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## Review Essay—Summarizing Eisenhower

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## REVIEW ESSAYS

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### SUMMARIZING EISENHOWER

Jay M. Parker

Kinnard, Douglas. *Eisenhower: Soldier-Statesman of the American Century*. Washington, D.C.: Brassey's, 2002. 112pp. \$19.95

Wicker, Tom. *Dwight D. Eisenhower*. New York: Times Books, 2002. 158pp. \$20

Holland, Matthew F. *Eisenhower between the Wars: The Making of a General Statesman*. Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2001. 248pp. \$64.95

*I have written you a long letter because I do not have time to write you a short one.*

—Blaise Paschal

Anyone who has ever written professionally, whether a novel or an interoffice memo, quickly acknowledges the accuracy of Paschal's statement. If this is the test of a good writer, it is even more pertinent when the subject is someone larger than life. Dwight D. Eisenhower's extraordinary achievements have filled vol-

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umes, some more adequate than others. Historians of great note have written hundreds of pages about brief segments of his eventful life. Now, three authors have attempted in comparatively slim volumes to define the essential experiences and achievements of one of the twentieth century's most notable figures.

Of the three books reviewed, Kinnard achieves this task to a greater degree than the other authors. This should come as no surprise to those familiar with Kinnard's work. A true soldier-scholar, Kinnard has

often achieved the near impossible task of being present for significant moments in history and later proving capable of writing about them with objectivity and careful scholarship. Originally a protégé of General Maxwell Taylor, he went on in his post-Army career to carve a distinct niche in the scholarship on defense politics and national security. His earlier writings on the politics of defense policy in the Eisenhower years still rank among the seminal works on this subject. His classic *The War Managers* (Avery, 1985) is an invaluable addition to the civil-military literature of the Vietnam era. In Kinnard's latest study of Eisenhower (part of a Brassey's series on great military leaders), he best addresses Eisenhower's military leadership, with particular attention to his role as supreme allied commander in the Second World War. While he is clear in his praise for Eisenhower's diplomatic skill and his consistently keen grasp of the bigger strategic picture, Kinnard does not shrink from presenting criticism of Eisenhower's early failures, particularly in the North Africa campaign. A more thorough discussion of these events and the personalities that shaped them can certainly be found in larger volumes (most notably Carlo D'Estes's excellent biography *Eisenhower: A Soldier's Life* [Henry Holt, 2002]). However, for so thin a volume, Kinnard's book covers these topics extremely well.

Less satisfying, however, is his discussion of Eisenhower's road from Abilene to five stars. All the high points are there—the difficult childhood, the serendipitous opportunity to attend West Point, the long years of service in a small and resource-poor peacetime Army, and the important role played by his mentors Fox Connor and George Marshall. Yet among Eisenhower biographers there are two schools of thought on his early military career. One highlights an almost inevitable march through a succession of key jobs and successful mastery of important opportunities that culminated in his unchallenged appointment with destiny. The other presents a grim parade of brutal staff jobs for often ungrateful bosses (among them Douglas MacArthur) and the series of lucky breaks in what might have been considered the twilight of a mediocre career that led George Marshall to select Eisenhower for command in Europe. Kinnard seems to fall in with the former school of thought.

The truth, of course, lies somewhere in between, and it is difficult to play out important nuances in so short a book. The story of Eisenhower as presented here, however, might have been better served by balancing the great achievements with the hard knocks. For example, who would imagine that a junior officer could survive a court-martial and go on to five-star rank? What career officer would not benefit from the knowledge that an assignment that superbly oriented Eisenhower to his future battlefields (service on the American Battle Monuments Commission) was an assignment Eisenhower neither sought nor welcomed?

Kinnard addresses important facets of Eisenhower's presidency that served him well: his unique military experiences in diplomacy, the economics of national security, and the domestic politics of defense. In so doing, however, Kinnard is less critical than he might have been of what are generally acknowledged to be the two most significant shortcomings of Eisenhower's presidency—his failure to challenge Senator Joe McCarthy and his reluctance to intervene on behalf of public school integration in Little Rock, Arkansas. These failures are made all the more puzzling by instances earlier in Eisenhower's career when he successfully challenged bullies similar to McCarthy when others would not, and when he personally took the high road on civil rights in a racially segregated Army. Again, a short volume does not allow for a full examination of all questions, but Kinnard at least could have raised these issues in his otherwise excellent book.

