

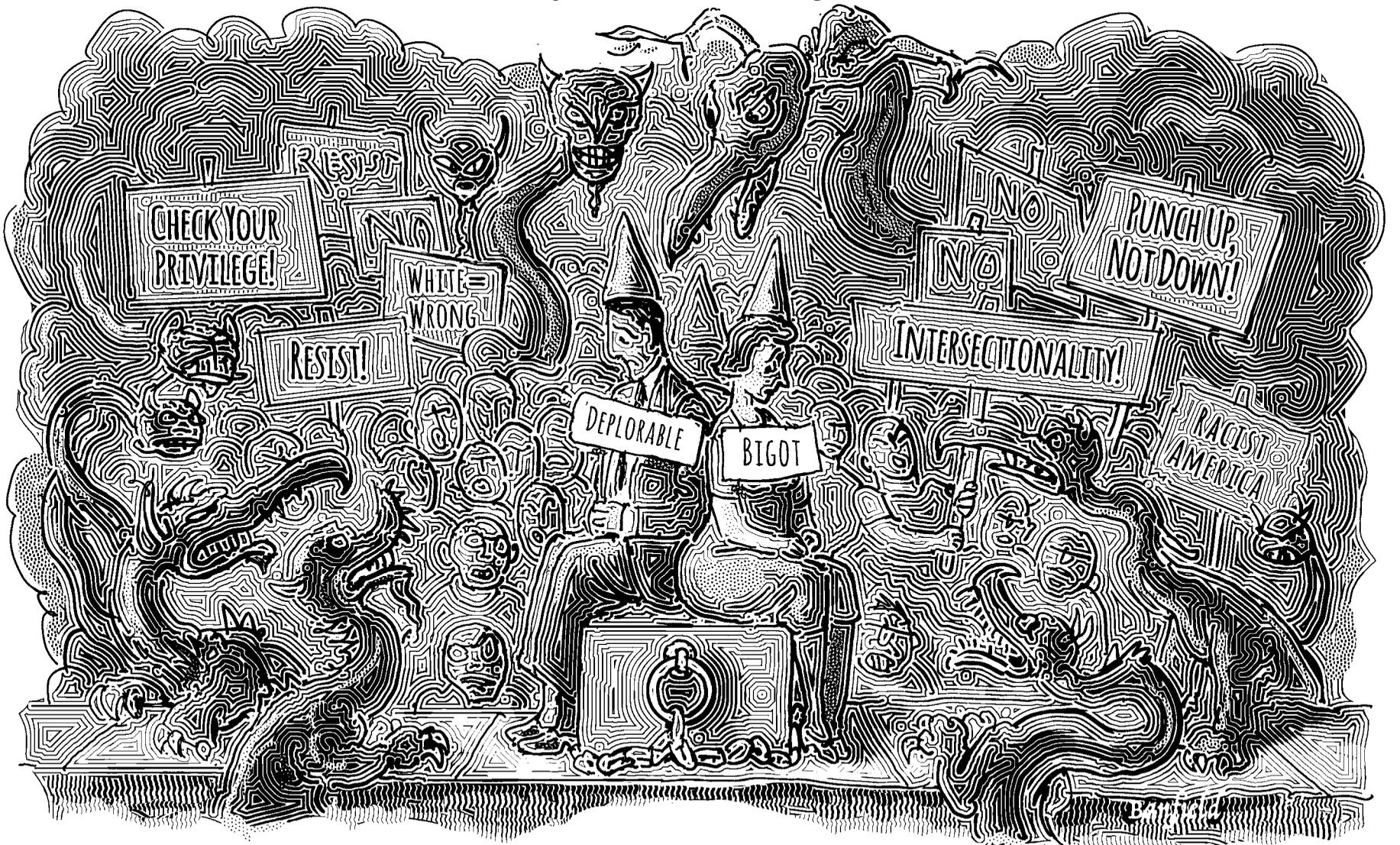
VOLUME XVIII, NUMBER 4, FALL 2018

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