1947

"You’ve owed me a letter for damned near a year," wrote Swede on 28 March 1947, quickly adding, however, that "I have no complaints." In any case, Eisenhower and Mamie visited the Hazletts in April during a trip to nearby Fort Bragg. They talked about the presidency, the "burning question," as Swede put it. "I still insist you’re the best man in sight and could have it in a walk-away," Swede wrote. "But if you don’t want it, that’s that!" The following month, Swede sent Eisenhower the original of an illustration that had appeared in the Hearst papers, along with excerpts from Kenneth Davis’s biography of Eisenhower.

22 May 1947

Dear Swede:

Instantly on receipt of your letter I looked into the matter of the receipt here of a set of prints of the drawings made by your friend, Mr. William Prince, for Kenneth Davis’ book "Soldier of Democracy." I am enclosing a copy of a letter which I sent to Mr. Prince, which, I believe, is self-explanatory. Incidentally, the original drawing of which you wrote was received this morning. I think it is exceptionally good.
Chapel Hill, North Carolina, April 1947 (courtesy of Dwight D. Eisenhower Library). The Eisenhowers visited the Hazlettes while Ike was on a tour of duty at nearby Fort Bragg as army chief of staff. They talked about the presidency. "I still insist you're the best man in sight and could have it in a walk-away," wrote Swede. "But if you don't want it, that's that!"

I am due in Raleigh on August 28 to speak at the Farmers' and Farm Women's Convention. I would be delighted to see you, but frankly have no knowledge of how much time I will have available for myself. Customarily when I am the guest, I leave the matter of my entire schedule in the hands of my hosts. However, in this instance, I will ask my aide to get in touch with you about the first of August to see if perchance we can have a few minutes together in my hotel suite at Raleigh, and also to inquire about the
possibility of having you attend the dinner at which I shall speak. As far as I know now, Mamie is not accompanying me to Raleigh.

Mamie and I enjoyed our visit to Chapel Hill. I hope to see you in Raleigh. In any event, please don’t hesitate to let me know should you find at any time that you are coming this way.

Sincerely,

By early 1947 Eisenhower had decided to step down as chief of staff, a job he had found even more trying than the occupation. As he wrote to his son, it was “a sorry place to land after having commanded a theatre of war.” As chief of staff, he had found himself not only embroiled in the bitter fights over unification and the draft but caught as well between the shrinkage of military resources that was produced by postwar demobilization and the growing demands that were being placed on the military by the expansive new diplomacy of the Cold War. “The World situation presents nothing that can be classed as improvement,” he wrote. “Coupled with this is the Congressional determination to slash into budgets that are already practically incapable of carrying out our great bag of commitments, and you can see that our days are anything but hilarious.”

In May 1947 he was approached by Thomas J. Watson, the president of IBM and a trustee of Columbia University, who offered him the presidency of the university. Eisenhower had talked before of heading a college or university, and though he doubtless would have preferred a smaller or at least a non-metropolitan institution, he nevertheless accepted Watson’s offer. Although he would continue as chief of staff until early 1948, his appointment as president of Columbia was announced in late June 1947.
Dear Swede:

As always your letter provided me with an interesting and sane interlude in an otherwise hectic day. I am truly sorry that you have had to enter the hospital, but I think you are wise in getting a thorough check-up when you find yourself ailing.

There are dozens of different considerations that finally influenced me to say "yes" to the Columbia Trustees. One of these considerations was their clear understanding of the point that I would never really separate myself from the uniformed services of the country. I explained to them carefully that I have lived 36 years in one idea and for one purpose and that as a result I had absorbed several simple conceptions and observations that would remain with me until the end of my days. From my viewpoint, going to Columbia is merely to change the location of my headquarters; perhaps it would be more accurate to say that I am changing the method by which I will continue to strive for the same goals.

