Ike's Letters to a Friend, 1941 -1958

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Eisenhower wrote a brief note to Swede in early February 1951, when he returned from an exploratory tour of European capitals. In April he formally assumed command of Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE), and by June, when he wrote this letter, he was deeply involved in the politics of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. In his letter of June 1, Swede noted that "the country is sitting back, perhaps too complacently, in the comfortable belief that Ike has everything in hand in Europe."

21 June 1951

Dear Swede:

Recently, I have been wondering when I was to get another letter from you; a question that was finally answered by your letter dated June 1.

Trying to make some comment on each subject you raise—and, God knows, my observations will not only have to be limited, but will possibly be better classified as hazy day-dreaming—I start out by saying that, if anyone thinks this whole task is "comfortably in hand," he had better acquaint himself a little more accurately with facts as they are. How can anyone in the world believe that
numbers of nations could, within a short space of months, so organize, develop, and train themselves that they were even capable of putting out timely and necessary decisions in such a matter as mutual defense, to say nothing of accomplishing all the material, mental, and psychological jobs as are included? Time and effort and understanding, and renewed effort and tireless study, and still more effort, would comprise a fair recipe for the product we are trying to obtain.

There are, of course, certain encouraging developments. I am quite sure that anyone acquainted with Europe would, as of now, sense a tremendous increase in morale, courage, and determination as compared to the level of these only six months to a year ago. On every front, there has been some improvement, even though progress is far less rapid than we could wish or even have the right, in certain instances, to expect.

The one indispensable thing to remember is that, if the free world cannot provide for its "collective" security, the alternative for every one of these nations, including our own, is an eventual fate that is worse than any kind of expense or effort we can now imagine. Consequently, American leadership must be exerted every minute of the day, every day, to make sure that we are securing from these combined countries their maximum of accomplishment. Where any nation fails—as some of them are, of course, partially failing now—we must take a certain portion of the responsibility by admitting that, in that particular instance, our leadership has been partially ineffective.

I assure you that, as I go around to various capitals and meet with members of the several governments, I never let up for one single instant on pounding home some serious facts. The first of these is that each country must provide the heart and soul of its own defense. If the heart is right, other nations can help; if not, that particular nation is doomed. Morale cannot be imported.

Next, I insist that Europe must, as a whole, provide in the long run for its own defense. The United States can move in and, by its psychological, intellectual, and material leadership, help to produce arms, units, and the confidence that will allow Europe to solve its problem. In the long run, it is not possible—and most certainly not desirable—that Europe should be an occupied territory defended by legions brought in from abroad, somewhat in the fashion that Rome’s territories vainly sought security many hundred years ago.
To my mind, Turkey and Greece are nations that must be brought into our defensive structure very definitely and soon.\(^1\) Whether or not they should be militarily attached to my command, or should be divided—possibly with Greece under our particular umbrella and Turkey under another—are problems that are susceptible of several solutions. The main thing is that they, with us, should make common cause against a common enemy and make this job one of top priority in each country.

As to Iran, I think the whole thing is tragic.\(^2\) A stream of visitors goes through my office, and some of the individuals concerned seem to consider themselves as authorities on the Iranian question. Numbers of them attach as much blame to Western stupidity as to Iranian fanaticism and Communist intrigue in bringing about all the trouble. Frankly, I have gotten to the point that I am concerned primarily, and almost solely, in some scheme or plan that will permit that oil to keep flowing to the westward. We cannot ignore the tremendous importance of 675,000 barrels of oil a day. The situation there has not yet gotten into as bad a position as China, but sometimes I think it stands today at the same place that China did only a very few years ago. Now we have completely lost the latter nation—no matter how we explain it, how much we prove our position to have been fair and just, we failed. I most certainly hope that this calamity is not repeated in the case of Iran.

So far as all the MacArthur-Korean-administration-partisan politics affair is concerned, I have kept my mouth closed in every

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1. In deference to the concerns of other European nations, neither Greece nor Turkey had originally been included in NATO. Administration thinking changed, however, after the beginning of the Korean War, and in February 1951 the National Security Council had recommended the inclusion of both in the Western alliance. The formal invitation to join would come the next year.

