Ike's Letters to a Friend, 1941 -1958

Griffith, Robert W.

Published by University Press of Kansas

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

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/84001

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2881416
Introduction

The letters that fill this volume are the product of a friendship between two young men—Everett E. Hazlett ("Swede," the boys called him) and Dwight D. Eisenhower (like several of his brothers, nicknamed "Ike"). Forged during the hot Kansas summer of 1910, their friendship lasted a lifetime—through thirty years during which their lives roughly paralleled one another, and for nearly two decades more during which their lives sharply diverged. Yet the letters that they exchanged are more than simply the chronicle of a friendship; they constitute, as well, a unique self-portrait of one of modern America's most important leaders and a highly revealing inner history of his presidency. "Our deep friendship endured to the day of his death in 1958," Eisenhower later wrote. "Our correspondence over those forty-odd years would fill a thick volume. I drew on it for *The White House Years* because Swede Hazlett was one of the people to whom I opened up."

The story of Ike and Swede begins in Abilene, Kansas, which, despite its brief and lurid history as a Wild West cattle town, was by the time of their youth a sedate midwestern farm community. It was a good place to grow up in, both later recalled, though neither of them returned with any great frequency, and with the passage of years, their ties to the town grew increasingly tenuous.

Nor did they grow up together. Eisenhower, whose father was an "engineer" (read mechanic) at the Belle Springs Creamery, lived with his parents and five brothers in a small two-story frame house on the south (and "wrong") side of the railroad tracks. Swede, whose father was a physician and pharmacist, lived with his parents and sister on the more affluent north side of town. Though Swede would later proclaim in a burst of patriotism that "there was never any difference between 'north of the tracks' and 'south
As you well know, it was only through you that I ever heard of the Government Academies. To the fact that you were well acquainted with the methods for entering the Academies and my good fortune that you were my friend, I owe a lifetime of real enjoyment and interesting work" (Eisenhower to Hazlett, 11 October 1941).

of the tracks," he was wrong. The lines of class in Abilene, though not impermeable, were clearly drawn and reflected in dozens of subtle and sometimes not so subtle ways. On the south side, where Eisenhower lived, were the small frame houses of the working class. On the north side, where the business and professional classes lived, were many large Victorian homes. As a boy, Eisenhower attended Lincoln Grammar School on the south side, while Swede went to the newer and more modern Garfield School on the north side. It was not until the seventh grade that the kids from "south of the tracks" joined the others at Garfield, an event that was often accompanied by fistfights and other youthful rivalries. Indeed, Ike's two-hour battle with northsider Wesley Merrifield quickly became a town legend.²
Nevertheless, when Hazlett arrived at Abilene High School for the beginning of his freshman year, it was Eisenhower who affectionately dubbed him “Swede” and took him under his wing. A sophomore, Eisenhower was already a football star and school hero. Swede, on the other hand, was a gangly blond-headed youth who sometimes became the target of school bullies. “He was a big fellow, too, but he had been raised in a quiet atmosphere and occasionally a few people smaller than he would try to bulldoze him,” Ike later recalled. “I felt protective, a sort of obligation to him, and I took it upon myself to tell a few of the so-and-so’s to lay off.”

Swede spent only a year at Abilene High, however; he completed his high-school education at a military academy in Wisconsin and then secured a congressional appointment to the United States Naval Academy. He failed the mathematics section of the entrance test, however, and came back to Abilene in 1910 to prepare for a reexamination. By the time he returned, Eisenhower had already graduated and was working nights at the creamery. “I had been seeing more and more of Ike, during vacations, as the years went on,” Swede recalled, “and this summer I spent many of my evenings at the creamery, helping him to while away the hours. We played a bit of penny-ante poker—giving him the start that ended in his reputation as the best stud player in the Army. Still being kids, more or less, we also weren’t above raiding the company’s refrigerating room occasionally—for ice cream, and for cold storage eggs and chickens which were cooked on a well-scrubbed shovel in the boiler room.”

Before long, Swede had convinced Eisenhower that he, too, should try to secure an appointment to Annapolis. It was not difficult. With one of his older brothers in college at the University of Michigan, and with younger brothers Earl and Milton coming along, Eisenhower found the service academy’s free education extremely attractive. As it turned out, he was forced to settle for West Point instead, since he would be twenty-one before the next class enlisted and thus would be too old to begin at Annapolis. Both Ike and Swede passed their entrance examinations the following year and entered their respective schools as members of the class of 1915.

