Grand Valley State University
ScholarWorks@GVSU

Features | Hauenstein Center for Presidential Studies

8-20-2007

Cold War Conservative?

H. W. Brands

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/features

Recommended Citation
Brands, H. W., "Cold War Conservative?" (2007). *Features.* Paper 22.
http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/features/22

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Hauenstein Center for Presidential Studies at ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Features by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.

Cold War Conservative?

Dwight D. Eisenhower in the Oval Office

By H. W. Brands

Dwight Eisenhower was elected president in 1952, making him the first Republican president of the Cold War. This is absolutely crucial in understanding the way Eisenhower handled himself and the country during his presidency. Eisenhower was one of those very rare cases of a president who was elected primarily for reasons of foreign policy -- it's almost impossible to find another president who is chosen principally for his positions in foreign policy.

Eisenhower & Nixon were nominated for a second term on August 22, 1956.

With Eisenhower, the moment was critical. The United States was still fighting the Korean War. Everybody knew where he stood on the important issues of foreign affairs. People didn't really know where he stood on issues of domestic affairs, primarily because he didn't have any record and nobody really pressed him very hard on it. He came into office and the first things that he did was to disappoint those many Republicans who had thought that the New Deal was a long, bad dream and that they would wake up from the creation of the welfare state in the United States and they would go back to the way things were in the days before Herbert Hoover.

When Eisenhower enters office, the first thing that he does is to make clear that he's not going to repeal the New Deal. Why not? Well, in the first place, Eisenhower was not the kind of conservative who had been criticizing the New Deal for the previous 20 years. Think about it for a minute. Before Eisenhower became president what did Eisenhower spend his life doing? He was a government employee for heaven's sake. He's not going to dismantle the government. He had been making his living off the government since the time he entered West Point. Most soldiers don't really consider themselves government employees, but he recognized there *is* a positive role for government in the modern world. Whether this was true in the 18th century is a different question, but Eisenhower recognized that there is an important role for government in the 20th century. He recognized it certainly with respect to foreign affairs because, after all, it was the federal government of the United States that fought World War II for the United States and had done a pretty darn good job of it if Eisenhower said so himself.

Unlike a lot of old-line conservatives who contended that essentially anything that government put its hands to turned out badly, Eisenhower did not have that predisposition. He was willing to look at what government programs accomplished, and if they accomplished something worthwhile, he was willing to support them.

Instead of repealing Social Security as Republicans had been proposing for years, he expanded the coverage by about ten million people. He believed that Americans, for the seventeen years since Social Security, had come to build their economic expectations on a government check after they retired. It would be wrong-headed, it would be unfair, and it would be politically stupid to try to pull that rug out from under people. Social Security was something they had come to expect, it certainly seemed legitimate to Eisenhower, and it was something he would support.

There were other instances in which Eisenhower adopted what you might consider to be an unusual test for whether programs ought to be supported or not. It had to do with the connection of the programs in question to American national defense. This might seem unusual in the context of the long scheme of American history because what in the world did domestic programs have to do with American defense before World War II? Very little. But when Eisenhower came along, the overriding issue was the defense of the United States against Communism, against Soviet aggression, against potential nuclear attack. This was the cloud that hung over the United States in those days. Eisenhower constantly asked himself when almost any issue came up "is this going to contribute to American defense, to American national security or not?"

He answered in the affirmative on a lot of programs that seem only marginally related to national defense. For example, the largest public works project in American history was initiated during Eisenhower's presidency: the interstate highway system. The interstate highway system, you might think, has relatively little to do with national defense, but to Eisenhower it was very closely connected in two ways. First, for the military to move equipment from one coast to another, from one part of the country to another, it was necessary to have modern highways. The United States highway system in the 1930s and 1940s was remarkably primitive; it was almost entirely the responsibility of states and the counties. Certain states spent a fair amount of money on highways and so you would be traveling on good highways until you got to the state line with the next state, which hadn't been spending so much, and all of the sudden the highway would deteriorate and you would be driving through potholes and on dirt roads. Eisenhower recognized that for the purposes of American defense, to get troops and equipment from one coast to the other, the United States had to have a modern highway system.

