

Professor Michael Birkner's remarks, shared at the Eisenhower Memorial during the commemorative concert held in honor of President and General Dwight D. Eisenhower's 131st birthday, October 14, 2021.

It is a pleasure to be here this evening with you to commemorate Dwight Eisenhower's 131st birthday and the first anniversary of the Eisenhower Memorial. When Eduard asked me to speak at this event, I quickly accepted his invitation, because it is an honor to be in this special place to join you in tribute to Dwight D. Eisenhower. But I was also quite humbled by the prospect of speaking on this occasion. Here was an opportunity to discuss a great American who was often underestimated by the political pundits, many members even of his own political party, and by scholars as well, until in the 1980s the tide began to shift. Ever since then, Eisenhower's steadiness of purpose and action both during the Second World War and subsequently, into two productive terms as president, has been increasingly recognized by the historians who know him best.

Dwight David Eisenhower touched millions of lives over a long, busy, and fruitful life. Best known to us for his role leading the crusade in Europe against Nazi tyranny, and for his successful presidency, Eisenhower was also an example of the American dream come to life. He demonstrated that while it helps to be born to wealth, that is not a prerequisite to success, if you have personality, brains, ambition, and, perhaps not least, people above you in rank who perceive your potential and help you realize it. I'm thinking here most particularly of Generals. First there was Fox Conner, who commanded American forces in the Philippines and mentored Eisenhower in the early 1920s, with a particular focus on classics in military history and strategy. Ike's second mentor was George Catlett Marshall, Army Chief of Staff as World War II loomed. Marshall promoted Eisenhower and partnered with him during the war years, to the great benefit of the Allied cause.

Although Eisenhower became a "big" man, and a popular national figure by 1942, he stayed grounded, which is to say, approachable and relatable. The wife of a leading British military officer based in Washington during World War II, Lady Nancy Dill, put it this way: Despite his growing responsibilities and fame, he "did not change, remaining just a simple, natural man." Whether in his uniform as a five-star general or with his coat and tie off, Ike put on no airs. Gettysburg College houses a collection of reminiscences of Eisenhower from World War II forward, which illustrated this point. They capture a down-to-earth leader who would casually offer a cigarette to a stranger in a London air-raid shelter as they waited out an attack, and a general who willingly carried a scrub bucket for an elderly cleaning lady at the Hotel Trianon in Versailles. Stories of this nature are common.

What is it we need to know about Dwight Eisenhower besides this reminder of his basic decency and good humor? I think we must commence with Ike's sense of duty. You cannot understand this man without recognizing that duty was central to his being and his outlook on life. From his time at West Point forward, duty, honor, and country was his lodestar. One wonders sometimes what Ike was thinking as he and Mamie moved from post to post across the globe in the 1920s and 1930s, toiling largely in anonymity and without much material

recompense, because duty called him. If he ever regretted his choice of vocation, or the winding roads that life took him as he did his duty, I am not aware of it.

Circumstances, of course, decreed that Dwight Eisenhower would play a major role on the biggest stage of the twentieth century: the war against Adolf Hitler's aggression. Here, Ike's years of preparation for responsibility, his self-confidence, his good judgment and his commitment to duty served him well. As many historians, including his grandson David Eisenhower, have shown, Eisenhower was in the best sense a political general, a man who knew how to manage difficult personalities and daunting challenges without compromising his convictions and his best judgment. He knew how to deal with the egos of politicians and military peers, as much as how to set a strategy or plan a given campaign. His ability to hold disparate, often high-strung personalities together, and bring out the best in them during the war years, was not simply a valuable skill. It was essential, as even Viscount Bernard Montgomery would later concede.

After the war ended triumphantly for the Allied cause, Eisenhower's devotion to duty led him first to accept appointment as Army Chief of Staff, one of the most demanding responsibilities he ever undertook in the service of his country. By that I mean he was charged with overseeing the demobilization of the great American army of World War II. He accomplished this objective, while laying the groundwork for a modernized army. Having provided a foundation for American Cold War era military preparedness, Ike then took time to write a factually based, engrossing and best-selling memoir of his World War II experiences, *Crusade in Europe*. Subsequently Eisenhower served as a valuable counsellor to the defense establishment during the tense early years of the Cold War.

