

Witness in the White House

***"The Ordeal of Power: A Political Memoir of the Eisenhower Years,"* by Emmet John Hughes** (Atheneum. 372 pp. \$5.95), *views the ex-President's Administration as a personal and political tragedy of lost opportunities. Henry Brandon is Washington correspondent for the London Sunday Times.*

By HENRY BRANDON

EMMET JOHN HUGHES vaguely reminds me of Upton Sinclair's fictional hero, Lanny Budd. He is a sympathetic figure with a driving desire to be a sort of Man Friday to men of power and influence, whether they be Presidents, publishers, or governors. He usually does not quite share their outlook, but that seems to be only an added incentive; for he is essentially a crusader who on the whole manages to keep both feet on the ground, who wants to improve the ideas Americans live by, and who finds satisfaction in improving the ideas of those men he attaches himself to and exerting influence through them.

Again like Lanny Budd, Hughes can be profound or superficial, idealistic or skeptical, sophisticated or naïve, brilliant or half-cocked; but mostly his instincts are sound. He is the kind of American who makes this nation attractive to foreigners. He is endowed with enormous enthusiasm, a drive to engage himself intensely in the interests of his country, and a restlessness with things as they are, which the younger generation in Europe today lacks or rarely has an opportunity to apply. He best expresses his own feelings when he says in this latest book, his fourth, that "doubt and ire alternate with compassion and hope." In the end, playing *eminence grise* via the pen is frustrating and disillusioning.

This "political memoir"—an apt subtitle—was inspired by his own experience of more than two years as a speech writer for President Eisenhower. The main title, I presume, refers to the deal it was for Eisenhower to exercise power; but in the end, I felt, it tells us more about Hughes's ordeal of trying to define both what he calls his "intense comradeship" with Eisenhower and the latter's elusive character.

Hughes first served as a speech writer for the President during the election campaign in 1952, following which he joined the White House staff in the same function; but, as he puts it, the President's ways and views and his own "steadily grew more gravely apart," and early in 1954 he resigned. The book therefore loses some of its special interest as an "inside report" rather early; but, thanks to the intermittent contact he kept with the President, either by letter, by an occasional personal visit to the White House, or by helping on a speech here and there, he maintains the impression of continuing to be an "insider."

He brings the contradiction in Eisenhower the man to life better than anybody else has succeeded in doing so far, essentially, perhaps, because he is a trained and quite brilliant reporter with the capacity for writing and judging perceptively from both inside and outside the ring. He takes the reader with remarkable skill through his own emotional ups and downs with the President, without, however, telling us of his own personal disappointments that led to his resignation. He lights up with obvious affection Eisenhower's many attractive traits, but he also brings out the opportunities that the President had, and lost, to do great things. Under him, Hughes believes, American conservatism could have rejuvenated itself, could have caught up with this century, as conservatism has done in Britain and on the European Continent; but his harsh conclusion is that Eisenhower failed in his historic role:

He offered no leadership that could be hailed by a grateful nation as imaginative, bold or memorable. As a politician he set forth to remake the blurred image of the Republican Party, but he merely ended by suffering himself to be remade in its image.

Eisenhower's negative and passive attitude, I think, had its uses during his first term, when this country had somehow lost all perspective in the Cold War. He pacified the country then, but in his next term he failed to take advantage of the base he had created for a more activist policy. Hughes blames this on his utter reliance on two men, the villains of this book: John Foster Dulles and George Humphrey. He shows how Eisenhower and Dulles,

such opposites in character, at first clashed in their outlook on how to conduct foreign policy; how gradually Dulles took complete command in this area, mainly because the President had "an unafraid but slightly dismayed awe for it"; how after Dulles's death Eisenhower suddenly felt liberated and, prodded by Hagerty, was anxious to take the initiative, and how his actions ended in disaster. At the time of the Korean War Dulles told Hughes that he could not accept a Korean settlement until the U.S. had given the Chinese "one hell of a licking." When Hughes mentioned this remark to Eisenhower, the President snapped: "If Mr. Dulles and all his sophisticated advisers really mean that they cannot talk peace seriously, then I am in the wrong pew."