Second, and more important, the real critical issue for Eisenhower was the role of the interstate highways in allowing the evacuation of cities. The major threat to the United States during the 1950s, from a military standpoint, was a Soviet surprise nuclear attack. The only way to defend against such an attack -- there was no technical defense, there was nothing that could shoot down the incoming missiles -- was to clear out the cities. Presumably the Soviet missiles would be aimed at the cities and if you could evacuate the cities then you stood a chance of saving tens of millions of people. A major point of the interstate highway system was to allow people to get out of cities without having to stop at a stoplight every block. So Eisenhower, under the reasoning of national security during the Cold War, launched the interstate highway system -- the largest and most expensive ongoing project in American history.

In other areas, as well, Eisenhower was drawn into supporting programs that he wouldn't have supported if not for the Cold War. Until Eisenhower became president, for example, spending on education was almost entirely a matter for states and local school districts to deal with. In the autumn of 1957, however, the Soviet Union successfully launched the first artificial satellite around the earth -- Sputnik. As Eisenhower recognized, the assumption that the United States was ahead of the Communist powers in science and technology was under threat. He insisted, and Congress went right along, that the United States begin to spend more money training students in science and engineering. He recognized that the Cold War was going to be a race for science and technology as much as it was a race for arms.

In the last area I'll mention, Eisenhower endorsed a position on an issue that he wouldn't have supported if not for the Cold War, one that seems far removed from the Cold War. In 1954, the US Supreme Court decided in the case *Brown vs. Board of Education* of Topeka, Kansas, that segregated schools were no longer Constitutional. They had been Constitutional since the 1890s but the Supreme Court decided, "sorry, the old notion of 'separate but equal' doesn't pass muster anymore."

Eisenhower didn't agree with the decision. He didn't agree that the federal government ought to impose its views on the states; he thought that the states should settle this issue themselves. He thought, in any event, that if the society as a whole couldn't figure out how to integrate the races, it shouldn't impose the burden of that on school children. But the Supreme Court had spoken. Eisenhower essentially sat on his hands for the next three years hoping the situation would resolve itself. It didn't.

In the autumn of 1957, as students were lining up to go into classes in Arkansas, there were violent protests against the integration of Central High School in Little Rock. The Governor of Arkansas, Orval Faubus, encouraged resistors and essentially dared the president of the United States to do anything about it. Eisenhower believed that this was an intolerable affront to federal authority, but not so much because it insulted Eisenhower personally or even the president institutionally. What he really worried about was the message that it was sending to other countries.

By the late 1950s, the Cold War had changed somewhat in its emphasis and outlook. In the late 1950s, the European colonial empires were being dismantled and there were new countries being created in Africa and Asia -- countries inhabited by people who didn't have white skin. These

people looked at the Jim Crow system of segregation in the United States and said to themselves, "How in the world can you expect us to support the United States when you don't recognize the equality of people who look like us?" Eisenhower was getting all sorts of pressure from his ambassador to the United Nations, Henry Cabot Lodge, for example, who said, "I have an impossible task here. I'm saying the United States is on the side of freedom and equality and democracy and the folks who come to the United Nations can't get a hotel in Washington, DC, for heaven's sakes."

Eisenhower disagreed with the idea of heavy-handed federal pressure on the states and he was a firm believer in state's rights up to a point. But when the furor blew up in Little Rock, Eisenhower felt obliged to take action. When he ordered the troops in he said,

> *At a time when we face grave situations abroad because of the hatred that Communism bears toward a system of government based on human rights, it would be difficult to exaggerate the harm that is being done to the prestige and influence, and indeed to the safety, of our nation and the world.*
>
> *Our enemies are gloating over this incident and using it everywhere to misrepresent our whole nation. We are portrayed as a violator of those standards of conduct which the peoples of the world united to proclaim in the Charter of the United Nations.....*
>
> *And so, with deep confidence, I call upon the citizens of the State of Arkansas to assist in bringing to an immediate end all interference with the law and its processes. If resistance to the Federal Court orders ceases at once, the further presence of Federal troops will be unnecessary and the City of Little Rock will return to its normal habits of peace and order and a blot upon the fair name and high honor of our nation in the world will be removed.*