Why George Bush Should Like Ike

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It is a widely accepted political certitude these days that George W. Bush’s presidency will be rated very low by historians and political scholars. The conventional wisdom holds that his unpopularity among voters and the controversial Iraq war will rank him among the worst of former presidents.

And conventional wisdom may be right. America’s 43rd president may, indeed, end up near the bottom of the presidential performance barrel, where he will keep company with the likes of Warren Harding, Ulysses S. Grant, Richard Nixon, James Buchanan, and Franklin Pierce. But the experience of one of Bush’s recent presidential predecessors suggests caution in assuming Bush’s ultimate fate.

The presidential exemplar and Bush predecessor was Dwight Eisenhower (1953-1961), popularly known as "Ike." Eisenhower’s experience shows that unfavorable contemporary assessments of presidential performance may not accurately forecast history’s final verdict.

In fact, Eisenhower in office, like Bush now, was not highly regarded by either the press or scholars. Yet in time, he has come to be ranked in the top ten among 42 past presidents.

His early post presidential ratings were not auspicious. In 1962, the year after he left office, he was ranked modestly in the Arthur Schlesinger Poll as just an average president--below even Herbert Hoover, Benjamin Harrison, and Chester Arthur, and only one spot above the impeached Andrew Johnson. But the 34th President’s stock among scholars rose rapidly thereafter. By 1982, his standing stood at 11 in a survey done by historian Robert Murray--between Lyndon Johnson and James K. Polk. Since then, his standing has fluctuated slightly, reaching as high as eight in 1994.

One reason for Ike’s initially low rating was the perception that he was an uninvolved president. The belief was widespread that he delegated day-to-day decisions to his top aides--and wiled away his days playing golf, hosting social events, and going on hunting shoots. His public appearances often reinforced this image. On numerous occasions, his press conferences and speeches were not models of clarity, leaving the impression he was in over his head or, maybe worse, in the pocket of his advisors.

Politically, Eisenhower was viewed as aloof and avuncular. And in truth, he didn’t like politics much nor politicians. He once remarked acidly that the only thing successful politicians had in common was that they married above themselves. And his distaste for Nixon, perhaps the quintessential politician of the age, was notorious.

But Ike’s reputation began to change when his own diary accounts of the White House years appeared in the 1970s, about the same time previously sealed presidential materials became available. Soon, biographies and other research using the newer material were published. These, particularly those written by Arthur Larsen, Fred Greenstein, Stephen Ambrose, Geoffrey Perrot, Michael Birkner, and Michael Korda, launched a reappraisal of Eisenhower’s presidency.
The richest fruit of the new Eisenhower scholarship has brought about a rethinking of Ike’s political leadership—an element of his presidency heretofore considered suspect. Like his predecessors, Eisenhower confronted the presidency’s two contradictory roles: one as head of state and the other as head of government. As head of state, the president acts in a ceremonial role to unify and symbolize the nation. But as head of government, he acts as a political decision maker who provides policy leadership that is often divisive in nature.

Eisenhower carried out the head of state role with natural aplomb, but it was the second role as head of government that appeared troublesome for him. There, Eisenhower struck many as an avuncular figure, detached from day-to-day affairs and not quite up to the job. It was Eisenhower’s performance as head of government that contributed to his early low ratings by historians.

Ironically, as Eisenhower revisionists, such as presidential scholar Fred Greenstein, have argued, Ike purposely produced his own bad press. He deliberately left the nation with the impression that he was removed from day-to-day policy making and especially politics. Ike believed that he should play prominently the role as head of state, but conceal his role as head of government.

Greenstein has branded this the "hidden hand" presidency. Scholars now know that the "hidden hand" of Ike was far more instrumental in policy formulation and political decisions than thought by his contemporaries.

A related reappraisal dwells on Eisenhower’s decision making, another area for which he had been criticized. Ike’s style was to establish general guidelines for policy rather than policy itself. During his presidency, many sneered at this "big picture" approach and concluded that Eisenhower was weak and ineffectual as a decision maker.

But more recent historians now argue that far from ineffectual, Eisenhower’s exhibited consummate decision making skills throughout his Presidency included characteristically keeping all his options open and typically acting resolutely once he had reached a decision.

Ike’s own diaries and his two volume account of his presidency have inspired much of this reevaluation. Scholars aware of the day-to-day detail of the administration see Eisenhower with more clarity. Robert Ferrell, for instance, the editor of Eisenhower’s Diaries, has concluded that Ike was a skillful politician who liked power and was comfortable using it. According to Ferrell, by the end of his presidency, Ike had proved himself a "marvelous politician," better than the professional politicians to which he was sometimes invidiously compared.

The Eisenhower reappraisal has not erased all doubts about his presidency nor earned the approbation of all historians. He continues to be criticized for failure to condemn Senator Joseph McCarthy directly, as well as for his unwillingness to use his moral authority as president to advance civil rights. Moreover, while Eisenhower did avoid a major hot war, he did not lessen the intensity of the Cold War, nor did he achieve the peace with the Soviets he strongly desired or the nuclear test ban treaty he sought. In addition, the revealed covert activities of the CIA in Iran and Guatemala have not been helpful to Ike’s reputation.
Still, Ike has come a long way in the esteem of historians since he left office some fifty years and nine presidencies ago. Far from perfect, he nevertheless may be the perfect example of a presidency that could not be understood in its own time.

For Bush, Eisenhower leaves a lesson and a question. The lesson is that presidential legacies take time to work out. The question is whether the Bush administration, like Ike’s, will take time to appreciate or whether it is simply one that has run out of time.

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