2. In May 1951 Iran's nationalist prime minister, Mohammed Mossadegh, won parliamentary approval to nationalize the holdings of the giant British-owned Anglo-Iranian Oil Company. In retaliation, Anglo-Iranian and the other large oil companies that dominated international petroleum markets declared a boycott on all Iranian oil, thereby hoping to bring the Iranian government to its knees. Their efforts failed, however, as did attempts by the United States and other countries to mediate the dispute. In 1953 Eisenhower, then president, directed the CIA to help overthrow Mossadegh and to replace him with the young Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi.

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language of which I have ever heard. I have some very definite views about parts of the sorry mess, but I do not have a sufficiently clear picture of the whole development, starting with some of the machinations and incidents of World War II, to allow me to make up my mind on many of the important features of the affair. I guess that the most we can hope out of the thing is that soon the Communists will quit pushing the conflict (terminating it somewhat as they did the attacks on Greece), and that we succeed in developing a sufficient strength among the South Koreans to withdraw the vast bulk of our own forces.

[Gen. Albert C.] Wedemeyer's testimony left me in complete bewilderment as I attempted to follow his reasoning. Moreover, I am not quite sure what you mean when you talk about "punishing the aggressor." Unless you can get at Mao and the small group of advisers he has right around him, I do not believe we would be punishing the aggressor merely by bombing Canton, Shanghai, or any other place where we would most certainly be killing a number of our friends along with the people who are true followers of the Communists.

I will not comment at all upon your observations concerning your dilemma in the next election if you have to vote for either of the two men you name [Truman and Ohio Republican Robert A. Taft]. With respect to your statement, "Worse luck, you seem to be pretty well out of the present picture," I wish I could feel that way as definitely as you do. Not only has there been a very recent poll taken which continues to stir up trouble, but a whole bevy of visitors here, and correspondents in the States, keep plugging away at a contrary view and determination.

I never heard of Clugston [who had written a right-wing attack entitled Eisenhower for President?]. Moreover, I am told that his book was written as a very sly piece of "smear" work. I can't be bothered, although he is one campaigner who is apparently in league with another fellow named Dewey Taft who publishes a

3. Truman had relieved the insubordinate General MacArthur of command in Korea in April 1951, triggering a torrent of criticism. Although privately critical of MacArthur, Eisenhower heeded the advice of his old friend Gen. Lucius D. Clay, who warned him to "let no one maneuver you into any . . . comment on the MacArthur incident."
queer little paper down in Wichita. This latter character insists that I am one of the great friends of Communism in our country, and the darling of Moscow. I wish to God he could see some of the propaganda spread around this country by the Communist Party. If I am not Moscow's number one public enemy today, then I am certainly running that number one man a close race.

You are right in your idea that I had nothing to do with the appointment of [Adm. William M.] Fechteler [the new naval commander for NATO], but you are wrong that I went over backward in naming Monty [Field Marshal Bernard L. Montgomery, one of Eisenhower's old antagonists] as my Deputy. Monty not only has a very fine reputation in this region as a soldier, but he is one. Moreover, he is a very determined little fellow who knows exactly what he wants, is simple and direct in his approach, and minces no words with any soldier, politician, or plain citizen when he thinks that that particular individual (or the country he represents) is not fulfilling his complete obligations to NATO. He is one man who clearly recognizes the truth of the assertion that Europe cannot forever depend upon America for military and economic aid and assistance. He hammers away at the idea that this region must become self-sufficient.

We shall be on the look-out for your friend Corydon Lyons. If he brings along his students, I think I shall be secretly a bit on the pleased side. Sometimes I get quite weary of talking to the old, the fearful, and the cautious. I like to meet young people with their fresh outlook and their fixed, even if sometimes too complacent, assumption that they can meet the problems of their own time.

It was nice to hear that Bob Baughey [an air force public-relations officer and mutual friend] had been to see you. Not long ago, I had a letter from him.

I assure you that we are not enjoying Paris in the sense that we would prefer to be here instead of in the United States. I think that, if ever two people have had enough of foreign service, we are they. We look forward to coming home—not the least of our pleasures will be a visit with you and Ibbie. In the meantime, please keep writing.