In Tom Wicker's short biography (part of a series of short studies of American presidents edited by Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.) we see a different emphasis on Eisenhower's life and career, one far more critical and far less balanced than the picture presented by Kinnard. This is surprising, given Wicker's well deserved reputation as a political journalist whose carefully crafted writings often meet the standards of the finest scholarly works. His classic *JFK and LBJ* (revised and updated Elephant paperback, 1991) remains one of the finest studies of presidential exercise of legislative power. This work is even more impressive when one considers that it was a far more flattering picture of Johnson than of Kennedy, though it was written at a time when Kennedy was celebrated and revered as a martyr and Johnson was viewed as a tragically flawed and failed president. However, such balance and insight are not as prevalent in this book.

At 158 pages, Wicker's book is somewhat longer than Kinnard's, and as one would hope, given Wicker's expertise, it places far greater emphasis on Eisenhower's political career than on his time in the military. But Wicker disappoints on several levels. First, he does not adequately discuss how Eisenhower's unconventional military career more logically prepared him for the White House than for battlefield command. He seems to embrace the view that Eisenhower came from a rigid, authoritarian, hierarchical profession that did not understand or value the kinds of political nuance necessary to be president. Virtually every authoritative biography of Eisenhower—whether lengthy or short, celebratory or critical—has effectively laid this myth to rest. Wicker, however, seems unconvinced.

In addressing Eisenhower's successes and failures as a president, Wicker finds many of the latter and a grudging few of the former. Like Kinnard, he addresses the president's relationship with Joseph McCarthy and the use of federal troops to enforce the court order at Little Rock. But where Kinnard may be too

forgiving, Wicker is too uncompromising. The emotions surrounding the domestic politics of the Cold War (its roots grounded in the Red Scares of the 1920s and '30s, with the added overlay of the nuclear age) should not be underestimated. Likewise, the task of applying federal force to issues that the Civil War should have decided but that Reconstruction failed to resolve was a monumental challenge that continues to haunt presidents. If Eisenhower did not adequately meet these two demands on his watch, it certainly was not because he was a simple man unable to grasp an obvious solution. In the end, Wicker's book, which could have been an excellent political bookend to Kinnard's military critique, falls short.

In the third short volume, Matthew Holland studies Eisenhower's preparation for leadership, with a particular emphasis on the role played by his military experiences. A retired army officer turned academic, Holland does not have the kind of impressive track record that recommends Kinnard or Wicker. However, there are telling signs of a newer scholar, two of particular note. One is his strongly enthusiastic admiration for his subject. Scholars—despite what they may say—do not approach a subject with total dispassion, and historians and political scientists normally choose those disciplines more from deeply held beliefs than idle curiosity. Holland is to be admired for at least putting his biases up front; however, while true scholars may start with a research question that betrays their particular perspective, they then carefully gather data and, if they are doing their job, let the chips fall where they may. There are countless examples of authors who started a book with a fixed opinion about the outcome, only to be surprised by the eventual conclusion. In this particular instance Holland could have let the facts speak for themselves.

Having said this, the book has much to commend it. Holland weaves together primary archival material and important secondary sources, sometimes providing an important expansion on the works of other writers and, on occasion, correctly contradicting them. While his stated topic is the years before Eisenhower came to power, he links Eisenhower's background to his later actions, giving us a fuller picture of the man as opposed to the myth. There are critiques of style that can be made. For example, rather than tracing Eisenhower's biography in chronological fashion, Holland chooses to address key points by topic, such as Eisenhower's political experience or his personal relationships with mentors and peers. While Holland uses this technique to provide rich, specific, and important details (some of which do not appear in many other comprehensive works), it can be distracting to readers. When Holland covers different topics from the same era in back-to-back chapters, the reader sometimes is inclined to ask, "Didn't I read this already?"

In sum, Paschal was right: the short text is an author's most difficult challenge. None of these works should be a substitute for more comprehensive books available on the life of Dwight Eisenhower. Yet all three books demonstrate to a greater or lesser degree that it is possible to provide a solid, valuable introduction to the topic for the serious scholar and an adequate, self-contained work for the casual reader.