Ike's Letters to a Friend, 1941 -1958

Griffith, Robert W.

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The National Security Act of 1947, which had effected a partial unification of the armed services, did little to diminish interservice rivalry. Indeed, the battles of the late 1940s were among the bitterest in service history. At stake was which branch would take the lead in implementing the nation's emerging nuclear weapons strategy. The navy's hope rested with a new class of "super carriers" which would be capable of handling B-29 bombers carrying atomic bombs. The air force, on the other hand, countered with the new long-range B-36 bomber. Secretary of Defense Louis Johnson's April 1949 decision to halt construction of the "super carrier" USS United States prompted the resignation of Secretary of the Navy John L. Sullivan and led to an angry attack on the administration by high-ranking naval officers.

27 April 1949

Dear Swede:

Your splendid letter reached me while I was in Key West and I still was very miserable from a queer sort of digestive or stomach disorder. In the last two or three weeks I have improved markedly. For the past two weeks Mamie has been with me here at the Augusta National Golf Club and I have been puttering around
with a bit of golf every day. I expect to be down here for another week as a minimum.

I have not your letter with me for the moment and, consequently, cannot discuss intelligently the various and interesting points you raised—however, I do recall your expression of fear that I should not appreciate the true value of the carrier. I am quite certain that no one has a greater respect for the carrier task force, under conditions suited to its use, than I do. Moreover, I believe it is one of the finest weapons that we can maintain in our Arsenal of Defense because of the great flexibility permitted in its use during the early days of an emergency when we know that everything is going to be different from what we had previously anticipated. I would be among the last people in the world to consent, in these days and times, to the elimination of the carrier from the U.S. Navy. I believe that most people hold similar views although there seems to be vast differences of opinion concerning the types and numbers of carriers that we should attempt to maintain in time of peace. There is, as you know, a tremendous argument going on about the wisdom of building the so-called Super-Carrier. I certainly do not pretend to know the answer to this one.

The great difficulty comes about through the tendency of each Service to measure its importance to the country in terms of the size of its current budget. The struggle for the lion’s share of the defense dollar is never ended—it is conducted relentlessly and endlessly, in the Halls of Congress, in the public press and in inter-Service argument and conferences. All of these arguments carry great air of authenticity because of the fact that a democracy will always have an obvious deficit in the desirable strength of its security establishment. But since a democracy must always retain a waiting, strategically defensive, attitude it is mandatory that some middle line be determined between desirable strength and unbearable cost. Since, therefore, each Service always will have less strength than it considers necessary, it can always develop plausible, and sometimes bitter, argument for greater and greater appropriations. What we must do is to forget and abandon this type of approach. We must put our consolidated professional brains to the job of determining the general character of the defense establishment when needed and these same professionals should logically reach conclusions as to proper priorities in producing such defensive strength under limited budgets. Stated in a crude and incomplete way, this is the problem of today.
Frankly, I have found many of our younger officers showing greater appreciation of these facts than I have discovered among our seniors. I do not despair of the future because I believe the younger generation has more sense than ours has so far displayed. But I must say that the current task of getting everyone to approach these questions from the single viewpoint of the country's good—and without unreasonable prejudice or bias in favor of some particular theory or weapon—is truly difficult. For this situation I blame no one, nor any particular service—at least I attach to no one else any more fault than I do to myself, but I am quite certain that unless we rapidly arrive at some sensible solution of this problem we are going to damage the country financially and without adding to its defensive strength.

The subject is no longer discussed, in Washington, in terms other than those of controversy. If someone expresses doubt as to the great effectiveness of the B-36, then he is instantly "anti-Air"; if someone else sees weakness in the theory of employing a super-carrier or mildly objects to the Navy's developing a land Army, in time of war, of 600,000 Marines (which it did in World War II), then he is called "anti-Navy."

All this distresses me greatly. I have been very proud of membership in the Armed Services and have felt that, jointly, they provided to the country the greatest body of honest, selfless, intelligent public servants that could be found anywhere. Consequently, it hurts me to see a public impression growing up that these men do nothing except to quarrel and fight among themselves for access to the taxpayers' pocketbook. Most of the time and in most problems they work together beautifully and are in complete accord. Such things do not, however, make "news"; seemingly, only the quarrel can do this. Consequently, our Armed Services and their military leaders are getting a bad name, most of which is undeserved, but for which there is, unfortunately, some foundation.

I did not mean to grow so garrulous this morning.

Give my love to Ibby and the children, and of course, warm regards to yourself. In all this Mamie joins me enthusiastically.

