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Dwight D. Eisenhower
The Last General in the White House

By H. W. Brands

H. W. Brands spoke at the Hauenstein Center's "A Day with Eisenhower." Following is his account of the General's decision to run for president.

The great thing about nominating a general for president is that he has no political record -- there are no awkward votes to explain away or defend. This was exactly the position that Andrew Jackson found himself in, and it was the same situation for Ulysses Grant after the Civil War. It's not simply that Americans love victorious generals, it's that they're very easy to elect. They're famous, they have name recognition, they have lots of friends, and they can't have many enemies without the enemies appearing at least vaguely unpatriotic. So there have been a dozen American soldiers who have been elected president. There have been, I think, six or seven career generals who became president and Eisenhower was the last of them.

Now, you have to recognize that anybody who rises to the top of the military -- to the top of any profession -- has to be talented, but also quite ambitious. And there's no higher position to achieve in the United States than president. What is it traditionally that mothers tell their sons? 'You could grow up to be president.' And so when somebody says, 'You could be president,' it's a hard thing to turn down. But Eisenhower did manage to turn it down until they cast in the terms 'it's your duty.'

Left to right: Donald Markle, H. W. Brands, Ralph Hauenstein, and Louise Whitney after Brands's talk.

Now, how did he know it was his duty? He knew it was his duty because those people who were paying attention to Republican politics realized that the alternative to Eisenhower in 1952 was almost certainly Robert A. Taft. Robert Taft was the son of President William Howard Taft. He was the leader of the Republican isolationists. Robert Taft was, I've often called him, the last true conservative in this country, the last one who believed in small government at home and small government abroad. He believed that large government at home contributed to large government abroad and vice-versa. He had been opposed to the New Deal in the 1930s and he was opposed to NATO and American commitments overseas in the 1940s because he thought that the creation of a large military establishment, necessary to support these overseas commitments, would simply contribute to the establishment of a large government at home -- what he called a garrison state. He opposed NATO, the North Atlantic Trade Alliance, he opposed the sending of American troops to Europe, and he was probably going to win the nomination in 1952 if Dwight Eisenhower didn't step in.

And so, the people who wanted to see Eisenhower president went to Europe, where Eisenhower was stationed, and told him, "If you don't enter the race, Taft is going to get the nomination." And, if Taft gets the nomination, well he's almost certainly going to win because by this time -- and this is something that's worth remembering -- both political parties seemed to have adopted Harry Truman. They thought Harry Truman was a great guy. Truman was, in fact, one of Ronald Reagan's favorite predecessors.
But in 1952 Harry Truman wasn't anybody's favorite anything. He wasn't barred by the Constitution from running for re-election in 1952, but he didn't even try to get the nomination. He knew he probably couldn't have gotten the nomination of his own party -- an incumbent president. He was that unpopular. So it was really clear that whoever the Republicans put up would waltz to victory, and Eisenhower realized it came down to himself or Robert Taft.

Eisenhower had a meeting with Taft. Before he went into the meeting he told himself and some of his associates that if Taft was committed to keeping American troops in Europe, and maintaining American responsibility for the defense of Europe, he would not run; the nomination was Taft's. But in the meeting Taft wouldn't give him that commitment. Taft remained committed to the idea that the United States ought to pull back from Europe.

In the early days of the Cold War, Eisenhower, and most people who believed in the conventional wisdom regarding the world, looked at the Cold War as an implicit continuation of World War II. Both wars had the United States opposed to totalitarianism. During the World War totalitarianism had taken the form of Nazism and of Japanese militarism. It was Fascism during the war and Communism after the war, but they were two sides of the same coin. That's the way Eisenhower and most of his generation viewed things. Eisenhower feared that if Taft were elected president, all the good work that had been done during and following World War II would unravel. At that point he believed that his duty required him to throw his hat -- his general's cap -- in the ring.

Now, those folks who knew Eisenhower's thinking on the subject recognized that if they cast it to him in this way, 'that it's your duty,' then he wouldn't be able to say no. They staged a rally at Madison Square Garden -- a rally in favor of Eisenhower -- and they made a film of this. They flew the film across the Atlantic to Paris where Eisenhower was the head of NATO and they showed it to him. Eisenhower wrote in his diary after he saw this, "I've not been so upset in years. It was a real emotional experience. Clearly to be seen as the mass-longing of America for some kind of reasonable solution for the nagging, persistent, almost terrifying problems. It's a real experience that one could become a symbol for many thousands of the hope they have."

He went on, "I can't help it. The performance at the Garden is not only something to make an American genuinely proud, it is something to increase his humility, his sense of his own unworthiness to fulfill the spoken and unspoken desires and aspirations of so many thousands of humans." And with that, Eisenhower announced he would run.