Duty led Ike back to Europe in 1951 as creator and head of SHAPE, at a time when the western military alliance was floundering. He helped effect positive change there before overcoming his distaste for partisan politics and deciding to run for the presidency in 1952. Here, too, Eisenhower's sense of duty impacted his decision making.

Eisenhower had long nursed strong opinions about the direction the country was taking under the leadership of Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman. Well before he made the decision to run for president, he felt that the country needed a change in direction on the domestic front—or at the very least, a pause in what seemed to him a headlong movement towards paternalism and loss of entrepreneurial spirit in the U.S. Equally needed was assurance to our European Allies that the United States would support them and stick by them—an assurance the then leading candidate on the Republican side in 1952, Senator Robert A. Taft, was not willing to offer.

Eisenhower did not “need” the presidency as a capstone achievement. The man who orchestrated D-Day had already reached the mountaintop. But once persuaded that the American people looked favorably on his giving up his military work for a different challenge, he responded.

It has sometimes been said of Ike that he was a great general but a poor politician. Yet as one examines the Eisenhower presidency in terms of politics and partisanship, one notices that for an allegedly inept politician, he had a remarkable record of accomplishment. Two decisive election victories, in 1952 and 1956; the first significant civil rights act passed in modern times, in 1957; a record of fiscal prudence and balancing budgets that has never been rivaled; pressing for and passing legislation for a magnificent interstate highway system; launching of our space program; major support for education, especially so science and technology; strong appointments to the federal bench and the Supreme Court. Construction of the St. Lawrence Seaway. The list could go on much longer.

Given that for six of the eight years he served as president the Republican Party was in the minority in Congress, the record of achievement is all the more outstanding. It is a reminder that as president Eisenhower was not just a benign monarchical figure who left the hard work to others while he was golfing at Burning Tree and his other favorite courses. Judge Ike by what was accomplished during his time in office. He was an effective political leader, and a popular one, too, which naturally gave him more leverage in dealings with Congress.

As President, Eisenhower was champion of the Middle Way. He staked his position in what he called the sensible center. He shared the concern of conservatives in his party about the drift to what they called the “statism” of the New Deal and Fair Deal. But Ike also recognized that parties and policies need to change with changing circumstances. He agreed that programs like Social Security, unemployment Insurance, farm subsidies and government support for small business were a part of the American system that citizens wanted to continue and enhance. And he did exactly that, at the same time always keeping his eye out for what would not break the budget. If government programs worked, Eisenhower was not about to end them. If they sapped individual initiative and self-reliance, he would take a different course.

Let me provide you with one example of many about the way Eisenhower navigated the rapids of ideological politics. At one of his Cabinet meetings, the very conservative Secretary of the Treasury, George Humphrey, began inveighing against foreign aid and particularly against a program of assistance to India. It was a matter of pouring good American money down India’s socialist rathole, Humphrey insisted. When Humphrey paused, Eisenhower, with an air of polite inquiry, said, “That’s very interesting, George, but tell me, if you were in charge, how would you raise the standard of living in India?” Taking the bait, Humphrey began talking about building infrastructure, financing rural development, and expanding technical education. When he paused again, Ike asked, “do you see much difference, George, between what you are advocating and what we are trying to do?” That was Ike’s *modus operandi*. He was grounded in the belief that government should never be the first resort to get things done. But he was never dogmatic about what government could and could not do. This approach characterized his words and deeds as president, and it served him well. Because in truth, Eisenhower’s views on domestic issues were very much in sync with those of a majority of voters.