As ever,
The National Security Act Amendments of 1949 increased the authority of the secretary of defense and further reduced the autonomy of the individual services. The angry debate over the naval budget and over plans for the supercarrier continued unabated, however. Swede, of course, took the navy's side, referring to Louis Johnson, the new secretary of defense, as a "bozo" with an "anti-Navy bias."

12 August 1949

Dear Swede:

Since you have called my attention to the point, I now realize that I do answer your letters far more promptly than I do those that reach me from most other people. The reason—from my viewpoint—is a simple one. Yours are interesting, and the others usually fall into one of three categories. The first category comprises requests of various kinds for help. Sometimes this is merely money begging, more often it is a request that I use some fancy "influence" for everything from obtaining scarce theater tickets to obtaining civil service positions in our occupation forces.

The second category is made up of advice, usually from strangers, and its purpose is to tell me what my duty is and what I am to do about it. Like the first category, the subject matter of this covers a very wide range.

The third category involves invitations to dinners, to conventions, to university ceremonies, to luncheons, dinners, breakfasts—it would be impossible to indicate the scope if I would fill up this page with words. Only a few others—indeed a very very few—write to me as you do, merely as a friend who seems to get some kick out of receiving my answers.

Of course I was tremendously intrigued to have your reaction on "unification." Right now I am a member of a Board which has been meeting here in Denver for the last two days. It was
appointed by the Secretary of Defense (Forrestal) [James V. Forrestal, who resigned in early 1949 and committed suicide a few months later] to examine the entire subject of Academy education in the three Services with particular emphasis on the possibility of using these years of education to promote ultimate unification.

I don’t know when I have undertaken anything (even though I went on this Board with extreme reluctance) that has given me so much encouragement in the pursuit of real and sensible progress. In the first place, the Board is made up of a very fine group of educators. Associated with it are a number of Panels each of which, in turn, comprises a group of outstanding men. All of these people have given earnest and effective attention to the problems at hand.

You will be interested to know that the education records of West Point and Annapolis have received the highest praise from this entire group, although it is clear that some of these people entered upon their examination with preconceived ideas that they would find nothing except the things to criticize. Comparative records established in many colleges through examination upon graduation show that the Academies stand exceedingly high. About the only real criticism voiced by this group of educators was that little was to be found in the curricula and methods at West Point and Annapolis that encouraged free-thinking and self-confidence.

Far more encouraging to me however, than these pleasing reports upon two institutions that so deeply involve our sentiments, was the obvious interest taken by all my associates in analyzing the need for teamwork among the Services and in their development of ideas as to how this could be secured. Every conceivable kind of idea was discussed and a wide variety of viewpoints was brought to bear. However, the whole thing was done in an atmosphere of friendliness and I am quite sure that every participant believed that much has been accomplished. This Board and its Panels have been meeting intermittently for some months and I am certain that out of its work is going to come much that is good. Incidentally, I met for the first time, Admiral [Raymond A.] Spruance. Frankly I think he is one of the finest Naval officers I have ever met. He is quiet, modest, and self-confident without being either dominus or patronizing. I like him extremely and wish I could have had more time with him.
Incidentally, and before I drop completely the subject of this recent Board, the studies reveal that the curriculum at West Point is somewhat more crowded and intensive and requires a greater number of hours of work than at Annapolis. Some years ago I think the reverse was true, and I thank the Lord that I went through the Academy when they were not so much engaged in the cramming business. Frankly I honestly believe it far easier if we do not place too much dependence in mere knowledge—in other words, I do not believe too much in cramming.

With respect to the carrier, I do not follow your argument about the so called “super ship.” If an Air Force bomber cannot penetrate into the heart-land, then how is this going to be done by a bomber flying off a super carrier? Each will admittedly have to fly far beyond the range limit of fighter planes. Consequently, while I hold to my opinion that a certain number of so called “freak” [“fleet”] carriers can be a most favorable element in our defensive structure, I do not see how we can give the super carrier a sufficiently high place in our priorities that we can afford to build them in an era when we are going to face smaller and smaller appropriations. Please do not for one moment interpret my words to mean that I would not like to see a vast amount of this practical experimentation—provided the Nation could afford it. Finally, there must however be a line drawn between the requirements of economy on one side, and hope for improvement in our defense establishment on the other.