Cordially,
In a handwritten note on August 22, Swede enclosed a letter by his friend and essayist Harold W. Whicker on the theme of painting. "As I’ve told you before, Whick is a he-man—ex-professional wrestler, English prof, outstanding painter and essayist, outdoorsman—who is afflicted with a heart ailment but doesn’t let it get him down."

4 September 1951

Dear Swede:

It has been a long time since I last read one of the letters you receive periodically from Whicker. Yet that interval is not so long that I fail to recall at once the primary emotion his writing always inspires in me—a feeling that here is one man who is able to put down in print a clear expression of the thoughts that flow through his brain as he contemplates the beauty of a sylvan scene, the capabilities of man for sacrifice, and the exceedingly disappointing result we seem always to get when we find men attempting to act as a group in the solution of common political and social problems. He finds ways and means of describing, with cameo-like sharpness, his disappointment that men respond far more easily to a selfish impulse than to a noble one; he is so convincing in this regard that his reader (this one at least) comes to feel that the conclusion as to relativity—wheat to chaff—is a gross overstatement.

Of course, I am intrigued by his explanation of his reasons for painting. You may or may not know that I indulge in the same habit. But in my case there is no faintest semblance of talent, and certainly I paint for far less complicated or worthy reasons than does Mr. Whicker. Some years ago I found that I had to limit my hours devoted to serious and steady reading; my life is given over to such incessant contemplation of heavy and weighty problems—most of them made more difficult by the circumstances that they
have no final and complete answer—that some kind of release or relief became necessary in order to keep me up to the bit and operating at reasonable efficiency during the hours when I deal in the affairs for which I bear some responsibility. So I took up painting. I did it without a lesson and I have persisted in it for more than three years with no more constructive help from the outside than an occasional piece of casual criticism from one of my artist friends. For me the real benefit is the fact that it gives me an excuse to be absolutely alone and interferes not at all with what I am pleased to call my "contemplative powers." In other words, I paint for fun, for recreation, for enjoyment. When the work is woefully bad, so that even I recognize its stupidity or banality, I merely turn it upside down and start again. After I do this often enough I burn that particular canvas. But once in awhile one comes out so that it is definitely better than I know how to do! That one I keep. Such a one may be a portrait, a picture of a tree, or merely a colored sketch of a couple of flowers. The point is that one with no talent, no ability to draw and no time to waste can get a lot of fun out of daubing with oils. Most of mine is done between the hours of 11 and 12 at night, but when the effort I am making seems worthwhile pursuing in daylight, then I have a fine early Sunday morning pastime.

All this to tell you how much I really envy your friend's ability to paint in a way that pleases himself and the time to do it.

I like his facility of expression—even his flow of words. His style reflects not only an appreciation of niceties and of nuances, but his unhurried and even wordy way of reaching his conclusions adds confidence, because it implies that he had time to think the matter through carefully. I am tempted to believe he is right in the suggestion that to attain sheer personal happiness one ought, through some judgment accepted by all, be relegated, inexorably, to a life in a woodland cottage.

As to his conclusions about the American scene, I most thoroughly concur in his condemnation of public violators of the principles of decency and honor. Now, none of us is so strong that he is spared the painful embarrassment of looking back upon moments of weakness; none is so wise that he cannot recall times when his own ignorance bordered upon the stupid, even the moronic. Nevertheless, high standards must be upheld—he helps to do so! He beautifully expresses his respect for courage, integrity and honest effort.
Some day I should like to spend a week with him, just sitting in his backyard and possibly talking about nothing more removed than the trees and the mountains that he loves so well.

My love to Ibby and your nice family and, as always, my very best to you.

Cordially,

P.S. I see that you wrote your letter in longhand. Did the blankety-blank typewriter play out? The reason I ask is a bit more than a mere concern for your convenience; I was told that the particular typewriter we got was the sturdiest and best in its field. If it wasn't, I would like to write a sarcastic letter to the producing firm.

