Ike's Letters to a Friend, 1941 -1958

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In December, Swede began a long handwritten letter to Eisenhower, a letter that, given Swede’s faltering health and the continued interruption of savage headaches, took him more than a month to complete. Ann Whitman typed it up for the president, who scrawled his own reactions on the margins. In his letter, Swede expressed his admiration for Eisenhower’s determination to attend the NATO Conference, “in a wheelchair if necessary”; praised Secretary of State Dulles, Assistant to the President Sherman Adams, and Secretary of Agriculture Ezra Taft Benson; criticized actor and television advisor Robert Montgomery’s staging of Eisenhower’s television address on his return from Paris (“to be frank, you looked decidedly ill at ease’’); and applauded Eisenhower’s selection of Neil H. McElroy as secretary of defense. “I’m afraid, though, that you can’t expect too much enthusiasm on his part as regards further tightening of the bonds of service integration. As you undoubtedly know, he ran [Procter and Gamble] on the theory of inter-departmental rivalries.” Swede attacked columnist Drew Pearson, who in a television interview had predicted that, within a year, Eisenhower would no longer be president; criticized French actions in Tunisia; and on the proposed Summit meeting with the Russians, concluded that “unless the prospects show a real promise of concrete achievement I think you would be wasting your time.” “I agree fully,” wrote Eisenhower in the margin.

In late February, Eisenhower wrote the following “birthday” letter to Swede.
Dear Swede:

Since I want both to send you felicitations for that non-existent birthday of yours and to answer, at least briefly, some of the comments in your most recent letter (which I enjoyed tremendously, as I always do), I shall try to limit myself to those subjects you bring up and not go off on my usual lengthy, and I like to think philosophical, discourse.

Now as to your points. Please don't concern yourself about any lack of coherence, if such there ever might be, in your letters. The important thing is that you don't tire yourself in writing them. I always like to have your thoughts, and they don't have to be in any logical order for them to be of value to me.

As for my recent physical mishap, never at any time did I feel ill, so I don't deserve any special commendation for making the Paris trip. My only apprehension was about the formal speeches I knew I would have to make, and, to some extent, concerning the informal conferences with the various heads of government. But all in all, the experience was pleasant and I think all to the good. I especially got a kick out of my visit to my old SHAPE Headquarters.

With reference to the illness itself, apparently months will be needed to complete the full cure. But the only symptom I notice now is a tendency to use the wrong word—for example, I may say "desk" when I mean "chair." But that tendency seems to be decreasing and people who haven't seen me for months say, honestly I think, that they notice a much improved condition in this ailment.

You know how I feel about the Secretary of State, both from previous letters and from the many public statements I have made. I admire tremendously his wisdom, his knowledge in the delicate and intricate field of foreign relations, and his tireless dedication to duty. Apparently with strangers his personality may not always be winning, but with his friends he is charming and delightful. In addition to Mr. Dulles, Secretary Benson and Governor Adams are two individuals who have been, in my opinion, unjustly attacked. They are also dedicated and completely honest men. But in this business sometimes glibness gives more surface reward than does honesty.
Speaking of personalities, the new Russian Ambassador to the United States, Mr. Mikhail Menshikov, is making quite a splash in Washington. He is extremely affable, good-looking (I am told by the ladies of my family) in the “Western sort of way” (whatever they mean by that), energetic and apparently not impressed with protocol procedures (which break with routine I admit I find refreshing). Only time will tell whether his appointment is in any way indicative of a change in official Russian policy.

Oh yes, I agree completely that Bob Montgomery erred in his “stage directions” for the report to the nation immediately after the NATO Conference.

Now to go back to your letter and to my health. I am trying to follow the advice of the doctors. I want to keep well and conserve my energy as much as possible for the tasks that lie ahead of me. But it is not easy since politicians have a habit of making me ill—mentally and physically! I cannot, for example, understand why any one, Democrat or Republican, would want to fan the flames of the so-called “recession” for his own political advantage at the expense of all Americans. But you know as well as I do that such a thing is done daily for the cheap advantage that certain people feel they will gain personally. In the same category I put the request of some thirty Congressmen that I “fire” Benson simply because they are so avid for more governmental handouts for the farmers in their districts.

Already we are in the special fever of a campaign year. If a Republican Congress could be elected it would be the neatest trick of the week. The brickbats that will be thrown at me I shall ignore, and I shall concentrate, as I have tried to do in the past, upon our national security, upon inching toward a just and durable peace for all the world, and upon sustaining the health of the American economy.

Secretary McElroy is, in my opinion, one of the best appointments that could be made. He may have started out, as you say, without too much enthusiasm for service integration, but I think he is changing his views. He has, incidentally, absorbed with unexpected rapidity the enormous complexity of the Defense Department and will, I think, make a tremendous contribution there.

This whole business of inter-service rivalries has been greatly distressing to me, and to all of us. I am sure you are as sick as I am of public debates among Generals and the Secretaries of the various services. You referred to the German General staff system.
I venture that few people really understand what happened under that so-called system. Their General Staff was Army.* For that it was superb. But military separation in compartments was marked. Even the Ministry of War in 1914 had nothing to do with the General Staff.

I have had endless discussions in my office on the relative merits of the nuclear submarines versus nuclear aircraft carriers. I agree with you completely that the flattop is becoming obsolete and I have tried, and will continue to try, to convince the Navy big brass that their only possible use would be in a small war. Here you get down to an intra service rivalry that presents its problems, too.

As for the columnist [Drew Pearson] you mention, I merely say that I have not read a word of his in fifteen years. Personally I think he is a "spherical" SOB which makes him one no matter from what angle you may view him. And as for the prophecy you mention, I had not heard of it before. He could of course be right. But I think the good Lord will have more to do with what happens than this particular columnist.

