Ike's Letters to a Friend, 1941 -1958

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In December, Eisenhower sent to Swede copies of a recently completed portrait of himself and of a painting of Washington that Eisenhower himself had done. In January 1955 he returned to the subject of better pay, housing, and health benefits for members of the armed services, a rather ironic discussion given his own strong opposition to the national-health-care proposals of the Truman administration. And in an afterword, he discusses, briefly, his son's somewhat reluctant decision to remain in the army.

28 January 1955

Dear Swede:

It will probably be some time before I answer your letter in the detail that such a thoughtful communication deserves. However, I want to remark upon one point you brought up—a raise in pay for the Services.

I have personally conducted quite a survey among a number of young officers and enlisted men as to what particular thing would add most to the attractiveness of a service career for them. Of course, a number have just said, "Raise my pay." But when the subject is pursued further, much more comes to light, and, out of all this, I have concluded about as follows:
(a) A raise in pay is badly needed for highly trained technicians and non-commissioned officers in the enlisted grades.

(b) A selective raise in pay for officers should be enacted, particularly for those in the Army grades of Second Lieutenant to Major inclusive, and similar grades in the other Services.

(c) Some raise in pay for "hazardous duty" is needed. Since a great portion of this pay goes to aviators and submariners—and these are principally in the grades just indicated—there would be a dual raise in pay for many officers of the grades of Second Lieutenant to Major.

(d) For officers of the career services, there should be adequate quarters.

(e) For all officers of all grades, there should be fewer changes of station. These always occasion a drain upon the private purse and create a recurring necessity of fitting out homes and making new friends.

(f) Each officer should be assured decent and adequate medical care for dependents. This is particularly important these days because a young officer is so often ordered away on tours of duty of three months to a year in duration and forbidden to take his family with him. Without exception, the younger married officers I have seen give this as one of the most depressing things they encounter in Service today.

(g) There should be better provisions made for the care of dependents upon an officer's death, whether he is on the active or the retired list—in the first case, it would be a higher pension. (As of this moment, a reserve officer's widow gets something on the order of 5 or 6 times as much as a regular officer's widow if both officers die while on active service.) Likewise, retirement pay should contain a survivor's clause which would provide a minimum standard of living for his widow.

Income taxes, so far as I can see, are never again going back to the comfortable 3 or 4 percent that we paid in our early years of service. Consequently, in the average case, for every three cents added to an officer's pay, he returns one to the Federal Government. But this is not the case in what you call the "fringe" benefits.

I've had a number of Service officers conducting similar surveys and their findings largely confirm my own. But as to the
basic issue, I endorse your thought, "... We must make the career services more attractive."

Thanks for your letter.

As ever,

P.S. In this matter I had a curious reaction from my son. Of course, his case is not typical; both he and his wife are Service "brats," he has from his grandparents some financial help and prospects and, because of me, feels a certain special obligation to the Service.

When a large firm offered him a most attractive position, he said to me:

(a) The Services are losing many young officers because of low pay and allowances, and domestic hardships.
(b) I'm in a bit better financial position to stay than is the average.
(c) If I'm any good, the Service needs me.
(d) If I'm no good, the Service will eventually fire me—as it should—but in any case I would not be existing on the charity of a business firm or friend extended to me because of my parents.
(e) So far as Service Public Relations are concerned, I think it would be unfortunate for the son of the President to resign.

In February, Eisenhower sent to Swede a brief greeting on his "non-existent" leap-year birthday. Then, in June he returned again to the possibility of his candidacy in 1956 and to a review of the accomplishments of the first several years of his presidency. Among the "definite victories" the administration had scored were Iran and Guatemala, where the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) had toppled existing governments. The "stalemate" was Korea; and the "limited loss" was Indochina, where the French and the Vietminh had agreed to a temporary partition at the seventeenth parallel.

In his catalogue of domestic triumphs, Eisenhower obviously avoided mention of the administration's inept handling of the new poliomyelitis vaccine, which led to the resignation of the secretary of the Department of Health, Education and Welfare, Oveta Culp
Hobby, or to the Dixon-Yates scandal, which undermined his efforts to limit the TVA.

The "London Agreements" to which Eisenhower alludes brought West Germany into NATO, finally accomplishing what the United States had earlier attempted through the abortive European Defense Community. The "Big Four" meeting, coming shortly after the ascension to power of Nikita Khrushchev in the Soviet Union, did indeed signal a relaxation of East/West tensions, and for at least a brief while, both East and West basked in the "spirit of Geneva."

