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EISENHOWER: FROM ABILENE TO THE ELBE

Douglas Kinnard

D'Este, Carlo. *Eisenhower: A Soldier's Life*. New York: Henry Holt, 2002. 848pp. \$35

Dwight D. Eisenhower, affectionately known as Ike, was in the center of major world events for two decades in the mid-twentieth century. As a soldier in World War II, he commanded the Allied armies that defeated the Axis powers in the Mediterranean and Europe, and in the following decade he served two terms as a very popular president. With this long and interesting volume that ends on VE Day, 8 May 1945, Carlo D'Este, a military historian, joins a distinguished list of Eisenhower biographers that includes Stephen Ambrose, Peter Lyon, grandson David Eisenhower, and, most recently, Geoffrey Perret.

"I come from the very heart of America," Eisenhower said in his famous Guildhall address in London 12 June 1945, celebrating the Allied victory over Germany. The heart of America was Abilene, Kansas, where he grew up and from which he left for West Point on a June day in 1911. D'Este covers in detail Eisenhower's early years in Abilene as one of six brothers brought up by parents David and Ida in an atmosphere of religion, discipline, and love. Though poor and from "the wrong side of the tracks," the Eisenhowers lived comfortably. An average student and considered something of a roughneck, Dwight Eisenhower enjoyed sports, camping, and hunting.

Accepting Stephen Ambrose's misperception of Ike's father David as unsuccessful, D'Este goes one step farther: late in the book he calls David "an abject failure," implying that Ike's extraordinary creativity and ingenuity appeared *ex nihilo*. In fact, David Eisenhower's work as a dairy mechanic required creativity

and ingenuity, and he, as well as Ida, considerably influenced each of their sons' development.

Far from a paradigm in dress gray, Cadet Eisenhower ended up with a disciplinary ranking of 125th out of 164 members of his class. In academics he did better, although by his own admission he was a "lazy student." What really motivated Ike was athletics, and in this, as well as in other areas, he displayed a real talent at stimulating cooperation among others. D'Este develops all these characteristics of young Eisenhower

Douglas Kinnard, a West Point graduate, served in combat in World War II, Korea, and twice in Vietnam, the second time as a brigadier general. Retiring in 1970 to pursue an academic career, he received his Ph.D. from Princeton University, then joined the political science faculty at the University of Vermont. Since becoming emeritus he has taught at a number of universities, including the Naval War College. The author of numerous books, his most recent is Eisenhower: Soldier-Statesman of the American Century, published 2002 by Brassey's.

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and expands on them, introducing a theme important in understanding the future General of the Army: “For all his gregariousness, Eisenhower was a solitary man. When not showing off the side of his personality he wanted the world to see, Eisenhower found solace by himself, often on the steep banks overlooking the Hudson River.” Ike graduated with the West Point class of 1915, which would one day become the most famous in the school’s history, producing fifty-nine generals—“the class the stars fell on.”

That autumn the Great War, which had started in 1914, was hopelessly deadlocked on the western front. The United States was very much at peace, though, when Second Lieutenant Dwight D. Eisenhower took up his duties at Fort Sam Houston, Texas. On his first tour as officer of the guard he was introduced to eighteen-year-old Mamie Doud, who was wintering there from Denver with her parents. Intrigued, Ike began a pursuit that culminated in their marriage the following summer. Beginning here, and continuing throughout the book, D’Este’s treatment of Mamie is very detailed and effective in providing a greater understanding of Dwight Eisenhower the man and the soldier.

When the United States entered the war in the spring of 1917, Ike, like all career officers, hoped to get into combat, but that was not to be. Eventually, he commanded a tank training center near Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, and although he did well, he was depressed, feeling that he had missed the greatest war in history. D’Este covers the period in a straightforward way, concluding, “For all his success as a trainer and troop commander, Eisenhower’s future remained clouded as the United States approached the decade of the Roaring Twenties, during which its armed forces all but vanished.” It was this time, however, that brought Ike into contact with three generals—Fox Conner, Douglas MacArthur, and George Marshall—who were to influence his future profoundly.

Assigned in 1919 to Camp Meade, Maryland, then home of the Tank Corps, Eisenhower met George Patton. (D’Este published the definitive biography on Patton in 1995 and never lets us forget him throughout this book.) Patton, in turn, introduced him to Brigadier General Fox Conner, a military intellectual and formerly General John J. Pershing’s chief of plans and operations in the American Expeditionary Force. Conner was impressed with Eisenhower and a couple of years later arranged for his assignment to Panama, where Conner commanded a brigade. He became a father figure and mentor to Ike, insisting that he commit himself to a study of military history, which they would then discuss in detail. In a chapter on this period, titled “The Man Who Made Eisenhower,” D’Este really makes Ike come alive—warts and all. Conner’s influence did not end with Ike’s return to the United States; rather, he arranged for his protégé to attend the Command and General Staff School at Fort Leavenworth.