They saw one another only occasionally during their academy years, and even more infrequently after graduating. They wrote from time to time, and though no letters from these years appar-
ently survive, Swede later remembered that during World War I, Eisenhower had written “griping because I was overseas while he was kept at home, training our new tank corps.” The two were reunited in 1923, when Ike was stationed at Camp Gaillard in the Panama Canal Zone and the submarine that Swede commanded put in for repairs at the naval base at Coco Solo. Swede was impressed by the fact that Eisenhower had “fitted up the 2nd story screened porch of their quarters as a rough study, and here, with drawing board and texts, he put in his spare time re-fighting the campaigns of the old masters.” Eisenhower himself later recalled his tour of duty in Panama, under Gen. Fox Conner, as “a sort of graduate school in military affairs and the humanities.” He would later excel at the army’s prestigious Command and General Staff School at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.

Their paths did not cross again until 1935 in Washington, where Ike was serving as a senior aide to Army Chief of Staff Gen. Douglas MacArthur and where Swede, now a commander, was serving in the Navy Department. Swede later recalled that Eisenhower was already “rapidly becoming known as an Army ‘comer’ . . . but [that] he was still a Major with no immediate prospects.” A few months later a reluctant Eisenhower left for the Philippines with MacArthur, and more than a decade elapsed before the two friends would see one another again.

During the years that followed, the lives of both men changed dramatically. In Swede’s case, the change was for the worse. A severe heart attack brought his promising career to an end in 1939, on the very eve of World War II. He returned to duty during the war, first as an academic administrator at the naval academy, then later as commander of the naval training program at the University of North Carolina. He retired in 1946, remaining in Chapel Hill with his wife, Elizabeth, or “Ibby” as she was called, and their two daughters, Mary Elizabeth and Alice. He continued to experience poor health, including high blood pressure and excruciating headaches, a second heart attack in 1953, and finally cancer, from which he died in 1958.

Eisenhower, meanwhile, after a sometimes frustrating three years in the Philippines, returned to the United States in 1939 to begin the quick march that would soon lead to his appointment as supreme commander of the Allied Expeditionary Force in Europe and, eventually, to the presidency of the United States.
The correspondence between Eisenhower and Hazlett resumed during the fall of 1941, only a few months before Pearl Harbor. At first, Ike’s letters to Swede were short and infrequent, a fact possibly dictated by the heavy demands of command, by wartime censorship, and by Swede’s reluctance to intrude on his old friend. There is a tentative quality to these early letters—as though the two men were attempting not only to remember who they had been but also to come to terms with who they had become, trying, as it were, to reestablish a relationship that had been attenuated by the passage of years. In the second of the letters, for example, Ike refers to “Mrs. Hazlett,” scarcely a sign of close friendship. In the years that followed, however, the letters increased in length, frequency, and personal warmth. Ike wrote to Swede four or five times a year throughout the late forties and early fifties, and even more often during the presidential years. Nor were his letters perfunctory or merely social; indeed, they increasingly became long and detailed expositions of what Eisenhower was thinking and doing. It is this quality, of course, which makes the collection so interesting to historians.

