

Things He Believed In

The Eisenhower Diaries; Edited by Robert H. Ferrell; W. W. Norton & Co.; New York.

by Allan C. Carlson

Academicians of any orthodox persuasion have always been uncomfortable with the legacy of Dwight Eisenhower. When his second Presidential term came to an end in early 1961, they joyfully dismissed him as an intellectual lightweight, a mere West Point graduate, an aging warrior whom time had passed by, while his administration was coolly mocked as "the bland leading the bland." The professors were eager to get on with reshaping the nation and the world in the heroic images drawn by Rostow, Galbraith and Schlesinger. The 1950's—an age characterized by bourgeois dullness, an obsession with business and family matters, an abiding mediocrity—had gratefully come to an end; the great adventure could begin.

Nearly two decades later, the orthodox academicians raised their bruised frames above the moral and intellectual ruins, contemplated the failed Presidencies and social decay of the 1960's and 1970's, and concluded that Eisenhower was in fact a great leader. Yet the transformation required a few alterations in the Eisenhower image. According to these revisionists, for example, Ike really wasn't much of a conservative. In fact, he appears in retrospect to have been something of a closet liberal. As described by scholars such as Fred Greenstein, Robert Divine and Burton Kaufman, Eisenhower was a "politically astute and informed" leader who applied a carefully honed concept of leadership to the conduct of his Presidency. They portray Ike as incessantly battling the obscurant wing of the Republican Party, pressing for an internationalist foreign

policy, defending the New Deal reforms, backing the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Topeka* decision, quietly yet purposefully undermining Senator Joe McCarthy, distrusting Nixon, fighting the Pentagon to hold down defense costs, using John Foster Dulles as a front while himself directing American foreign policy towards peace and rapprochement with the Soviet Union, keeping the U.S. out of Vietnam and guiding the foreign-aid program away from an obsession with military security and Western Europe and toward economic purposes and the developing nations.

One can understand the professors' anxious efforts to transform Eisenhower into one of their own, and there are elements of truth in most of what they say. Recently declassified foreign-policy documents from the 1950's, for example, have provided a more complex and flattering perspective on Eisenhower's role in that period. Moreover, the discovery and publication of a series of diaries kept by Eisenhower intermittently from 1935 until his death in 1969 have provided fresh insight into the mind, attitudes and world view of an exceptionally "private" public figure.

Yet the effort to rework Eisenhower into a minor hero in the liberal pantheon simply won't work. The Eisenhower diaries do provide a common denomi-

nator to Eisenhower's life, philosophy and political program, yet it is one in which most of the professors can personally take little comfort. As the diary entries make clear, Eisenhower believed fervently in traditional moral and family values, in the concepts of duty, honesty, personal responsibility and patriotism, and in the justice and efficacy of the free-enterprise system. His greatest fears focused on communist expansion internationally and on creeping statism, immorality and personal irresponsibility at home. The diaries, quite simply, portray the Eisenhower most persons would expect, a prototype of the contemporary conservative temperament.

Such traits were a legacy from Eisenhower's family experience, particularly the example set by his father. In 1942, on the day of his father's funeral, Ike sat in his wartime office at the Pentagon and wrote: "He was a just man, well liked, well educated, a thinker. He was undemonstrative, quiet, modest, and of exemplary habits—he never used alcohol or tobacco. . . . His word has been his bond and accepted as such; his sterling honesty, his insistence upon the immediate payment of all debts, his pride in independence earned for him a reputation that has profited all of us boys. . . . My only regret is that it was always so difficult to let him know the great depth of my affection for him." Emotional reticence characterizes the diaries. Yet it is significant that Eisenhower's few other recorded flights of feeling—e.g. during a 1938 trip with his father to Yellowstone or on the pending arrival of his first grandchild—centered on family-related events. Eisenhower, in fact, saw his own family as an example "of what this country with its system of individual rights and freedoms, its boundless resources, and its opportunities for all who want to work can do for its citizens. . . ."

Eisenhower's loyalties are also transparently simple. In 1939, he wrote that,



Dr. Carlson is executive vice president of The Rockford Institute.

"My entire life has been given to this one thing, my country and my profession." Twelve years later, he cited "my family" and "America" as "the only real passions of my life." Countless references to "duty" and "responsibility" fill the diaries.