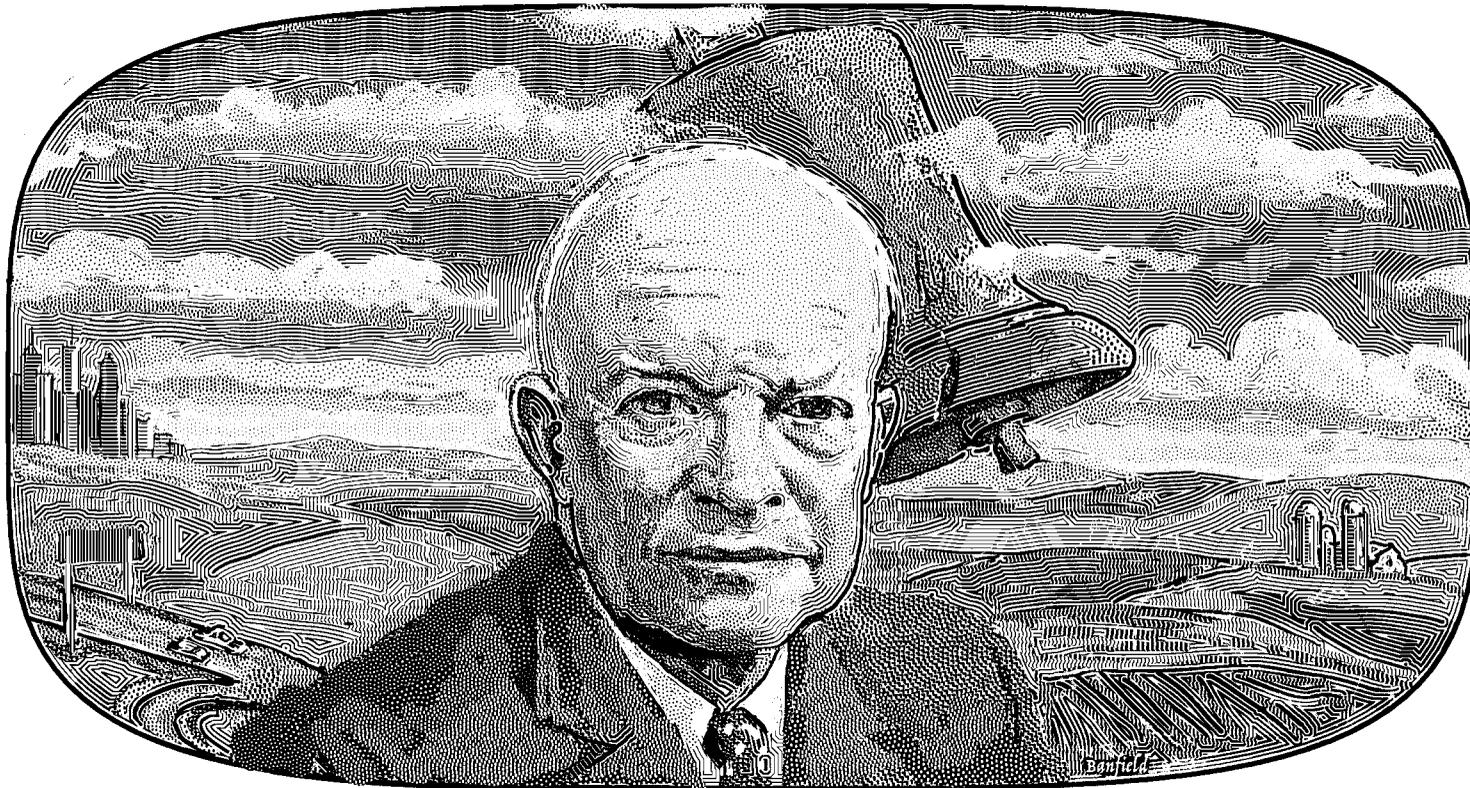
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Book Review by Alvin S. Felzenberg

