Ike's Letters to a Friend, 1941 -1958
Griffith, Robert W.

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Recognizing the value of personal letters, especially those written by President Dwight D. Eisenhower, the University Press of Kansas has taken the opportunity to reissue Robert W. Griffiths’s edited collection Ike’s Letters to a Friend, 1941–1958. Published in 1984, the correspondence between Eisenhower and his longtime friend Everett E. “Sweede” Hazlett provides many insights onto Eisenhower’s formative years as a committed military officer and, later, politician. The sixty-six missives—dictated to his personal secretary Ann C. Whitman over the course of seventeen years—provide a window onto Eisenhower’s need to balance his professional and public convictions with the desire to remain honest with his friend, Sweede, and, ultimately, himself.

Written during the war, postwar, and presidential years, Eisenhower’s letters to Sweede represent a long and deep relationship that began as schoolmates in Abilene, Kansas, in 1910 and lasted for nearly fifty years. As boys and young men they shared many interests, including military careers, which they both pursued. In time Eisenhower ascended the ranks quickly, eventually obtaining the appointment to commander of the Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary force in Europe in 1943, a post he would hold throughout the war. By then, Sweede’s career had taken a sharp downturn as a result of a heart attack he suffered in 1939, essentially ending his hopes for any activity on the field. Sweede nevertheless satisfied himself with administrative positions and maintaining a close friendship with Eisenhower and influencing politics in that way. To Eisenhower, however, Sweede’s letters were especially welcome, for much of the correspondence he received, he informed Sweede, was from people asking for help, giving him unsolicited advice, or requesting his appearance at a social event. Sweede, in
contrast, wanted none of that. Rather, he engaged Eisenhower as a friend.

Readers will find that the missives in Ike’s Letters to a Friend reveal much about Eisenhower and Sweede’s relationship, though perhaps not as much as they do about military and political matters. Despite Eisenhower’s conviction that “Sweede Hazlett was one of the people to that I ‘opened up,’” the correspondence indicates Eisenhower’s inability or, likely, unwillingness to engage in a personal or decidedly intimate relationship with Sweede, his lifelong friend. Indeed, the letters contain subdued affect, with “interesting” being the most praise Eisenhower heaped onto Sweede’s epistolary talents. Yet it is clear that Eisenhower valued his friend’s communication, for he implored him to send notes frequently. “The first paragraph of your letter mentions a prescribed periodicity of three months for your letters,” wrote Eisenhower in early 1952. “I just want to remind you that the prescription is self-imposed” (97). In other words, Eisenhower stated, write more often.

Along with the notes, Ike’s Letters to a Friend contains an introduction and detailed introductory essays that contextualize the letters for the reader. Griffiths’s collection, however, lacks transcriptions of Hazlett’s correspondence. Yet Griffiths makes up for that absence by providing summaries and quotes from Hazlett’s letters to Eisenhower to provide fuller meaning and context to their exchanges. Readers interested in learning more about Eisenhower’s politics—that is, his national and international perspectives, including his staunch beliefs in patriotism and duty, limited government, and the defeat of communism—will find much of interest. Less is said, however, on Eisenhower’s views on growing battles for social justice of the day. As many scholars have remarked, Eisenhower refused to take a stand on integration and segregation, leaving it up to the courts to decide. A firm believer in states’ rights and a conservative, he nonetheless believed the decision of Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas (1954), in which the Supreme Court unanimously ruled that segregation was unconstitutional, had been a mistake, as had his appointment of Earl Warren as chief justice to the Supreme Court a year earlier. He regretted that decision, Griffiths indicates. “Later,” Eisenhower “characterize[d] the appointment of Warren as the ‘biggest damfool mistake I ever made’” (134).

For all the shortcomings of Eisenhower’s administration, Sweede remained a steadfast supporter and had tremendous pride in his friend’s achievements. Yet Eisenhower’s success and status
as a national and international figure was difficult on Sweede, for he refused to ride Eisenhower’s coattails, as he stated. And, though Eisenhower uttered few effusive words describing Sweede’s friendship, he valued their relationship. When Sweede died from cancer in 1958, a few years after suffering another heart attack and high blood pressure, Eisenhower wrote to his widow, confessing “I can never quite tell you what Sweede meant to me. . . . His passing leaves a permanent void in my life.” While the letters provide many clues as to the nature of their relationship, they leave it up to us to contextualize and make sense of the greater meaning they bring to their bond as well as the era. They provide a valuable asset in understanding how the personal, public, and political worlds of statesmen in the 1940s and 1950s were circumscribed by dominant social mores and conventions of the time.

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