Prior to the end of World War II, it is true, Eisenhower evidences no well-thought-out or articulated political philosophy. By early 1953, though, he had developed and repeatedly expressed a world view that would remain essentially unchanged throughout his Presidency. During thirty-five years of diary-keeping, Eisenhower only once inserted a newspaper clipping into the text, namely the January 4, 1950 farewell editorial of the New York *Sun*. He referred in particular to a concluding paragraph, which read:

Throughout [the *Sun's*] career it has supported constitutional government, sound money, reasonable protection for American industry, economy in public expenditures, preservation of the rights and responsibilities of the several states, free enterprise, good citizenship, equality before the law, and has upheld all the finer American traditions. It has opposed indecency and rascality, public and private. It has fought Populism, Socialism, Communism, governmental extravagance, the encroachments of bureaucracy and that form of government paternalism which eats into the marrow of private initiative and industry.

Eisenhower flatly declared: "These are the things in which I believe." He also despaired that such principles were increasingly discarded, yet personally vowed to "go down fighting." At other times in the 1945-53 period, Eisenhower stated that American strength rested on faith, free enterprise, moral probity and necessary military strength; described "moral regeneration" and a "revival of patriotism" as necessary; labeled capitalism as "essential" to democracy; termed federal aid to private education "immoral"; saw the federal

government—in the name of "social security"—taking ever-greater power over people's daily lives; praised "Americanism" while railing against "the hand-out state" and "the regulatory spirit"; became persuaded that it was his duty "to unseat the New Deal-Fair Deal bureaucracy in Washington"; and concluded that free government was necessarily based on "some form of deeply felt religious faith."

Even Eisenhower's efforts to restrain military spending were not born (à la

"Eisenhower revisionism is full of nostalgia for the 1950's and it is certainly true that if you were white, male, and middle class or better, it was the best decade of the century."

—The New Republic

McGovern or Carter) out of distrust of the military mind, sympathies for the world revolution or fear of American motives. They rested instead on a thoroughly conservative fear of the dangers which a large defense establishment posed to the fiscal and social arrangements of a free society. Ike was aware that "If we are not [internally] healthy, we can communicate no health to the world"; in the face of military financial demands, he worried about "the poor tax payer." Most significantly, he argued that "the purpose of America is to defend a way of life rather than merely to defend property, territory, homes or lives," and concluded "that excessive expenditure for nonproductive [defense] items could, in the long run, destroy the American economy." At a time when American liberals were clamoring for higher defense budgets as a stimulus to the economy, Eisenhower found early in his Presidency that his views on taxation, defense spending and domestic policy actually coincided to a surprising degree with those held by Senator Robert Taft, the erstwhile leader of the Republican far right. (Even so, it is worth noting that Eisenhower's now-praised "lean" defense budgets absorbed a significantly higher share of the nation's Gross National Product than would Ronald Rea-

gan's widely attacked defense projections for the mid-1980's.)

Again reflecting the conservative conscience of their author, the Eisenhower diaries convey a deep pessimism about the future: specifically, a sense that the nation and the world were beginning to spin out of control and despair over the failure of a new generation of responsible leaders to emerge. In 1951, while commanding NATO, Eisenhower lamented over the "unworthy men" who guided Western destinies in

London, Washington and Paris and "desperately" wished for "new, young, and virile civil and military leaders devoted only to their respective countries, to decency, and to security." In 1956, after a long conversation with Dulles, Eisenhower suggested that "the world is on the verge of an abyss" and that they would probably be succeeded by men of less experience, prestige, intellectual capacity and moral courage. "What will happen?" he asked with a sense of resignation.

In sum, Eisenhower's self-styled "middle-of-the-road" philosophy is ill-suited for revision into closet liberalism. Eisenhower's appropriately admired sense of proportion and judgment (concerning Indochina, he noted as early as 1951 that "no military victory is possible in that kind of theater" and that "a union of minds and hearts" among the American people was indispensable to the success of a military commitment anywhere) was rooted in traditional conservative caution and a distrust of recklessly entered ideological crusades. A man of honor, Eisenhower saw in Joe McCarthy an opportunist and a scoundrel. Yet Ike also had no tolerance for government employees of questionable loyalty, and he quietly dismissed thousands from sensitive posts. Eisenhower did not at-

tempt to dismantle the New Deal, but neither did he substantially add to it; he was later appalled by the Great Society experiments of the Johnson administration. In the last published diary entry, dated March 1967, Ike described Richard Nixon as "one of the ablest men" he knew, a man for whom he held "great affection."