Though Eisenhower saw Swede only infrequently—on two occasions in 1947, when he was in North Carolina; in 1957, at the second inaugural, and twice while Swede was hospitalized in Bethesda Naval Hospital near Washington—their friendship steadily deepened. For his part, Eisenhower gratefully recalled the pivotal role that Swede had played in the summer of 1910. “As you well know,” he wrote in the first of these letters, “it was only through you that I ever heard of the Government Academies. To the fact that you were well acquainted with the methods for entering the Academies and my good fortune that you were my friend, I owe a lifetime of real enjoyment and interesting work.” On Swede’s part there was tremendous pride in Eisenhower’s achievements, as well perhaps as the vicarious satisfaction of those needs that were denied to him in his own career. “I can’t begin to tell you what a glow of pleasure I get out of all the honors being heaped upon you,” wrote Swede in 1943. But there were also undercurrents of uneasiness in the relationship, especially as Eisenhower became not merely a highly successful army officer but also a national and world hero. These undercurrents were reflected both in Swede’s sometimes extravagant praise for Eisenhower and in his sensitivity about the nature of their relationship. “A year ago,” Swede wrote in June 1945, “I boasted to all who would listen
of our friendship; but now the aura of your glory has become so blinding that I fear even to admit acquaintanceship for fear I’ll be accused of ‘basking’—something I’ve never done in my life.’’ Ike was quick to respond to Swede’s feelings, repeatedly reassuring him that success had not altered their relationship and that he would be upset ‘‘if you feel it necessary to say that you didn’t know that other guy from Abilene.’’ In November 1945 he wrote to Swede that he would ‘‘admit, for the sake of argument, (though without acknowledging any sense in the proposition) that so far as the headlines of the past few years are concerned, we are somewhat like Mutt and Jeff. I’ve been long; you’ve been short. You will remember that as between Mutt and Jeff themselves, comparative elongation made little difference, either in their recurring fights or in those instances when they were both on the same side of a question. What I am getting at is, so far as the Swede-Ike relationship is concerned, there is no ‘big’ and certainly no ‘little’ shot.’’

Although Eisenhower, as we have seen, later recalled that Swede was one of the few people to whom he ‘‘opened up,’’ this is a very relative judgment. Certainly, in the correspondence there is little of an intimate or highly personal nature. Eisenhower didn’t ‘‘open up,’’ in that sense, to anyone. He once wrote to a friend: ‘‘Anglo-saxon men usually find it difficult to exchange direct expressions of sentiment and affection. I am as subject to this inhibition as is any other person.’’ There was, moreover, an element of circumspection in virtually all of Eisenhower’s letters, including those to Swede. In his correspondence, as in his public utterances, Eisenhower was careful not to criticize others or to put to paper words that might, if revealed, prove embarrassing. Nor were there any of the profanities that frequently peppered his private conversation. Indeed, there was a stiff, almost formal quality to most of his correspondence, even to family and good friends such as Swede.

It nevertheless seems clear that the letters to Swede were important to Eisenhower and that they became more so through the years. Once embarked on a letter, some of which ran as long as eight to nine single-spaced typewritten pages, he would indeed pour out his thoughts and feelings. Nor did he shy away from important or controversial topics—Vietnam, the Middle East, civil rights, defense spending, the problem of who would succeed him as president, all found their way into his letters to Swede. The
result is thus a documentary record of considerable value in understanding Eisenhower and in evaluating his presidency.

While contemporary observers praised Eisenhower for ending the Korean War, for restoring a measure of political tranquillity after the hysteria of the McCarthy era, and, negatively, for not dismantling the New Deal welfare state, some of them also charged him with a failure to provide leadership in meeting the difficult new challenges of the postwar world. Many portrayed him as a weak and politically naive president who, as Walter Lippmann put it, was never willing “to break the eggs that are needed for the omelet.” A poll of seventy-five historians, conducted during the early 1960s, rated Eisenhower only twenty-second among American presidents, between Andrew Johnson and Chester A. Arthur.

By the end of the 1960s, however, historians and other intellectuals had begun to change their views, portraying Eisenhower as a more complex, intelligent, and even skillful chief executive. The opening in the late 1970s of important new collections by the Eisenhower Library—among them the Eisenhower-Hazlett correspondence—soon led to a flood of books and articles extending and qualifying this new interpretation.

Much of the early “revisionist” literature seemed limited by the debates of the past: Was Eisenhower an active or passive president? Was he a skilled leader or a bumbler? Was he dominant or subordinate in his relations with powerful advisors such as John Foster Dulles? Some revisionist accounts were suffused with nostalgia for the 1950s, a supposedly golden age of lost innocence and balanced budgets; others sought to use Eisenhower as a foil with which to attack the policies of his successors, emphasizing the differences between him and other postwar presidents and ignoring the many similarities.

The steady accumulation of newer studies on the Eisenhower years, however, now permits historians to proceed beyond the narrow limits of the early “revisionist” literature toward a broader, if also more complex, understanding of Eisenhower and the Eisenhower presidency.