4 June 1955

Personal

Dear Swede:

A thousand things engage my attention these days, but—largely through a bombardment by loyal and well-meaning friends—the one that dominates all others is "1956." Some time ago, probably in 1953, I gave you an outline of my intentions with respect to my future in politics. Those intentions have undergone no significant change whatsoever. But as the tension mounts and the bombardment continues, the question that I will have to face next spring will be: "Are the conditions actually prevailing in the world and at home sufficiently serious as to be classed as an emergency which should properly override any personal decision or desire?"

As of this moment I feel no qualms as to my ability to hold out in what I think to be a sane and proper determination, formulated in the light of the good of the whole country. No man has ever reached his 70th year in the White House; this may not mean much in itself, but it does remind us that every Presidential term is for four years and no one has the faintest right to consider acceptance of a nomination unless he honestly believes that his physical and mental reserves will stand the strain of four years of intensive work. Incidentally, this inspires the observation that the greater
the tensions of the domestic and world situation, the greater would be the erosion in mental and physical resistance.

In any event, if I should come to feel any weakening of my own resolution in this whole affair, I may get you on the phone. You are one of the very few who has seemed, from the beginning, to have been on my side in such matters.

The past two years or more have shown tremendous progress in procuring legislation that has been needed. This had included a new farm program, reforms in tax systems, a marked increase in pay of the uniformed services, a bill for increased pay and reform in the postal services, enactment of a better trade law and, of course, many others, particularly in the field of social security, unemployment insurance and so on. On top of all this, we have had a major tax reduction—the largest single reduction in our history—and if nothing unforeseen occurs, we approach a balanced budget. Possibly the greatest accomplishment has been the stabilization in the purchasing power of the dollar. The cost of living has varied only in the range of something like one half of one percent in the past two years.

In the international field the record is not all that we could hope, but it still shows tremendous improvement. In January of '52 Korea, Indo-China, Iran, Egypt and Guatemala all presented problems of the most acute character, some even carrying the possibility of major war. There is no need to recite here what happened in each case, but in at least three we had definite victories and of the others, a stalemate in one and limited loss in the other.

Added to all these there is the great accomplishment of the ratification of the London Agreements. The record is one to give ground for hope of greater things still to come.

Personally I do not expect any spectacular results from the forthcoming "Big Four" Conference. Nevertheless, I should think that Foster and I should be able to detect whether the Soviets really intend to introduce a tactical change that could mean, for the next few years at least, some real easing of tensions. If we do not obtain some concrete evidence of such a tactical change, then, of course, the effort must be to determine the exact purpose of recent Soviet suggestions for conferences and easing of tensions and so on.

In any event, the general world and domestic outlook is better than it was two and a half years ago.
Along with this, of course, my associates and I hope to recreate in this country some respect for constitutional methods and procedures in government, and renewed confidence in personal initiative and responsibility as the indispensable foundation of free government. I think that this also is being done.

Possibly all that I am trying to say is that if I had any special or particular function and duty in our national life in 1952, that such special duty has been or is being—so far as current circumstances will allow us to judge—largely fulfilled.

Of course I believe that prospects as of some ten months from now will be even better than at present. I hope that we will be prosperous, fully employed, and with a growing confidence in our own security and general international position. In such circumstances, I doubt that even the most demagoguish of New Dealers could induce our citizens to abandon the course on which we are now embarked so long as we could present to them as candidates, worthy representatives of “moderate conservatism.”

Give my love to Ibby and all the family.

As ever,

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After his return from Geneva and the adjournment of Congress, Eisenhower left Washington for Denver and an extended vacation. The question of his candidacy, however, as his letters to Swede and others indicate, remained uppermost in his mind.

There was more to the replacement of Adm. Robert B. Carney as chief of naval operations than Eisenhower’s letter to Swede suggests. In late March 1955, in the midst of the tense crisis over the Chinese offshore islands of Quemoy and Matsu, Carney had told a group of reporters that war was imminent and that some in the military were pressing the president “to destroy Red China’s military potential and thus end its expansionist tendencies.” Eisenhower moved swiftly to quash such speculation, and two months later he had Carney quietly replaced as CNO.
15 August 1955

Dear Swede:

This is my first day in Denver and I have a half hour to myself while waiting for an appointment with the Mayor and one or two other people. For some days I have been wanting to write to you—first to answer your intriguing letter of June 8, second to tell you something of my Geneva impressions.

Incidentally, mere mention of the date on which your letter was written takes my mind back eleven years, to June 8, 1944. That morning I visited all our landing beaches which we had struck the previous day; before the day was over I was in a first class shipwreck. I hit a sand bar—and stuck on it—at 33 knots.