## LIKING IKE

*The Age of Eisenhower: America and the World in the 1950s*, by William I. Hitchcock.  
Simon and Schuster, 672 pages, \$35



AFTER LEADING ALLIED FORCES TO victory over Nazi Germany in World War II, Dwight Eisenhower's prestige was so great, and his political views so closely held, that leading Republicans and Democrats maneuvered to make him their party's 1948 presidential nominee. Our impressions of Ike, nearly a half-century after his death in March 1969, are far less vivid. William I. Hitchcock, a professor of history at the University of Virginia, remedies this problem with his new book, *The Age of Eisenhower: America and the World in the 1950s*, which promises to be the definitive single-volume account of this understudied but highly consequential presidency.

Why has it taken so long for historians to get Ike right? First, given his unprecedented role as Supreme Commander of the Allied Expeditionary Forces, earlier biographers tended to subordinate everything Eisenhower did after 1945 to his wartime achievements. Second, the 34th president's management style was not the kind calculated to win plaudits. Columnist Murray Kempton, who be-

gan what became known as "Eisenhower revisionism," considered Ike far different from the genial, disengaged golfer who appeared in so many of Herblock's biting liberal cartoons. To him, Eisenhower was a cold, calculating manipulator, who deliberately concealed his objectives as well as his intelligence from both admirers and detractors. Relying on then recently opened papers, political scientist Fred Greenstein's *The Hidden-Hand Presidency* (1991) concluded that the passivity Ike showed to the world was the façade of a shrewd, deliberate governing strategy.

Third, and perhaps most damaging, was the picture of Ike that came down to us through both the popular culture and the academy. "Remember the Eisenhower doll?" comedian Mort Sahl would ask his audience in the early 1960s. "You wound it up and it stood still for eight years." Historians and social scientists who came of age during the New Deal judged all presidents who followed Franklin D. Roosevelt by how closely they resembled him. By those lights, Ike did not stand a chance.

AS AN UNDERGRADUATE, I ONCE DECLARED my intention to write an "honors" paper on Eisenhower's presidency, only to be admonished by my adviser that Ike had fallen far short of the modern standard of presidential activism. As such, she said, he made a poor choice for academic scrutiny. We compromised: I limited my topic to Ike's achievements as a party leader.

On that score, she and I could agree he had failed miserably. In spite of winning two presidential elections in record landslides, and high approval ratings (65% on average), Eisenhower spent his final six years in the White House facing a Democratic Congress. Nor did he witness the election of his preferred successor, as Ronald Reagan did in 1988. The instant Ike retired to Gettysburg in 1961, the "permanent civil war in the Republican Party," as journalist Theodore White described it, resumed in earnest. Barry Goldwater's nomination in 1964 against such competent moderates as Nelson Rockefeller, William Scranton, and Henry Cabot Lodge—none of whom came close to Ike in stature—was the revenge


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of conservatives who had seethed for decades as the GOP kept nominating internationalists and tepid New Deal opponents: Wendell Willkie in 1940, Thomas Dewey in 1944 and 1948, and Eisenhower in 1952 and '56.

In the ensuing years, many able historians issued reappraisals of the 34th president. But as one of Hitchcock's reviewers relates, they proved no match for the "master propagandists" in and out of the academy who stuck to their script. Hitchcock's declaration that "Camelot almost killed Ike" may be the best and most apt comment in his book.

For some, it became fashionable to like Ike for the things he did *not* do: confront Soviet forces in Berlin and Hungary or Chinese ones in Asia; press for a unified Korea; assist America's European allies to reassert colonial holds on Indochina and the Middle East; or allow junior coalition partners to drag the United States into full-scale wars. Carefully guiding his readers through these challenges, Hitchcock also relates how Ike, in order to avert a Soviet-led coup in Lebanon, sent troops himself, only to withdraw them without a single casualty after the crisis had passed.