The Eisenhower who emerges in these letters was not a dimwit who, as one particularly nasty barb had it, didn’t read much “because it made his lips tired,” but was a man of solid intelligence, self-confident, orderly, and disciplined in his mental
processes. And although he wrote with little grace or literary flair—his letters were, at best, plain-spoken and, at worst, stiff and rhetorical—he nevertheless generally expressed himself both clearly and coherently.

It should also be clear that the Eisenhower who wrote these letters was no apolitical babe in the woods, Walter Lippmann and others to the contrary notwithstanding. To be sure, Eisenhower went to great lengths to avoid labeling himself a politician and almost always used the words “politics” and “politicians” in a pejorative sense, as when he wrote to Swede in 1943 that he did not “mean to sound like a demagogue or a politician.” Eisenhower nevertheless understood politics, especially the managerial politics of large organizations, and he fully enjoyed the exercise of power. He may not have been a “Machiavelli in pinstripes,” as some overly enthusiastic revisionists have seemed to suggest; but he was nevertheless an extremely skilled chief executive and, within the limits that he believed to be appropriate for presidential action, a successful political leader.

As I have argued elsewhere, Eisenhower was a product of the organizational revolution that had transformed American culture during the twentieth century. He understood the dynamics of large organizations and extolled their ability “to produce orderliness, which means restriction upon irresponsible human action.” Yet, at the same time, he feared the propensity of organized interests—”pressure groups,” he generally called them—to pursue their own narrow ends or, worse yet, to impose those ends on the state, turning the government itself into little more than a battleground for class conflict. As he told a Columbia University audience in 1948: “Danger arises from too great a concentration of power in the hands of any individual or group. The power of concentrated finance, the power of selfish pressure groups, the power of any class organized in opposition to the whole—any one of these, when allowed to dominate, is fully capable of destroying individual freedom.”

Such conflict, Eisenhower believed, was neither necessary nor inexorable. Class interests were interdependent, not irreconcilable. As he told an audience in 1947: “In our tightly knit economy, all professions and callings . . . have points of contact and areas of common interest. Banker or housewife, farmer, carpenter, soldier—no one of us can live and act without effect on all the others.” Eisenhower believed that the role of civic-minded managers like
himself was to dampen popular passions, to quietly reconcile group conflict, and to convince business, labor, and agriculture to pursue enlightened long-range goals rather than immediate self-interest.

As the letters to Swede make clear, Eisenhower’s vision of a harmonious “corporate commonwealth,” and of the role of professional managers in resolving conflict, grew out of his military experiences during World War II and out of the bitter interservice rivalries that followed the end of the war. Indeed, Eisenhower’s keen sensitivity to the narrow self-interest of the military services constitutes one of the principal themes of this collection, a theme that links his leadership during World War II, his experiences as army chief of staff in 1946 and 1947, his opposition to increased military spending during the late 1950s, and his warning, in his 1961 farewell address, on the dangers of the “military-industrial complex.”

Eisenhower’s vision of a harmonious and orderly society at home was closely paralleled by an almost Wilsonian faith in an interdependent and cooperative world order. Indeed, the two were inextricably linked in his mind; for if the United States did not sustain such an order through liberal foreign aid and trade policies, it would be, as he put it, “doomed to eventual isolation and to the disappearance of our form of government.” To Swede he gave a single, “simple” example of the problem that the United States faced: “No other nation is exhausting its irreplaceable resources so rapidly as is ours. Unless we are careful to build up and maintain a great group of international friends ready to trade with us, where do we hope to get all the materials that we will one day need as our rate of consumption continues and accelerates?”

America faced, he wrote in his diary, what Marxists called the “contradictions of capitalism,” both the conflict among the “capitalist states for the domination of the world’s surface” and the conflict “between the advanced, industrialized nations of the world and the dependent masses of backward peoples.” Here, too, Eisenhower believed, conflict, though real, was inevitable only if nations did not abandon their narrow, selfish rivalries for mutual cooperation.

For Eisenhower, as these letters make clear, France became a metaphor for international short-sightedness through its actions in Europe, Indochina, and North Africa. Yet, as he wrote to Swede, “the fact is . . . that while we get almost disgusted with the picture
that France . . . presents, we need only to look at the rest of the world—indeed to ourselves—to see many points of similarity.” If the Western nations could only resolve their differences on the basis of the “long-term good of all,” Eisenhower believed, then “we could laugh at the other so-called ‘contradictions’ in our system, and . . . be so secure against the Communist menace that it would gradually dry up and wither away.” Thus, abroad, as at home, narrow self-interest had to give way to broad long-range goals, and conflict to cooperation and harmony.