A goodly portion of your letter was an analysis of the various reasons pro and con that will affect my decision about running again and the pressures that will be brought to bear—some of them spurious—by those who believe that I should do so. Of course some of this urging will come from people who merely believe that with my name on the ticket they can themselves do better politically; others, I like to believe, will be moved by real (even if possibly mistaken) concern for the country.

By and large I agree with what you have to say about age. You treat it as a relative rather than an absolute matter, and to a certain extent this is true. There is, however, one insidious factor in this matter which you do not mention. It is this. Normally the last person to recognize that a man’s mental faculties are fading is the victim himself.

Exactly one week later.

I shall not attempt to explain the hiatus just indicated. It was one of those things that happen.

* * *

To return to my subject. I have seen many a man “hang on too long” under the definite impression that he had a great duty to perform and that no one else could adequately fill his particular position. The more important and demanding the position, the greater the danger in this regard.

As to who relieves me, I do not believe the question can be answered now, nor four years from this date, if I should then be at the helm.
The fact is that only the designation of a Presidential nominee by a political convention can glaringly focus national political attention upon any individual. For two and a half years I have genuinely tried to place two or three of our able younger men constantly before the public in the hope of giving them the publicity value that would compare favorably with their abilities. The inertia and indifference that I have encountered are scarcely less than phenomenal.

On the other hand, whoever heard of Stevenson before he was nominated? Yet today he is the tacitly acknowledged leader of the Democratic Party. What I am getting at is that no one can make accurate judgment as to the kind of political race an individual will run until after he is nominated. That is not wholly true in the negative sense. By this I mean that you could name dozens who could get nowhere. On the other hand, I am sure that I could name at least eight or ten Republicans, any one of whom could, by reason of personality, ability and energy, conduct a most effective campaign in our country.

So I feel that your question as to a possible successor is unanswerable, but if I should be a second term President I argue that even four years from now the question would still be unanswerable.

Of course, now, with a Constitutional amendment prohibiting a third term, the interest in a second term President would begin to die out very seriously after the first eighteen months. All attention would be turned to the "heir apparent." This situation might in fact bring out two or three individuals who would stand out so much above the crowd that the choice could be narrowed that far.

At least I feel that the absence of an obvious successor provides no valid reason for my considering a second term.

Your concern lest I allow the rantings of an "Eager Beaver from Tennessee" to disturb me may be instantly dismissed. I never read them. In fact, there are so few people who have any real conception of the need and difficulty of keeping "fit" in this position that I pay no slightest attention to any advisory comments as to my efforts in that direction.

My reactions to Geneva have been fairly well publicized. It was difficult indeed to reach a decision that I should go to such a meeting. The twin dangers of encouraging either complacency or defeatism, depending upon the outcome, were very great indeed.
These, however, were lessened by the Soviet agreement to the Austrian Treaty, by their invitation to Adenauer to come to Moscow—after having previously threatened the most dire consequences in the event that the Paris Agreements [formally approving the inclusion of West Germany into NATO] were signed—and finally the general attitude of the new Kremlin masters: all of these encouraged the belief that possibly a new attitude might be developed in the conduct of foreign relations.

On our side, we were careful to state we were looking for nothing more, on a short term basis.

The general results you know so well as to need no elaborate comment from me. However, I am quite sure that the October meeting of the Foreign Ministers in Geneva will begin to tell the true story. But a long time must elapse before developments can possibly reach the stage that we can have any confidence in the announced purposes and proposals of the Soviets. In the meantime we must keep up our guard.

As for the change in the office of CNO, I think no one doubted the intelligence and general capacity of Admiral Carney. But I know that a very distinct difference in philosophies affecting naval direction and authority arose between him and the Secretary of the Navy [Charles S. Thomas]. Personally, I think there is nothing complicated about the line of authority and responsibility. The President is Commander in Chief. He delegates to a Service Secretary a certain amount of his Constitutional authority and that Secretary becomes the President’s representative in the affected service. The Secretary’s orders are presumed to be the orders of the Commander in Chief. If the Secretary is the type who does not take the advice of his own military choices, or who is domineering and arbitrary in his decisions, then it is the fault of the Commander in Chief for having selected such a person, if things go wrong—as they surely would.

But the theory that the control and direction of all parts of the Navy fall within the responsibility and authority of the Secretary cannot be questioned, even though the CNO has an additional capacity as the chief “Naval Adviser to the President.” As I understand the matter, from both sides, (and of course this a highly secret) Carney holds that there are certain matters within the direction and operation of the Naval chiefs, with which the Secretary has no possible concern or right to interfere.
I would go so far as to say that if the Secretary felt it necessary to interfere, then he should instantly relieve the CNO. However, the only way he can know what is going on is to be constantly informed and to demand and have all the inspectional rights as to operations, reports, communications and so on, which are necessary to him in order to form his own judgment in these matters. Unless this is so, there could be no control over any CNO—certainly the President has no time to check up on such details.