In this whole discussion about unification there has developed a lot of froth and fuming, and a lot of heat, much of which was completely unjustified. No one has really plugged for a lop-sided single arm of defense organization. No one has advocated any “all the eggs in one basket” type of philosophy. These expressions and ideas are first used, in my opinion, by someone who argues hotly for a particular detail and soon there develops an attempt to smear each side of the argument, by the other, by all types of extravagant expressions and which, while he may develop some public or even Congressional support, are usually proof of nothing more than the mental poverty of their originators. In all this no one party has been solely guilty, just as no one has been completely innocent. It seems to me that lately there has been a very great decrease in this type of thing and I honestly believe that notable progress already made in unification is not only indicative of a greater application of
good sense and less temper, but implies also a still greater progress for the future.

Louis Johnson may make mistakes, but I believe he is thoroughly and completely determined to turn in the finest possible performance that he can. You say he has an “anti-Navy” slant, but I doubt such a generalization is completely accurate. I know that he came into his present job with the feeling that our present Navy could scarcely be justified on the basis of the naval strength of any potential enemy particularly when it is clear that any other navy worthy of the name belongs to a traditional ally. On the other hand he, like everybody else, had and has a healthy respect for hostile submarines and he was very anxious that the Navy consolidate all resources and brains in the field of anti-submarine warfare. I have never found Secretary Johnson opposing anything for the Navy that appeared clearly needful in the combating of the submarine for the complete control of the seas. I know that in some instances he has approved measures and forces that he considered overgenerous for these purposes. He, like most others, clearly recognizes that the greatest point of argument between the Navy and Air Force is the extent to which we should plan a Navy to take part in bombing operations against inland targets and where the effect upon the control of the seas is necessarily, more or less, indirect.

There are of course dozens of lesser problems and a myriad of details on which arguments develop, but fundamentally all of them finally come back to the one basic question.

One of the lesser problems you have already mentioned—the mission, strength and armament of the Marines. For example, all airplanes fly off a land base or a floating base; why then must we have a third Air Force when we already have one each for the floating and the land bases? Until World War I the Marines were never used in a formation as large as a brigade. The question naturally arises; why has it become suddenly necessary to develop a Marine force of hundreds of thousands in war and carry, in time of peace, the great financial burden of preparing for such a war time force?

Another item; for many years, starting first in 1930, I have been one of those in the Army who insisted on getting rid of ocean-going Transport Services. During all the years that I was a junior officer I was slapped down on this argument by my superiors. Finally I became Chief of Staff and I asked Admiral Nimitz whether he would take over the whole organization since I was now in a
position to do something. I was astonished to find that the Navy did not want it because they thought that the Army was trying to make a "service organization" out of the Navy. At the same time I was opposed by most of my own people, particularly by those holding high positions in our "Transport Service," but the real block at that time was the Navy didn't want it. Now I note that since Louis Johnson has gone into office that this move has been made. I cannot say who is completely right because only experience will show whether we have greater efficiency with less costs and whether the needs of all Services in any possible emergency will be better fulfilled, but the point is that at last someone is in a position to make a decision and to make it stick.

Possibly in my enthusiasm in the young officer I may have over-stated my case. I do not mean to say that a young officer twenty years from now will be as much of a fuddy-duddy as I am, or as some of those who twenty years ago appeared to me to be blocking all progress. What I was really trying to emphasize was that the Army and Navy, by their nature, can fall into the administrative hands of oldsters. Maybe I could express my thought a little better by saying that for every General or flag officer over fifty-five I should really like to see one not over thirty-five. Of course I realize that such a statement is on the cock-eyed side. The applicable actuarial data would finally defeat this unless every once in awhile you should find one of these high ranking officers when he was about forty years old. Unfortunately the calendar will not stand still when we find a brilliant fellow when he is thirty or forty.

You mentioned in your letter that one of your friends kidded you about me being back in politics—for me you can say that I consider him some kind of a "blankety-blank-blank," for if he can show for once that I have been in politics, he has no right to use the word politics. Moreover, you are most assuredly right that nothing has happened that has changed the convictions I expressed a couple of years ago. You may be quite sure that if anything ever occurs that appears so cataclysmic as to cause me to change in this regard you will be one of the first to know it. So in the absence of such unforeseen and catastrophic development you just go right ahead on the line you are pursuing.

It was nice to have the news of your daughter and her new husband. I have heard much about Spike Fahrion. All of it good. Incidentally, it is astonishing how many of your old friends and shipmates I have run into. Most of them seem to know that you
and I have been life-long friends and I have been most pleased by the fact that I can give them news of you.