There were, of course, sharp limits to Eisenhower’s philosophy, and contradictions in it that he never fully faced, much less resolved. His vision of a “corporate commonwealth” was profoundly conservative, indeed, at points almost antidemocratic. He distrusted popular passions, detested conventional politics, and, as his 22 July 1957 letter to Swede makes clear, had little but contempt for Congress. He was insensitive to the plight of the poor and was slow to respond to the burgeoning crisis of civil rights. He never endorsed the Supreme Court’s decision in *Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*; indeed, he privately thought that it was a mistake. And when he was compelled to order federal troops into Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1957, he was careful to couch his actions in terms of defending civil order, not civil rights. As he explained to Swede: “My biggest problem has been to make people see . . . that my main interest is not in the integration or segregation question. My opinion as to the wisdom of the decision or the timeliness of the Supreme Court’s decision has nothing to do with the case. . . . If the day comes when we can obey the orders of our Courts only when we personally approve of them, the end of the American system . . . will not be far off.”

Committed to a minimalist state and to a political economy in which conflict would be resolved voluntarily through cooperation, self-restraint, and disinterested public service, Eisenhower could do little but fume privately when business leaders refused to exercise the restraint that he believed necessary. “I want to give business an honorable place, but they make crooks out of themselves,” he angrily told his secretary. More fundamentally, he never recognized, or if he recognized, he chose to ignore, that by minimizing the role of the state, he implicitly endorsed the power relationships created by the marketplace and thus foreclosed the efforts of workers, farmers, and consumers to redress those relationships through governmental intervention.
Nor, finally, could he resolve similar contradictions in his thinking on international affairs. To be sure, Eisenhower’s conduct of foreign policy was characterized by restraint, by a constant effort to balance ends and means, and by a refusal to be stampeded by more precipitate advisors. As Robert Divine has observed: “Nearly all of Eisenhower’s foreign policy achievements were negative in nature. He ended the Korean War, he refused to intervene militarily in Indochina, he refrained from involving the United States in the Suez crisis, he avoided war with China over Quemoy and Matsu, he resisted the temptation to force a showdown over Berlin, he stopped exploding nuclear weapons in the atmosphere.”

Yet, critics of America’s cold-war policies are ill-advised to seek in Eisenhower, as some have done, a counterhero or foil to use against Truman and Kennedy and Johnson. Eisenhower fully shared the conservative, anti-Communist premises that shaped postwar American foreign policy, and when he chose, he could act on those premises with ruthless dispatch. Thus, while he declined to intervene militarily in Indochina, this was a decision produced more by France’s refusal to meet American conditions than by any particular aversion to the use of force against social revolutions. As he wrote to Swede, he had been unable to obtain “the conditions under which I felt the United States could properly intervene to protect its own interests.” After the French collapse, Eisenhower committed the United States to the support of a client state in Vietnam and to the undermining of the Geneva Agreements, both of which actions would lead directly to an expanded American involvement in the decade that followed. Moreover, many of the “successes” of which he boasted to Swede—Iran and Guatemala, for example—have come back to haunt our own times.

The Eisenhower who emerges from these pages thus bears little resemblance to the bumbling caricature of late 1950s journalism. But neither does he fit the mold of those who in recent years have sought to bend the Eisenhower legacy to their own ends, whether liberal opponents of the Cold War, conservative critics of Democratic fiscal policy, or White House aides seeking to “Eisenhowerize” Ronald Reagan. Eisenhower is, rather, a complex, multidimensional historical figure whom we must study on his own terms if we are to understand fully our recent past. It is my hope that the publication of these letters will contribute, in some small measure, to that understanding.
NOTES


4. What Swede called his "memoirs of Ike," from which the next several pages are in part drawn, are enclosed in Hazlett to Eisenhower, 23 May 1944, box 17, Ann Whitman File, Name Series, Eisenhower Library.


6. See especially the articles by journalists Murray Kempton, Garry Wills, and Richard Rhodes and the full-length studies by Herbert S. Parmet, Peter Lyon, and Charles C. Alexander.