By the autumn of 1951 the pressure on Eisenhower to announce his candidacy for the presidency had become intense. During the summer a group of his business friends had organized, with his tacit approval, Citizens for Eisenhower; and soon Eisenhower for President clubs were springing up all around the country. The steady stream of business and political leaders coursing through his headquarters in Paris increased, as did his private correspondence. In a front-page editorial in the New York Herald Tribune, his friend William Robinson endorsed him for the Republican nomination. It seems clear that Eisenhower was himself moving closer and closer to a declaration of candidacy; and in his correspondence with friends and supporters, as in the ensuing letter to Swede, he was careful to distinguish his own position from both the liberalism of the Truman administration and the extreme conservatism of the Taft Republicans. "Almost daily I'm asked whether or not you'll run," wrote Swede on November 2. "Invariably I answer that I know you don't want it but that you will, as always, answer a call to duty as your conscience hears it—that if you feel you are necessary to the nation's welfare you'll get into the race." For Eisenhower's confirmation, see paragraph thirteen below.
Dear Swede:

Thank goodness, you relieved my mind about the durability and efficiency of the Royal—until I received your reassuring letter, I had the unhappy feeling that Schulz may have been taken for a ride in the purchase he made.

One of the infrequent chuckles that I have had in recent days was inspired by your sentence that "I see so much in the papers about Eisenhower these days that I sometimes wonder if I really know the man they are writing about." If you think that, what do you suppose I feel? I find in the Communist press that I am a bloody Fascist, a war monger, and a tool of American Imperialists. The cartoons that accompany these accounts picture a big-paunched, heavy-jawed Germanic type of brutal soldier. At the same time, I find somewhat similar cartoons in sections of our Isolationist press, but in which the labels assert that I am a great friend of Joe Stalin's or of all the Internationalist do-gooders in the world. In one paper, I am a New Dealer; in the next, I am such a Reactionary that the CIO [Congress of Industrial Organizations] finds it necessary to condemn me as an economic anachronism. In the eyes of one columnist, I am too fearful and frightened ever to attempt to fill a political office; another columnist asserts that I am, with Machiavellian cunning, pulling every possible string to become President of the United States.

All this is ordinary fare for anyone who tries to pursue a steady and honest course down the only path available when he is dealing in complex activities pertaining to large organizations of humans—a path straight down the middle of the road. Sometime in September of 1949, I think it was, I made a talk before the National Bar Association, then meeting in Saint Louis. I pointed out that anyone who chose the middle of the road was going constantly to be subject to attack from both extremes. He is hated by the bureaucrats and the national planners, and he is distrusted by those who think that Calvin Coolidge was a pink. All of which would be rather terrifying to the victim if it were anything new or unique; actually, it is nothing but a mere repetition of what has been happening for hundreds, even thousands, of years.

You and I have had earlier correspondence concerning our common admiration for Forrest Sherman. So you must know how bitterly I regret his death. To my mind, there was no real second to
him and, as I recall, I wrote you one letter stoutly defending his selection as Chief of Naval Operations when I thought you had expressed some doubt about the matter. I do remember, though, that you wrote me a later letter to say that I had misunderstood the statements in which I thought I had found the criticisms.

With respect to the top Service jobs in Washington, I believe that our people have, as yet, a lot to learn. For the Joint Chiefs of Staff to coordinate and balance the great military organisms that our country needs in these days of tension requires, in each member, selflessness, energy, study, and the broadest kind of viewpoint and comprehension. Each of these men must cease regarding himself as the advocate or special pleader for any particular Service; he must think strictly and solely in terms of the United States. Character rather than intellect, and moral courage rather than mere professional skill, are the dominant qualifications required. Each individual will have to give only a modicum of his time to the establishment of policy affecting his own Service, because his great problem will be how to work with two others in devising and recommending to the civilian authorities a properly balanced force together with the programs and methods that should be applied to the problem of building global security for ourselves.