One last word, because of your question about my painting, it is rank hypocrisy to allow what I do to go under such an exalted name, as I am a deliberate dauber. It is easy enough to do if you are fortunate enough to have a place to permit your easel, paint and wet canvas to stand. It becomes a little difficult when you must clear them away after each ten minute tour at the canvas. Personally, I was almost fired because of my deficiency at drawing at West Point and I have nothing whatsoever of artistic talents. I simply get a bang out of working with colors and occasionally one of my efforts comes out with sufficient appeal about it to entice some of my friends to steal it and carry it away. Many others find their way to the waste paper basket. If you are interested I would be pleased to tell you how I got started, the materials I use and so on. Most of mine are done between eleven and twelve-thirty at night, but I can
guarantee you that if you ever take it up it will consume so many of your vertical hours that you will wonder how they have ever slipped away from you.

Mamie and I send love to you and your nice family. We are still looking forward to the day you can visit us in New York.

Cordially,

Further reductions in the navy's budget, together with the cancellation of the supercarrier, eventually led to the so-called revolt of the admirals, to an acrimonious congressional hearing, and to the dismissal of Adm. Louis E. Denfeld, the chief of naval operations.

17 November 1949

Dear Swede:

Your letter of the 2nd seemed to me to be so full of misinterpretations of what I thought I had said to you in the past that I was bewildered—until I had the idea of sending for a copy of the letter I wrote to you from Denver. Never again am I going to write a letter that must be dispatched under the "dictated but not read" category. To illustrate how badly garbled that letter was I use only one example: In one place where I said "fleet carriers" I found the worthy sergeant transformed it into "freak carriers."

Consequently, rather than review the entire file of correspondence, I think that I shall merely, on the basis of your latest communication, set down a few of my opinions or convictions and hereafter use this effort as the "alpha" of my running essay effort, of which, of course, you will be the entire reading public.

To deal first with the most important point of all, I very much doubt that Mamie and I shall get to the Army-Navy game. We have
just returned from a four day visit to Annapolis and that represents about all the time we have to spare before we take off for Texas on the last day of the month for a two weeks' stay. However, it is remotely possible that, even at the very last instant, we may find it possible to go.

Because there are a number of subjects, not all of them related, which I would like to mention in this letter, I am going to do so rather briefly. I hope that this will not mean to you that I am arbitrary about any of them. There are few—maybe none—concerning which I would not quickly change my opinion if someone should present to me an argument that struck me as applicable and convincing.

First—I have long advocated the peacetime maintenance and operation of a number of so-called "fleet carriers." The convincing reason for doing so is, to my mind, the flexibility of this particular weapon. It should be useful in almost any corner of the globe and since every war starts under unforeseen circumstances, it strikes me as good insurance to have something that could be used, under current conditions of warfare, anytime and, with obvious limitations with respect to land masses, anywhere.

Having said this much, the question becomes, in a limited budget, how many of these can we afford to keep in action during years of peace? This is admittedly a very difficult question, and the Navy opinion should be more influential than that of any other professional service. Nevertheless, all Services are forced into the problem because the matter finally becomes one of dipping ten glasses of water out of a six-glass bucket. We must never lose sight of the fact than an over-riding priority for a reasonable number of combat units does not necessarily mean an indefinite or additional number of these same units should take priority over all other classes of weapons and engines of war.

It was on questions such as this that the recent "war" broke out in Washington, and I tell you frankly that I was discouraged and saddened by the whole business. Because of the pressure of time I cannot expand too greatly upon this subject. But I cannot help but feel some resentment toward those who started this open warfare, with its resultant loss of confidence among great sections of our people in the judgment, selflessness, and integrity of their military leaders.

With respect to the super-carrier I think that in some one of my letters I must have expressed my views on this particular subject. I
agree with you that, if we are down to the basic question of survival in a force-driven world, and if we are efficiently and effectively using every dollar that the Congress gives for security purposes, then considerations of economy cannot validly be advanced against defense requirements. In attempting to assist Mr. Forrestal (and later Mr. Johnson) I have studied dozens of specific projects for saving money without hurting or diminishing our combat forces. It is possible that every answer I have received has been completely logical and correct. At least they all—(with only occasional minor exceptions)—argue that there is no possibility of saving in overhead, administrative, and routine costs without damaging directly and seriously our combat forces. I could discuss various aspects of this with you by the hour—here I can say only that I believe, with Mr. Johnson, that if we really put our hearts into the job, both by individual Service and by unified effort, that we can save millions. Nevertheless, I doubt that we could save, by these methods, enough money to build a super-carrier and at the same time procure all those other valuable items that probably have, in the minds of most, equal or greater priority than the super-carrier. Strangely enough, after many witnesses in the recent investigation had deprecated and belittled the effects of strategic bombing, they—the same witnesses—urged the need for the super-carrier and development of the long range bombing planes that would fly off its decks. It seems to me that there are obvious internal contradictions in any such argument. Moreover, if anyone ever convinces me that a “super-carrier” is essential to the control of the seas, I’ll be for that, too!!

