back into one’s past a destiny for the Oval Office is difficult to resist. The challenge is even more glaring for figures who achieved remarkable success as generals and then were elected president. How did their style of command inform their conduct as chief executive is the question unfailingly investigated. For surely a natural politician could not rise through the ranks of a protocol-obsessed promotion system to the rank of general and then slide comfortably into the give and take of politics. Jean Edward Smith is not so sure. In Eisenhower: In War and Peace, Smith reads Ike’s political savvy back into the hero’s army years.

After Franklin Roosevelt, Smith calls Eisenhower “the most successful president of the twentieth century” (xii). This is quite a designation given where scholarship on Eisenhower began. At the end of his second term and amidst the following Democratic dominance of the White House and Congress, the war hero was regarded simply as that – a war hero. Kennedy backers, eager to capitalize on their candidate’s youth, excoriated the Eisenhower presidency for its complacency, detachment, and agedness. The youth of the 1960s would concur with my father’s oft-repeated assessment, “Eisenhower was a great general, but he wasn’t a very good president.” Scholars since the 1980s have debunked this split in Ike’s credentials assigning a “hidden hand” management style to his presidency that first manifested itself as Supreme Commander in Europe. Several recent publications have celebrated Eisenhower’s engagement and sagacious navigation of the nation towards eighteen years of peace and prosperity. Smith’s one volume biography is the most comprehensive of the recent works.

The difference in Smith’s account is rather than echoing the praises heaped on Eisenhower for his leadership in World War II and conceiving of his presidency as almost anticlimactic to such a celebrated life, Smith flips this usual paradigm. Ike’s generalship receives its merited praise, but it is also subject to heavy scrutiny. Smith’s Supreme Commander is brilliant at forming and sustaining coalitions, but he should have left battlefield tactics to more experienced commanders such as Montgomery, Patton, and Bradley. Ike unnecessarily bogged the Allies down in North Africa, failed to block the German retreat from Sicily, underestimated German forces on the Italian peninsula, and most egregiously allowed his ego to prevent Montgomery from launching an all-out break for the Rhine when the Wehrmacht was reeling after the battle of Normandy. Eisenhower was more politically astute to incorporate de Gaulle in Allied planning, redirect Churchill’s attention away from the Balkans and towards France, and remained calm and decisive when the Germans broke out in the Bulge.

Smith sullies Ike’s war record even further by highlighting the general’s alleged dalliance with Kay Summersby. Smith’s biography is the first to rely extensively on Summersby’s memoir that details a secret romance between Ike and Kay during the war that jeopardized the general’s marriage and command. The memoir remains hotly debated, but it does not prevent Smith from portraying an Eisenhower who receives a massage after ordering the troops to the beaches on D-Day, living in luxury with Kay outside of Paris, and finally failing to obtain permission from George Marshall to divorce Mamie and marry Kay. Smith does not refute all the objections that have been raised about Summersby’s account, but her tale accommodates Smith’s wartime Ike.

If Eisenhower exhibited measured success during the war, then he achieved unmitigated triumph as president. The White House and not SHAEF was the apotheosis of Eisenhower’s career. “Eisenhower gave the country eighteen years of peace and prosperity. No other president in the twentieth century can make that claim” (xv). Ike’s political savvy served him well as he disavowed any desire for the presidency while his recruiters grew more energized. Ingratiating Taft’s supporters, sidestepping McCarthy, and managing Nixon during the campaign demonstrated the skills of a seasoned operator rather than a novice. Politicking served Ike well in one foreign policy crisis after another. He recognized the Korean War was unwinnable and provoked the Chinese and North Koreans not to escalate the
conflict, but to agree to an armistice. He resisted the pressure to use nuclear weapons to win in Korea, or to bail out the French at Dienbienphu, or to defend Quemoy and Matsu. Eisenhower’s refusal to support the French and British during the Suez Crisis or to support the Hungarian uprising in 1956 was not born of an old man’s detachment, but rather an experienced soldier who had witnessed the unpredictability and horror of conflict.

Eisenhower’s adept handling of domestic events delivered prosperity to the cold war economy and cautious progress to the issues that would rend the nation in the following decade. Balanced budgets, federal aid for education, expanding social security, the creation of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, and passage of the Interstate Highway Act offset the demands of cold war hawks for additional arms construction and leftover New Dealers who sought a larger expansion of government services. Eisenhower’s “middle way” which staved off two recessions, bumped up real wages, and slashed national debt also paved the way for federal support of the nascent civil rights movement. Incorporating David Nichol’s recent scholarship, Smith places Eisenhower at the front and not the rear of those who sought ways to use federal power to promote equality under the law. The same moderation Eisenhower employed at Little Rock he preached on arms production in his farewell speech to the nation.

Holding Eisenhower the general and Eisenhower the president together is a formidable enough task that most scholars have avoided by writing volumes solely on one or the other Ikes. Smith’s accomplishment is therefore commendable for not only showing us the singular Eisenhower who was both general and president, but for challenging us to look back from his presidency and not forward. *Eisenhower: In War and Peace* gives us even more reasons to like Ike.

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