As he prepared to make his exit from the presidency, the five-star general declared that his proudest achievement was that, on his watch, America remained out of a shooting war. "None of that happened by accident, I can tell you that," Ike told intimates.

**H**ITCHCOCK EXPOSES HIS READERS to two important, unpleasant realities that are also elements of Eisenhower's legacy. The first was that he tolerated and sometimes encouraged CIA-directed coups against governments in Iran, Guatemala, and elsewhere that he felt jeopardized American interests. Second, he relied heavily, perhaps too heavily, on nuclear weapons as the ultimate deterrent to aggression. Ike, as Hitchcock states, may never have actually threatened to use them if his demands in Korea or elsewhere were not met. But adversaries weren't sure, and chose not to find out.

Another often overlooked aspect of Ike's leadership, despite being there for all to see, was his handling of the economy. Hitchcock shows that Eisenhower inherited a \$10 billion debt from President Harry Truman, yet balanced the budget three times and came pretty close the other five. Ike regarded the prosperity Americans had come to enjoy during the 1950s as a strategic asset he could use against adversaries in the Cold War.

As a budgeter, Ike could spend as well as conserve. Defense spending under him was larger than at any other time of peace: from 13.8% of GDP in 1953, until the armistice was signed with Korea, to above 9% where it remained

throughout his presidency. This spending built up the nation's arsenal, most of it nuclear, which was significantly cheaper than the alternative, and also promoted civilian endeavors. Where he thought it essential to spend, sometimes lavishly, Eisenhower found creative ways to do it "off-budget." The best example of this was the Interstate system funded through the Highway Trust Fund, which drew its revenues in turn from increased taxes on gasoline, diesel oil, tires, buses, and trailers.

**B**Y THE TIME HITCHCOCK'S BOOK APPEARED, Ike had placed fifth in a C-SPAN poll of 100 historians, behind only Washington, Lincoln, and both Roosevelts. With Eisenhower's historical reputation on the ascent, *The Age of Eisenhower* makes the most of its opportunity to draw readers into its narrative and keeps them there. Hitchcock considers Ike the most consequential figure to stride the world stage in the years between 1946 and 1961. It's hard to disagree.

He may well have been the only president other than George Washington and Gerald Ford to enter the nation's highest office without revealing any feelings of ambition for the job. Shut out of the presidency for 20 years, the GOP was desperate to find someone who could lead it to victory. Ike had one condition before he agreed to accept the GOP nomination: the party had to embrace U.S. membership in NATO. He was committed to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization from its outset, and had taken leave of his post as president of Columbia University to become its first commander.

When prominent Republican power brokers first broached the idea of Ike's candidacy Senate Leader Robert A. Taft seemed the runaway favorite for the 1952 presidential nomination. Taft had been the leader of the isolationist faction within the party prior to U.S. entry into World War II. He was especially popular in the Midwest and with the party's conservative grassroots voters. Taft, who had tried and failed to become the Republicans' nominee in 1940 and 1948, was opposed in principle to NATO, which he thought unnecessary and potentially "provocative," thereby increasing the prospects of a new world war. (One of Taft's most vociferous supporters was a recent Yale graduate and ex-isolationist who disagreed with his hero on just this one subject. In one of his final editorials as editor of the *Yale Daily News*, William F. Buckley, Jr., expressed the hope that Taft would "come around" on NATO.)

With Ike receiving a steady stream of visitors at his headquarters at NATO, hints about his political availability began to leak out. By late April 1952, Ike was back in the United



States, out of the army, and in the political saddle. In an instant, a man who had been on the government payroll since 1915, lived in Washington on and off for many years, and was on excellent terms with the pillars of the American establishment, presented himself as a political outsider.