I think that you will find my past letters full of expressions exhibiting concern for “American control of the seas.” Nobody will fight harder and longer for a Navy adequate to perform this function than I will. Moreover, I think that I shall probably be as liberal as most in my readiness to agree that numbers of missions become part of the function of controlling the sea that do not confine themselves to the mere attack of Naval targets. I can see that many operations against ports, submarine installations, coastal communication centers and the like, while actually conducted over the land, are designed for direct assistance in controlling the seas. But when the relationship between the specific attack and the control of the seas becomes so tenuous, and the support so indirect, that the Navy assumes responsibility for attacking targets in the very heart of the enemy homeland, then I can say that we
have either gone far afield in the allocation of tasks or (and this is always possible) our idea of coordination among the three Services on the basis of mutually supporting missions is a completely false one.

If we adhere to current doctrine and are not ready to meet each other on a basis of mutual confidence and trust, I could understand an argument that might be advanced by the Air Corps about as follows: "Give the Navy everything it needs to control the seas: ships, guns, Marines, airplanes, and let the Navy organize those as it pleases. But give the Air Forces everything they need to bomb the enemy strong points: industrial centers, transportation systems, etc., etc. If this means that one or more of the Air Forces' landing fields should be mobile, and maintained on the sea, then also give the Navy enough services to protect our field. In other words, the "super-carrier" would belong, under this argument, to the Air Forces!

Personally, I am very strong for the Navy, but I venture to doubt its effectiveness in bombing the Victoria Falls. This attitude, on my part, shows an even greater concern for the primary Navy mission, control of the seas, than is exhibited by those who want the Navy to do everything from pole to pole. At least, I think I have demonstrated that in the arguments that develop when all of these serious questions are dragged out before the public and each debater attempts to capture the interest and the vote of the public, there is no limit to the potential distortion, confusion, and emotional heat in which these subjects will be surrounded.

I was somewhat astonished to read your reservations about [Adm. Forrest P.] Sherman. Whenever, in previous letters, you have mentioned him, it has always been in glowing terms. Certainly your good opinion has had considerable influence in the development of my own. For my part I have, as yet, found no reason for any change. When Sherman was representing the Navy in the writing of the unification law two years ago he was an extraordinarily able and tireless advocate of the Navy position. I have never seen any slightest swerving in his belief in the Navy's mission and in naval efficiency, loyalty, and integrity. While no one asked me for recommendations concerning the identity of a new CNO [chief of naval operations], it is quite true that I have frequently expressed quite favorable opinions about Sherman, in the presence both of my superiors and of others. It is always possible that these may have swayed some others, including those
in authority. If this should, by chance be true, I assure you that it was your expressed opinions as well as my own beliefs that were responsible for my statements.

Only the other day I had a long talk with Sherman at Annapolis. I took at least ten minutes to express to him your sentiments of respect, admiration, and liking. I also told him of my hope that he would someday have an opportunity to drop by Chapel Hill and talk to you, because I thought any man in the Service today would profit from listening to the results of your study, reflection and experience. If I have erred as seriously as your letter now indicates, I am in a hell of a spot. (However, don’t let it worry you. I have been in much worse ones and gotten out of them safely.)

Actually, there were a dozen other subjects I was going to take up in this letter. I now find that everytime I start talking about these matters at all, my anxiety to be completely fair and square leads me into so many divergent directions that it is impossible to discuss them adequately in a letter. Someday we simply must get together for a couple of days of undisturbed conversation.

Give my love to Ibby and the girls.

As ever,

Eisenhower replied to a Christmas card from Swede in a short note dated 21 December 1949, then returned to the exchange over Admiral Sherman the following day.

22 December 1949

Dear Swede:

Apparently my most recent letter to you tended to excite you a bit. I hope it did not raise your blood pressure beyond the blow-off point.
I think that now I have a clear picture of your estimate of Sherman. While it is true that this estimate is somewhat different from what I thought it was, some months ago, yet my own acquaintanceship with the man, added to what I thought, originally, was your opinion, gave me a composite reading that was not greatly different from the one you now present. No harm has been done.

Churning around in the back of my mind is the impression that I may have already answered your letter on this point. If I have, just take this repetition as another indication of approaching senility, and throw the thing in the wastebasket. At least, nothing will be hurt if I send you, even for the second time, very best wishes from Marnie and me for a fine Christmas and a 1950 crowded with good things for all the Hazlett family.

Cordially,