If you were choosing the Chief of Naval Operations by application of the standards I have just alluded to, I do not know where your choice would fall. I am not well acquainted with some of the men now coming to the front in the Navy, but there is one whom you did not mention and who, on short acquaintance, has impressed me greatly. He is the Vice Chief of Naval Operations, named [Adm. Donald B.] Duncan. He is quiet, almost self-effacing, but he seems to me to have a value that far exceeds the noise that he makes. Just as I always felt that there was no one in uniform who loomed above Sherman in value to our country, so I have some suspicion that Duncan may finally make a similar impression upon me. (Not, of course, that this is important but, after all, our correspondence is a personal thing, and so I find no need to apologize for my personal views.) I believe [Adm. William M.] Fechteler will do a good job [as chief of naval operations]—just possibly an outstanding one, because he seems to have a disposition that is neither easily upset nor particularly upsetting to others. He is one of those people who does not make the mistake of confusing strength and bad manners.
[Adm. Robert B.] Carney, of course, is a very skillful and able person. I think at times that he may be tempted to argue points rather legalistically and, because of this tendency, may give unwarranted importance to minor detail. I think this is subconscious but it does, on occasion, give his presentations an atmosphere of contentiousness. However, he is saved from any really bad effects because of his general popularity with his associates—all of us like him. He is most courteous and hospitable.

Incidentally, when I was in the Mediterranean recently, I renewed friendship with Admiral [Matthias B.] Gardner, I suppose of the Class of '17 or '18. I like him very much and have a great respect for his easy-going but effective methods.

Your letter brought me my first news that there had been any public intimation that even one, much less two, Eisenhower's were considered for the job of Baseball Commissioner. Over the past several years, informal suggestions of this character have been made to me, but my refusals to consider the matter have been both prompt and emphatic. This has not meant that I was insensible to the compliment implicit in the suggestion, but it has meant that it is not the kind of work in which I felt it best for me to engage. I had no idea that the job had ever been suggested to Milton, but I am quite sure that, if it was, his reaction was somewhat the same.

I feel impelled to pause for just a moment to make an observation concerning the topsy-turvy happenings that we accept, today, almost as commonplaces. If, some forty-five years ago, anyone had suggested to two barefoot boys of the Dickinson County region that they would one day casually—without even a second thought—dismiss an opportunity to take over an honorable and decent job paying $75,000 a year, the entire countryside would have, at that moment, broken into a very hearty laugh, not to mention a few snorts of derision. But that's the way it goes! I am not so terribly much richer in money than I was in those days (even though we had nothing then) but I guess that, in certain respects, my sense of values has changed considerably. And, after all, anyone with a $75,000 salary must have a great deal of anguish when he figures out his income tax!

The West Point scandal [in which a number of cadets were caught cheating] made me heartsick. The only grain of comfort I get out of the whole business was that apparently the authorities, when aroused to the knowledge that something incompatible with
the honor system was going on, met the problem head on and without equivocation.

One single observation about Korea-Iran-Egypt-Germany—and all the other spots on the earth in which we now sometimes find ourselves embarrassed. They are all part and parcel of the same great struggle—the struggle of free men to govern themselves effectively and efficiently; to protect themselves from any threat without, and to prevent their system from collapsing under them, due to the strains placed upon it by their defensive effort. It is another phase of a struggle that has been going on for some three thousand years; the unique feature about it now is that it is much more than ever before a single worldwide conflict with power polarized in the two centers of Washington and Moscow.

There is no point in my commenting further upon the political questions that you mention and with which I am so often personally confronted. Your own analysis remains accurate so far as I can foresee the future.

When I am attempting to answer letters from inquiring friends on the point, I normally include in the explanation of my own attitude a paragraph about as follows:

"For me to admit, while in this post, a partisan political loyalty would properly be resented by thinking Americans and would be doing a disservice to our country. Such action on my part would encourage partisan thinking, in our country, toward a job in which the whole nation has already invested tremendous sums. The successful outcome of this venture is too vital to our welfare in the years head to permit any semblance of partisan allegiance on the part of the United States Military Commander in SHAPE."

I believe that a bit of reflection will establish that there is no other possible course for me as long as I am in uniform. A man cannot desert a duty, but it would seem that he could lay down one in order to pick up a heavier and more responsible burden. So far as personal desire or ambition is concerned, there will never be any change for me. I could not be more negative.

I am glad you told me about the word "exegete." I am now going to look it up in the dictionary before I go home.

My love to your nice family.

Cordially,