You bring up the fact that retired officers are not included in the Administration’s recommendations for "cost of living" increases. These recommendations were based on the Cordiner report, which was designed to keep in the services young, able officers and real technicians. While the Cordiner report provided for very large increases in senior grades, the theory was that this would keep young officers in the service permanently. The general policy was to ignore all others. (This report was made, of course, when inflation was our number one domestic problem.) I think we might review the matter now, and I am assured by the experts that, in any event, the Congress will, for its own political reasons, see that retired personnel are included when the issue is finally decided.

I mentioned briefly the "recession" that is worrying everyone today. We are watching the economy closely and I still believe, as I said in my last press conference, that there will be more employment opportunities by mid- or late March. But this may mark the "beginning of the end" of the recession; it will be quite a while before we reach the "end of the ending." I shall never approve a tax cut for political reasons, but there are certain economists who believe that if the recession continues, we may have to give serious consideration to the possibility.
And a few brief points—I agree with you completely with regard to Bourguiba and I deplore the situation the French have gotten themselves, and indirectly us, into. [Félix] Gaillard [premier of France] is inexperienced (though in this specific instance I do not believe he was to blame) but basically he seems to have some of the marks of a capable leader.

Now we come to the Summit Conference. If we and our allies can first agree on the positions we will take on the various subjects that will be discussed; if the Russians will agree to a preparatory conference at a lower level; and if they will promise to abide by the agreements made at the preparatory conference—then, and only then, I am willing to meet with them. If this procedure is followed, I think we can at least hope for some success; anything else is bound to bring dismal failure.

I think I have covered all your comments except the most important ones—the fine Navy football game of last year, your health, and your birthday anniversary. I was proud of Navy's team (except on one day that need not be mentioned) and I watched them on TV whenever I could.

As you know without my telling you, I am distressed about the seeming lack of progress in your physical condition and I keep hoping that the doctors will find something that will make you more comfortable. I am glad you have decided to come back to Bethesda for another go-round and I shall keep praying that the doctors there will come up with something that will help you.

And now you are about to have a birthday anniversary, an event that I suspect you regard with as much dislike and disdain as I do. But at least you have to endure only fifteen or sixteen actual such days, while I have that imposing sixty-seven always to contemplate. But I fancy even that is little enough comfort in view of falling chests, hair and energy. At any rate you know that my prayer is that your birthday "present" for the next year will be better health.

With affectionate regard to Ibby and all the best to yourself,

As ever,

P.S.: Please let me know when you come to Bethesda; otherwise, I shall have to employ my special intelligence system.

* I am referring here to the justly famous General Staff of 1914. Of course under Hitler there was a personal Chief of Staff that could
presumably issue orders to any service. Actually Goering, as long as he was in favor, went his own way. [This note was apparently added at a later date.]

Eisenhower soon recovered from the mild stroke that he had suffered. Swede's health, however, continued to fail, and in March he returned once more to Bethesda for further tests.

25 March 1958

Dear Swede:

I understand from my private intelligence system that you are still undergoing tests out at Bethesda. I know you realize how strongly I pray that medical science will finally find the answer to your difficulty and some way to alleviate it.

Over the weekend, as perhaps you know, I went to Augusta in search of the elusive sun and a decent game of golf. The sun I found but there was absolutely no consolation in the brand of game I exhibited.

Perhaps these flowers will be a spot of color in your room; at the very least they will assure you that I am thinking of you.

With warm regard,

As ever,

In April the doctors at Bethesda discovered that Swede had cancer and operated, removing his right lung. Eisenhower re-
ceived regular reports on the operation and on Swede’s slow recovery. In August, Swede and Ibby moved to Bethesda, Maryland, where they bought a small cottage near the hospital. Here Swede began the last letter that he would attempt to write. “He struggled so hard to write to you,” wrote Ibby, who later sent it to Eisenhower. “He wanted very much to thank you for all that you had done for him.” In October, Swede was again hospitalized with a recurrence of the cancer. “His courage is magnificent,” wrote Ibby. “I don’t know how he bears such continual pain. I just hope and pray that we both will be given the strength that we need to face what lies ahead.”

23 October 1958

Dear Ibby:

Your note about my birthday anniversary, together with the letter Swede had struggled so valiantly to write me the latter part of August, reached me this morning on the last leg of my West Coast jaunt. I am, of course, grateful for your felicitations and good wishes.

I have, of course, gotten regular reports on Swede. His courage I have always admired, and I know he faces this battle with his flags flying.

You might tell Swede, if possible, that when I was in Abilene everyone asked about him. The town looks much the same. I saw Maud Hurd briefly; as you probably know she is not at all well but she is as keen and alert as ever. Charlie Case is unchanged by the years and as great a fan of Swede’s as ever.

If there is anything I can do for you, please do not fail to let me know. I would like to see you (although I don’t know how or when), but from the medical reports I have had, I don’t believe I should try to see Swede. He understands, I am sure, that he is constantly in my thoughts and prayers.

With warm regards,

Affectionately,

At the end of October, Swede died and was buried in Arlington National Cemetery. Eisenhower, who was present at the funeral, sent Ibby the following note.

November 1958

Dear Ibby:

This note is simply to say what of course you already know. The prayers and hearts of Mamie and myself are with you today, as
they have been in the past; we are thinking of you and all the members of your family with love and devotion.

I can never quite tell you what Swede meant to me. While I am glad for his sake that he suffers no longer, his passing leaves a permanent void in my life.

Affectionately,
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