It was there that Eisenhower first stood out from his contemporaries. The indifferent student of West Point days graduated first in his class at the Army's most competitive school.

In the fall of 1929 Eisenhower was assigned to the War Department, where he initially worked on problems of mobilization and procurement should the United States become involved in another war. About a year after Ike's arrival Douglas MacArthur became Army chief of staff. Soon coming into contact with Major Eisenhower, he was impressed enough to have Eisenhower assigned to his office as a personal assistant. This relationship was complex and at times turbulent. It continued throughout the 1930s, both in Washington, D.C., and, from late 1935, in the Philippines, where the now retired MacArthur was military adviser to the first Philippine president, Manuel Quezon. D'Este analyzes well the complexities of the relationship of these two strong-willed men, a relationship that had a major impact on Ike's future career. The author summarizes, "Despite their diverse personalities, Eisenhower was capable of separating MacArthur's virtues from his shortcomings and making the most of them . . . and was smart enough to realize how much he had to learn from MacArthur."

When World War II broke out in Europe in September 1939, Lieutenant Colonel Eisenhower could not wait to be assigned to troop duty. Despite pleas from MacArthur and Quezon to remain, he headed for Fort Lewis, Washington, in late 1939. With the Army just commencing a great expansion, Eisenhower experienced several different assignments with troop units for the next year and a half, as well as a promotion to full colonel. By the summer of 1941 he was chief of staff to Lieutenant General Walter Kreuger, who commanded the Third Army, which was about to begin the famous Louisiana Maneuvers. No maneuver has ever been covered by more correspondents, and Ike was a great hit with the press—far out of proportion to his role. As D'Este sums it up: "Staff officers do not provide leadership, nor do they command. . . . However improbable the reasons, Eisenhower's performance was recognized by those who counted." The reporters liked this approachable colonel who could explain in clear terms what was happening. Chief of Staff George Marshall made a point of meeting Ike when the maneuver ended. Two days later Eisenhower was promoted to brigadier general, and five days after Pearl Harbor he was transferred to Marshall's office in the War Department.

In the second half of this long volume the author covers Eisenhower's spectacular rise from Marshall's plans officer to commander of American forces in Britain, and in that same year of 1942 to the command of Allied forces in the Mediterranean. Subsequently, his selection as supreme commander of the Allied invasion of Northern Europe (Operation OVERLORD) projected Eisenhower onto the world scene. In this section D'Este's coverage of the man who was to

lead the greatest invasion in the annals of military history is absorbing and at times provocative, as well as refreshingly demythologizing.

Though the American navy had won a historic battle against Japan at Midway in June 1942, the Allied invasion of North Africa in November (Operation TORCH) was the first American combat against German forces. It was a time of learning both for the forces and the Allied commander, whose problems embraced the political, strategic, logistical, and operational dimensions of warfare.

At the political level Eisenhower's problem was to balance the requirements of the alliance with British, French, and American self-interest. As D'Este puts it: "The reality was that, like it or not, Eisenhower was both a military commander and a politician in the swamp of intrigue in North Africa." At the strategic level the major failure was in not securing Tunisia until May 1943. For this D'Este correctly places the blame not on Eisenhower but on the higher leadership of the American military: "Responsibility for not securing Tunisia in 1942 rested not with Eisenhower but with Marshall and Ernie King, whose insistence on invading Casablanca traded the strategic advantage of landings in eastern Algeria for the security of Gibraltar."

At the operational level, the battle of Kasserine Pass in February 1943 is usually cited as the nadir of the American forces' performance in North Africa. As World War II combat went, the battle was minor, but it was a baptism of fire against the Germans for American forces and Eisenhower. The author's judgment of Ike at Kasserine ("his performance was miserable") is perhaps warranted, particularly in Ike's toleration of his ground commander, Major General Lloyd Fredendall, who had been foisted on him by Marshall.

The war in North Africa ended on 13 May after Eisenhower's forces linked up with Field Marshal Bernard Law Montgomery's British Eighth Army, resulting in the surrender of over a quarter of a million German troops. Eisenhower faced many frustrations during TORCH, such as having to make political decisions on matters beyond his control, confronting logistical problems on a major scale, and above all, dealing with the inexperience of American troops. This was not the end of the problems he would face in the Mediterranean; in fact, just ahead lay Operation HUSKY, the invasion of Sicily. Space does not permit commentary on that operation, but readers will find D'Este's three chapters on HUSKY and the early Italian campaign that followed to be both graphic and perceptive in their assessments of both British and American commanders. D'Este's judgment of Eisenhower's performance is unsparing.