By no means do I intend to imply that the difference was carried to the point of acrimonious debate or any kind of insubordination. However, I believe it was serious enough that the Secretary was no longer too happy with the current situation and therefore recommended the change. Without exception all of us think that Thomas has been a good Secretary, so in the circumstances it seemed best to make the change.

With warm regard,

As ever,

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Early on the morning of 24 September 1955, Eisenhower suffered a severe heart attack and was rushed to a nearby military hospital. In Washington there was anxious talk of constitutional succession. In New York the Dow-Jones industrial average fell more than thirty points. For the next several weeks the president remained in virtual seclusion, shielded by his physicians, by Assistant to the President Sherman Adams, and by his trusted press secretary, James C. Hagerty. "Welcome to the Cardiac Club," wrote Swede on September 27, in a determinedly cheerful letter. Eisenhower’s reply, dictated on October 6, was accompanied by a note from his private secretary, Ann C. Whitman, who passed along a request from Hagerty that it not be made public. "It is one of two dictated by him today," she wrote, "and of course the newspapers would love nothing better than to know about it." Whitman went on to assure Swede that Eisenhower’s progress was, if anything, underestimated. "He looks wonderfully well, he
6 October 1955

Dear Swede:

While the doctors have almost completely succeeded in "divorcing" me from my secretary (and thus effectively prevented the kind of reply I should like to make to your note), they relented
sufficiently to allow me a moment to tell you how much I appreciated your letter. It was the best possible therapy.

As soon as possible, I want to write you fully. Meantime, my warm and grateful thanks.

With affectionate regard to Ibby, and, as always, the best to yourself.

As ever,

"But of course you won't run—and I'm glad," wrote Swede on October 21, reminding Eisenhower that he had once written that he considered his brother Milton the best fitted of anyone in the country to serve as president. "I think he is a natural," Swede concluded, "and the Eisenhower name alone will pull a lot of votes." In his reply, Eisenhower reiterated his high regard for his younger brother's abilities but also repeated his conviction that Milton had no interest in "politics."

26 October 1955

Personal and Confidential

Dear Swede:

I shall not attempt fully to answer your very fine letter, but, regarding the paragraph at the top of your second page, which deals with the "hands off" attitude with regard to a successor, let us not forget this one thing. I am vitally concerned in seeing someone nominated who not only believes in the program I have been so earnestly laboring to have enacted into law, but who also has the best chance of election. This is the tough one.

With regard to Milton, I have not changed my mind one iota. In fact, my judgment of past years has been strengthened with
every new day. But what might ever come of my own opinion in
this matter is something that I have not even seriously considered.
Certainly this is no time for anyone to make any kind of a move. In
fact, it is my own private opinion that if ever there is a fight to
develop in this world between my kid brother and myself, it will be
when and if he ever finds out that I would like to see him shoved
into politics in this fashion.

Today I am walking a few steps. The doctors say my progress
follows the normal pattern. With your experience you know, I
assume, exactly what that means. Apparently there is a period of
some four months before they can make an accurate prognosis of
the level of activity a heart victim can sustain without incurring any
damage. By that time a lot of factors that now appear doubtful or
uncertain should definitely crystallize.

Give my love to Ibbie.

As ever,
I find that my last letter was dated October twenty-sixth, and its principal topic, still unresolved, swirls daily around my mind and keeps me awake at nights. At the moment I don’t want to mar the holiday season—and my exhilarated state of mind at being a grandfather for the fourth time—with delving into the matter too deeply in a letter.

As far as my physical condition is concerned, I seem to be making the progress the doctors have anticipated. The one thing I need is exercise, but the weather at Gettysburg was too uncomfortable to permit me to be out very much—and while I can get a reasonable amount of exercise in the gymnasium here, the activities are not really those I most enjoy. I would like to go south for a couple of weeks, but there are certain family considerations which have priority.

I am afraid that I have had far too great a preoccupation with my own health these past months. More importantly, what about you? I would very much like to know how you are feeling and whether or not you are getting the treatment you need.

The other day I sent you one of the lithographic reproductions of a painting I did the last week I spent in Fraser. I hope you and Ibby like it.

This rambling letter represents nothing more, as I say, than a desire to be in touch with you and, specifically, to inquire about your health.

Give my love to Ibby and, as always, the best to yourself.

As ever,