I believe fanatically in the American form of democracy—a system that recognizes and protects the rights of the individual and that ascribes to the individual a dignity accruing to him because of his creation in the image of a supreme being and which rests upon the conviction that only through a system of free enterprise can this type of democracy be preserved. Beyond this I believe that world order can be established only by the practice of true cooperation among the sovereign nations and that American leadership toward this goal depends upon her strength—her strength of will, her moral, social and economic strength and, until an effective world order is achieved, upon her military strength. It is these simple conceptions that I will take to Columbia. If by living them and preaching them I can do some good I will hope to stay on indefinitely.

I did not mean suddenly to become pontifical—I have merely been struggling to get over to you something of my basic reasons for deciding to undertake that job when the time comes that The President feels I may be released here. That time, incidentally, is still some months distant.

Additionally, of course, there are certain other influences that affected me. Among these was pressure from a number of different directions to agree to undertake this or that job when this one should be finished for me. Regardless of my regular response that I
did not care to think of such things until my period of active service was over, a number of individuals—with their own conceptions concerning the direction in which my duty lay—continued their approaches, sometimes directly, sometimes through close friends. All of them finally understood that I would not consider anything commercial in character; the offers I have received of this type at times appeared to me fantastic. At the very least I have stopped all this by announcing what I hope to do with my personal future.

On the other side of the picture, Mamie and I both hate New York City and recoil from the thought of living there permanently. I know nothing about the workings of a great University and am certainly far from being an "educator." With regard to a residence, I am already searching for a country place somewhere up in the Connecticut area and we confidently expect to live in such a place throughout the year, except possibly for the deep winter months. With regard to the lack of scholarly attainment, the Board of Trustees insists that they want an organizer and a leader, not a professor.

That tells the story in rough, halting fashion. It has been encouraging to receive from many College Presidents and a great number of Professors messages expressing their satisfaction that I have accepted the job.

With regard to John: I think that like all young officers he has of course contemplated the possibility of resigning to enter some civil pursuit. However, I believe it was merely a manifestation of the doubts that nearly always assail a man after he has committed himself to a lifetime of service in one channel—his whole purpose seems to be to improve himself as an Army officer and I think he will stick to it without question.

I have none of the details of my Raleigh trip. Ordinarily I would fly down there in the afternoon, attend the evening meeting and fly back the next morning. If I can possibly see you and Ibby it will provide a real enjoyment to the trip, but from long and bitter experience I have found that my hosts on such occasions usually schedule every possible minute so tightly that there is little time left to do anything else. However, I will have an aide get all the details as soon as possible and I will communicate them to you when I can.

At least, here's hoping.

My very best to both of you and to the children.

As ever,
What a letter!—But if you could know how pressed I am you’d understand. [This is a handwritten postscript.]

Eisenhower wrote a brief note to Swede on August 20, inviting Swede to join him in Raleigh where he would be speaking at North Carolina State and dining with the governor. In his reply, on August 20, Swede noted that several newspaper columnists had recently speculated about Eisenhower’s political ambitions and declared that “I’d like to back you in a corner in Raleigh to find out if you’ve changed your mind.”

25 August 1947

Dear Swede:

Your note just reached me. I am delighted that we shall meet for a few moments in Raleigh, even though I shall apparently have the sketchiest of opportunities to talk to you.

Possibly you can go along with me to my train which I understand is not to pull out until 9:45 and this might give us an opportunity to talk a bit longer. I am due to go to Abilene about October 25 where I will attend a testimonial dinner to Mr. Harger. I would also like to tell you about my latest visit there which took place in June.

Please don’t concern yourself about the possibility that I have “changed my mind.” You may be certain that I have been absolutely truthful in every public statement I have made on the personal political question and you can be equally sure that I have not directly or indirectly given to anyone the right to represent my feelings and convictions differently at any place or at any time.