Eisenhower had other rapids to navigate, notably the Cold War and his concern to avoid another hot war. Let me be clear here. Eisenhower was not interested in simply maintaining

the status quo in the Cold War. He wanted to win it, though he did not have any specific date in mind for this end game. It was, however, Ike's firm conviction that if the United States could maintain its economic strength and follow the strategic design that he had put in place in 1953, the Soviet Union would eventually crack-up and its destructive ideology would have lost its allure. Why did he believe this? Because Eisenhower was certain the Soviet Union's leaders could not provide guns and butter to the people, while the U.S. could in fact have it both ways if we found a good balance between a strong economy, prudently managed, and our obligations to assure national and international security.

In the short run Ike would reach out to seek areas of agreement with the Soviet leadership. "Atoms for Peace" and "Open Skies" were among those initiatives. And there was the invitation to Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev in the middle of the Berlin crisis to visit the United States, resulting in an event filled two-week American excursion by Khrushchev in 1959, capped by a meeting in Gettysburg that opened the door to a real thaw in relations between the two superpowers. The May 1960 shutdown of the U-2 Spy plane ended that thaw for a time, but it did not disrupt the peace that Ike had worked so hard to maintain during his years in office. Reviewing his presidency the year after Eisenhower left office, a *Wall Street Journal* editorial writer encapsulated the virtues of Eisenhower's leadership. "He had the strength to distinguish between what was peripheral to the presidency and what was central; he was always prepared to lose votes in Massachusetts if he could hold fast to Berlin. He did not mistake the political credits of the moment for the voice of history."

Eisenhower did not make all the right calls, whether in domestic or foreign affairs. He was an effective leader, to be sure, but he was not infallible. Some of his moves regarding communism in the third world worked out better than others, some were highly debatable at the time, and even the successes in some ways had long term down sides. But when scholars today review the leadership he provided in his two terms as president, they are respectful and often admiring of his patience and good judgment. The Eisenhower record of peace, prosperity, and social progress over eight years speaks eloquently to that point.

I want briefly to emphasize two more themes that seem to me are critical to understanding Dwight Eisenhower as worthy of the splendid memorial in which we're now situated. The themes are patriotism and hopefulness.

Eisenhower lived and died a patriot. Service to his country was one of the things, throughout his life, that mattered greatly to him. It was not a patriotism of complacency, not a chest beating patriotism, not a patriotism that discouraged people seeking new opportunities in America that were unavailable to them in their native countries. It was not a patriotism that denigrated robust debate and dissent. "A democracy disdainful of new ideas," Ike wrote in 1953, "would be a sick democracy. A democracy fearful of new ideas would be a dying democracy." He told an audience at Dartmouth College in 1953, "if we are going to defeat Communism in the long run, we need to know about it. So, don't burn books about Marxism and Communism. Read them." There's no doubt in my mind that Eisenhower would not support the idea that you should cancel, erase, or prevent students from encountering and

talking about ideas that make them uncomfortable. This was a president unafraid of unorthodox thinking, and unafraid of questioning conventional wisdom.

Let the best ideas prevail, Eisenhower would say. Follow the evidence in making decisions. That seems pertinent to the present day.

In the summer of 1960, the autumn of his presidency, Eisenhower traveled to Huntsville, Alabama, to dedicate the George Marshall Space Flight Center. He told his audience there to put what the United States was doing in proper perspective. “All that we have already accomplished,” he said, “and all in the future we shall achieve, is the outgrowth not of a soulless, barren technology, nor of a grasping state imperialism. Rather, it is the product of unrestrained human talent and energy restlessly probing for the betterment of humanity.”

To my mind, it is *that* Dwight Eisenhower who resonates most in 2021, and on the occasion of his 131st birthday anniversary. It is the patriot, committed to doing his duty, even when it might be unpleasant, demanding, or controversial. It is the public servant who believes that results matter more than nostrums and stringent ideologies. It is the strongly anti-Communist president who encourages Americans to engage in vigorous but respectful debate and to engage with Communist ideas, the better to understand and respond to them. It is the man who, born in the horse and buggy age, not only hailed the advent of atoms for peace and rockets in space, but looked to America as the home of a revolution that, as he put it in a 1956 speech, “still goes on.”

Thank you.