Through a series of maneuvers and shenanigans orchestrated by his handlers—some in public, others in backrooms—Eisenhower defeated Taft at the 1952 Republican convention, 845 delegates to 280. After hammering away at three issues that had plagued the Truman Administration, “Korea, corruption, and Communism,” and pledging to “roll back” New Deal programs and Soviet postwar expansion, Eisenhower defeated Illinois Governor Adlai E. Stevenson 55.2% to 44.3% in the popular vote. In the Electoral College the tally was 442 to 89. (In his 1956 rematch with Stevenson, Ike won 57.4% to 42%, and 457 to 73.)

ONCE IN OFFICE, HE PROVED A RELUCTANT “roll backer” both at home and abroad. (And how Buckley, now running *National Review*, castigated him for it.) In his own defense, Ike wrote his brother Edgar: “Should any political party attempt to abolish Social Security, unemployment insurance, and eliminate labor laws and farm programs, you would never hear of that party again in our political history.” The most revered conservative of the era, Whittaker Chambers, advised Buckley that if he thought nuclear war necessary to liberate Hungary, he should propose it in his magazine and invite the American people to decide the matter.

On the matter of civil rights, Hitchcock presents Eisenhower as anything but the “reluctant warrior” previous writers thought him. Their criticism was that he justified whatever actions he took to extend and preserve African Americans’ rights on legal rather than moral terms, as would John F. Kennedy. But Kennedy took that direction only after having been in office for two years. “In area after area,” Hitchcock quotes Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., complaining 18 months into the New Frontier, the Kennedy crew “behaved exactly as the Eisenhower administration would have behaved.” To his credit, Hitchcock restores Attorney General Herbert Brownell to his rightful place as one of the most effective presidential advisers in history. Brownell did the heavy lifting when it came to drafting and enacting the 1957 Civil Rights Bill, and in the decision to send the 101st Airborne to Little Rock to enforce the court-ordered desegregation of public school that same year.

The Soviet Union’s launching of the first man-made satellite, Sputnik, in 1957 threw much of the country’s political leadership into

crisis mode. Ike, through a multi-pronged response, reassured the nation that the strength of the U.S. vis-à-vis the USSR had not changed. Two Intercontinental Ballistic Missile systems, the Atlas and the Titan, were developed and commissioned simultaneously. In addition, he ordered development of intermediate-range ballistic missiles designed for deployment in Europe to shore up NATO allies. He strengthened U.S. alliances by helping friendly nations augment their own capabilities, lowered trade barriers to enhance their wherewithal, and shared nuclear secrets.

WITH THESE FRONTS STABILIZED, Eisenhower made major long-term investments in parts of the civilian sector crucial to national defense: science, technology, education, and manufacturing. He named the first presidential science adviser and brought in a team that restructured science education throughout the country. He pressed hard for passage of the National Defense Education Act, which over four years invested \$4 billion to train scientists and provide fellowships for graduate study and instruction in esoteric foreign languages. He put in place the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), and fought to keep space research housed in this civilian agency, where it would not be affected by service rivalries in the Pentagon. He obtained passage of the Defense Reorganization Act, which brought more efficient management of the nation’s defenses.

Perhaps most significant, so much so that its very existence was kept a military secret, Eisenhower set up an agency to develop a spy plane. The agency would go on to do much in the area of computer science and electronics and is today credited with the development of the internet and microcomputers. Its official name was Advanced Research Projects Agency (later known as DARPA).

William Hitchcock’s masterly book should provide a decent burial to one of the worst predictions in U.S. history, which still finds its way into the history books. Informed of Eisenhower’s election, Truman remarked,

He’ll sit here, and he’ll say, “Do this! Do that!” And nothing will happen. Poor Ike—it won’t be a bit like the army. He’ll find it very frustrating.

Actually, quite a bit happened on Ike’s watch. And not by itself.

*Alvin S. Felzenberg teaches at the University of Pennsylvania’s Annenberg School for Communication, and is the author, most recently, of A Man and His Presidents: The Political Odyssey of William F. Buckley, Jr. (Yale University Press).*



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