It is difficult for many people—particularly those who have led a political life or are engaged in newspaper or radio work—to believe anyone who disclaims political ambition. Even though they
may accept without the faintest hint of challenge any statement a
man might make about any other subject in the world, on this one
thing they maintain a position of doubt, not to say suspicion.
Frankly, if Mamie and I could have our way we would, without the
slightest hesitation, retire to the quietest and least publicized
neighborhood in the United States. We have become convinced
that a completely private life is denied us—this conviction, as much
as anything else, is at the bottom of my agreement to attempt the
job in New York. Beyond this, however, I have no plans, no
personal ambitions, and I am attempting to live this as honestly as I
say it.

My own deepest concern involves America’s situation in the
world today. Her security position and her international leadership
I regard as matters of the gravest concern to all of us and to our
national future. Allied to these questions of course is that of
internal health, particularly maximum productivity. While there
may be little that I can do about such matters, I do have the
satisfaction of feeling that whatever I try to do is on a national and
not on any partisan basis. Moreover, I flatter myself to believe that
the people who listen to me understand that I am talking or
working for all, not for any political party or for any political
ambition. This is the attitude I hope that I can preserve to the end
of my days.

My very best to Ibbby and the girls and, as always, my very best
to you.

Sincerely,

Pressure on Eisenhower to become a candidate continued to
mount, as did speculation in the press. The latter, Swede wrote on
October 25, “has been throwing out so much smoke that, being
gullible, I began to suspect at least a spark.” If Eisenhower were
really determined not to run, Swede asked, shouldn’t he “make an
unequivocal statement on the subject—one that no one can shoot
holes in?”
29 October 1947

Dear Swede:

While I have not been invited to the meeting of the North Carolina Press Association in January, it will be impossible for me to attend even if I am asked. My life is just as hectic as ever and I have flatly refused, for many weeks past, to add a single engagement to my schedule. In fact, I have had to break three or four of long standing. At the end of this week I must make a run to Texas and stop at Little Rock on the way back. I am desperately trying to make those my only public appearances during the month except for a two-minute appearance here in the city in an effort to help out the Community Chest campaign.

All the so-called experts in the field of political analysis continuously point out that without artificial stimulus all these "boomlets" for particular individuals sooner or later collapse. I have been pinning my faith and my hopes on the correctness of this assertion—I have made my position very clear and still feel sure that I am not going to be faced with an impossible situation. It has been a most burdensome, not to say annoying, development. It has even resulted in bringing down on my naked head a lot of attacks from people who would ordinarily have no reason for concerning themselves about me one way or the other. But because they see in me some possible thwarting of their own purposes, they use the method of cursing anyone that gets in their way.

Personally I feel that there are a number of candidates in the field who would make acceptable political leaders and I cannot conceive of any set of probable circumstances that would ever convince me that it was my duty to enter such a hectic arena.

I am counting on going to the Army-Navy game this year, primarily because Lord [Harold] Alexander, Governor General of Canada [who had served under Eisenhower in North Africa and Italy], is going to attend and I am rather in the position of being one of his hosts. Frankly, I think I would far rather have the day just to sleep, and read about the results the following morning in the papers. In any event I shall not attend any of the other games.

In Abilene I found that my circle of old acquaintances and friends seems gradually to contract. On this trip I did see Lois Barger Parker—the first time I have seen her since we graduated from high school in 1909. I saw no significant physical change in the town—that is one corner of the country that seems to drift
along in the even tenor of its ways, and its people are the happier for it.

It is nice to know that you and your family had such a fine time at the beach. When a whole family loves the sea, the sunlight and deep-sea fishing, it certainly simplifies the vacation problem. With us the matter is somewhat more difficult because Mamie has no interest in outdoor life. I am perfectly ready (always assuming we can get any kind of an opportunity) to go to a mountain stream or a farm with some birds on it or to the seashore. But since none of these places has a definite attraction for Mamie, we always have a big discussion and end up by traveling around and tiring ourselves out. In any event, we are going to take 60 days between the termination of this job and the beginning of the next and incidentally, during that time, I am going to be careful to retain my active duty status.

Give my love to Ibby and the girls, and with warmest regards to yourself,

As ever,