Eisenhower presided over The American Decade, an era characterized by peace, domestic stability, economic growth, social progress, and the apogee of U.S. military and moral prestige in the world. Even long-apparent trends in American social life—a rising divorce

rate, falling fertility, spreading juvenile delinquency, declining church membership—all reversed during this remarkable period of national confidence and vitality.

One man, of course, did not cause these changes. In fact, the above-mentioned developments all began during the Truman years. Yet Eisenhower's sense of balance, caution and moral purpose allowed them to continue and the nation to prosper. There is much about Eisenhower for all Americans to admire, but there is very little in his world view that contemporary liberals would find in their own ideological mirror. □

Ryan's World

William Ryan: *Equality*; Pantheon Books; New York.

by Lee Congdon

Consider, if you will, Professor Ryan's Manichaeic world. In common with most of "us," he belongs to the "vulnerable majority" of long-suffering, systematically exploited Americans. While we struggle, with varying degrees of success, to eke out a living, "they"—the tyrannical rich—indulge their every desire. We make payments on small foreign cars; they own Cadillacs outright. Our wives work; theirs idle away the hours. If fortune smiles, our children attend State University; theirs are graduated from Princeton, Harvard and Yale. In a word, we are the have-nots; they are the haves.

Why, Ryan asks rhetorically, do "so few of us get upset about the enormous inequalities in the ownership and the distribution of resources?" Because, you see, our artful masters have contrived to create in us a submissive conscious-

ness. The mere mention of such "neo-conservatives" as Irving Kristol, Daniel Bell and Daniel Patrick Moynihan is calculated to ignite Ryan's volatile passions. And with good reason. These reconstructed liberals champion the insidious ideology of "Fair Play," laughingly referred to as equal opportunity. Central to their propaganda, according to Ryan, is the quaint notion that we are, in some admittedly qualified sense, responsible for our own lives. Quite naturally this depressing news breeds in us a spirit of resignation and inferiority. And as if this were not enough, Ryan complains, our children are similarly indoctrinated. American schools are nothing if not "ideological instruments" that discriminate between good and poor students and encourage competition to the utmost limit, forbidding "cooperation with [one's] friends (they call it 'cheating')." It follows from all of this that conditions of inequality are neither natural nor fortuitous; Ryan and other disabused victims have often "half jokingly, spun out fantasies about a giant conspiracy [emphasis added]."

Although I have edited out the jargon of victimization ("sexism"; "racism"; "stereotyping"), this, or something

closely approximating it, is Ryan's world. Yet his is no Spenglerian jeremiad, no counsel of final despair. Satisfied that he has decoded the ruling class's ideology, he speaks confidently of a *new* world, one in which "we" will finally receive our "Fair Share." At long last "we" will be equal with "them." Together we shall constitute a collectivity that, in the form of the state, will own the principal means of production and bring distribution in line with need, or perhaps I should say appetite, for "when what used to be luxuries become common possessions, they are, in fact, essential. It is difficult to do without them." For starters, we shall all have food and fuel stamps, free medical care and the run of theaters, concert halls and ballparks. Let the good times commence!

All in due course. Ryan does not foresee an immediate and total socio-economic transformation. Such, he allows, is the stuff of utopia. Rather, we shall advance one step at a time—a kind of incremental apocalypse. Before surveying the strategies of *ressentiment*, I should explain that Ryan's own "consciousness" was formed during the 1960's, a time that he chooses to look upon as a golden age. Thus inspired, he advocates renewed "strikes, demonstrations, disruptions of all kinds." Faced "with enough instability and turmoil, the mighty and powerful do make concessions." And if they do not—what then? Despite repeated protestations of peaceful intent, Ryan knows full well that violence will ever be the final arbiter when a social order is subjected to incessant provocation. Indeed, he makes little effort to veil his threats. He chides the poor for refusing, even when they are starving, to plunder the rich; he imagines with evident pleasure the murder of "Herman," the Cro-Magnon property owner in one of his parables; and he recalls—"perhaps capriciously, but I think significantly"—*Tosca*, Act II. Significantly indeed. It is then that *Tosca* mortally wounds Scarpia, whom Ryan takes to be "the cop as fascist, the fascist as cop." In our author's fevered imagination, the