During the Mediterranean campaigns Eisenhower was on a learning curve, but in this reviewer's opinion he performed as well as anyone could have, given the circumstances. In any case, for Ike, a consummate if reluctant staff man throughout his earlier career, Mediterranean operations were a professional

Rubicon. On 7 December President Franklin D. Roosevelt, en route home from the Teheran Conference, met Eisenhower in Tunis. Sitting down next to him in a sedan, the president said, "Well, Ike, you are going to command OVERLORD." This appointment as supreme Allied commander of the 1944 invasion of Europe was to make Eisenhower one of the most famous Americans of the twentieth century.

The final third of the book is concerned with Ike's service as supreme commander. To stay within the confines of a review, I will restrict my comments to certain problems of coalition warfare that D'Este stresses. During the period of preparation for D day Churchill attempted unsuccessfully to thwart the ten-division Allied landing in southern France (ANVIL) scheduled for 15 August. His goal was to divert the forces to the Italian front for eventual employment in a thrust toward Vienna. D'Este develops this matter in detail and *inter alia* makes two significant points—that the issue was really a clash of wills between Roosevelt and Churchill, with Eisenhower caught in the middle; and that Eisenhower, who in the end prevailed, had his own agenda—to ensure that OVERLORD did not lose emphasis to operations in Italy, a secondary theater.

The two chapters leading up to D day and on the day itself are superb. The invasion was surely the most complex and masterful military operation ever conducted. D'Este creates a sense of the great pressure Ike felt in making the final decision to invade on 6 June after a one-day delay because of a gale in the English Channel. Pondering, he finally turned to his Allied commanders and said, "OK, we'll go." Ike's great crusade had begun.

In his discussion of the great race across France in August 1944, followed by the fall campaigns leading up to the Battle of the Bulge, D'Este is discerning in analyzing British-American divergences. These were no longer muted, as they had been over ANVIL, and now the British point man was Field Marshall Montgomery rather than Churchill. The principal strategic issue was the broad-front strategy desired by Eisenhower versus the narrow-front thrust across northern Germany favored by Montgomery. A collateral issue woven in by the author was that of personality problems between Eisenhower and Montgomery, and between Montgomery and General Omar Bradley, commander of the Twelfth Army Group. The picture D'Este paints of Bradley makes him look less like the self-effacing country boy who made good and more like a territorial bureaucrat who nurtured grudges, particularly when placed under Montgomery's command during the Bulge. It should be stressed, however, that whatever the importance of personalities, the basic issues between the British and Americans were clashes of legitimate national interests.

On the broad-front versus narrow-front issue, D'Este draws a reasonable conclusion: "Not only was it politically impossible to have permitted the British to run the war by means of a narrow front, but there is ample evidence to

question if such a drive could have been sustained beyond the Ruhr.” Parenthetically, Ike in a sense called Montgomery’s bluff on this question when he approved MARKET GARDEN, the airborne operation to seize Arnhem in September 1944, thus opening the gates for a narrow thrust to Berlin. It was “a bridge too far,” resulting in ten thousand casualties and the destruction of the British 1st Airborne Division, proving that the Germans were far from beaten or vulnerable to a thrust across their northern flank.

In the final phase of the war, the winter-spring offensive of 1945, D’Este emphasizes the Soviet issue, in particular the question of who would capture Berlin. This became yet another British-American controversy. Eisenhower felt that the decision arrived at earlier at Yalta to divide Germany into occupation zones made the Allied capture of Berlin irrelevant, considering the potential American casualties. Why not let the Russians do it? Churchill protested that an Allied failure to take Berlin would “raise grave and formidable difficulties in the future.” In his analysis the author comes down on the side of Eisenhower’s decision to halt at the Elbe, then adds that the “resulting bloodbath of Allied casualties would have all but ruined Eisenhower’s reputation”—a secondary reason at best, compared to avoiding unnecessary casualties to Allied forces. In future years the Berlin issue was to plague Eisenhower, being raised as late as his 1952 presidential campaign.

The book concludes on 7 May 1945, at Supreme Headquarters in Reims, France, with the signing of the German instrument of surrender. After tiring of his staff’s efforts to write a grandiloquent message to the Combined Chiefs officially informing them of the surrender, General of the Army Eisenhower quickly wrote one himself: “The mission of this allied force was fulfilled at 0241 local time, May 7, 1945.” It was typical Ike.

D’Este’s objectives were to introduce Eisenhower to new generations of Americans “who know too little of this remarkable man” and to provide a fuller understanding of the man himself. He succeeds admirably on both counts with this engrossing, thoroughly researched, well written, and provocative partial biography. D’Este has done perhaps the best work to date, giving the reader a feel for the inner Eisenhower, well concealed behind that infectious grin. In the process the author also does an excellent job fleshing out the powerful figures with whom Eisenhower interacted, including MacArthur, Marshall, Roosevelt, Churchill, and a host of American and British military leaders. Readers, even those already familiar with the subject, will find the book compulsive reading—but should not plan on doing it in one evening. In sum, *Eisenhower: A Soldier’s Life* is by any standard first-rate and confirms D’Este as among the best of American military historians.