Hughes fought for a Presidential initiative in developing a peace program, but Dulles's and, finally, Churchill's counsel to delay won out. "Dulles rather lived at intellectual ease with the conviction that in his historic litigation he might have to appeal to force and war," Hughes writes; and then he recalls the remark by Dulles that, among others, led him to this conclusion: "I guess I don't think the chances of war are more than one in four. But in my job I've got to act as if they're fifty-fifty." This suggested to Hughes a "disconcerting readiness to invoke martial power to prove a diplomatic point."

Once during the Dienbienphu crisis, I remember, Dulles called me to his office to give me what was meant to be an exclusive piece of information: that the U.S. Fleet had been ordered to



steam close to the Indochina coast and was ready to go into action. I did not believe at the time that Dulles would go to this extreme; I thought that this was part of a psychological warfare campaign he was conducting with the British Government. Somehow I always had a feeling that John Foster Dulles had to talk about war to make himself feel he was the real power in the American Government. When at a press conference on the eve of the German elections in 1953 Dulles endorsed Adenauer, everybody—including myself—thought he had committed an absurd blunder. But one of the principal leaders among the German Socialists told me a year later that Dulles had been very astute. “The Germans,” he said, “consider the United States God and since they want to be the deputies of God they wanted to know where God stood, and Dulles made it clear to them.”

The U.S. under Dulles conducted a status quo policy in a world that was moving fast, and as a consequence we fell behind. This immobility was compounded on the home front by George Humphrey, the Secretary of the Treasury, whose gauge of U.S. strength was the “soundness” of the dollar and the “freedom” of the economy, not its growth. Here again Hughes cites some interesting scraps of discussion out of Cabinet meetings to prove his point.

Finally, Hughes produces more evidence than I have so far seen anywhere else that Eisenhower really disliked Nixon, but in the end had no alternative candidate: again, he did not want to make a choice. According to Hughes, Eisenhower’s unqualified choice for Republican Presidential candidate in 1960 was the new Secretary of the Treasury, Robert Anderson.

This book is not a history, but rather a weaving together of telling vignettes of personal impressions. The narrative flags when it dwells on the obvious, and it could have stood some cuts. “America, the Vincible,” Hughes’s last previous book, was written with a pathos and emotion that often seared the delicate and complicated web of history. Both this time are under better control, and the glutinous content in his style is also reduced.

What gives this personal memoir its inner impetus is the slow crescendo of the tragedy of the man Eisenhower, who had the confidence of the American people, the trust of the Allies, and even a great deal of sympathy in the enemy camp; yet who failed to use these great and unusual assets—who served, as Hughes puts it, as “a passive witness.” It is the compassion Hughes feels for the President that brings this story to life.



THE AUTHOR: Emmet John Hughes has occupied a world conning tower for all but twenty of his forty-one years. More than a decade in Europe as *Time* bureau chief in major capitals and service with the

U.S. Embassy in Madrid gave him a rare objectivity. Thus, although intellectually a New Deal Democrat, Hughes thought it necessary to elect a Republican President in 1952 and accordingly took leave of absence from his duties as a top *Life* editor to help make the Eisenhower campaign train roll like a juggernaut. As he saw it, the primary problems were to save the two-party system from breakdown; to get an almost exponential increase in U.S. initiatives on domestic and foreign problems. “The Democrats had become prisoners of their own critics,” he explained at lunch. “Initiatives would be choked off by instant Republican opposition, charges of appeasement and recklessness. Only a Republican administration would have the freedom and chance to, in Lincoln’s phrase, think and act anew.” The first step required ridding the Republican Party of “domination by xenophobes.” Hence his support for Ike.

Was the effort to rejuvenate and modernize the Republican Party an exercise in futility? “Essentially yes. The party today is in as much trouble as it was in ’52.” Why did Hughes serve such a short hitch in the White House? (He was a leading Presidential speech writer for only a year.) “There’s no mystery or backstairs intrigue about it, although some like to think so. When I took leave from *Life* I was assured that I would not be pressed to stay more than a few months. Sherman Adams had urged me to come in ‘just to help get things started.’”

When Hughes returned to *Life* as articles editor, he brought in some of the most distinguished lead pieces ever published by the magazine, including those by Graham Greene, James Michener, Evelyn Waugh, Lincoln Barnett.

In 1959, Hughes holed up for four weeks to produce a white-hot polemic on the weaknesses of American foreign policy. After reading “America, The Vincible” J. F. Kennedy called Hughes “an artist among our journalists” and said he would “keep the book close at hand.” Hughes, however, considers Kennedy’s decision on the Bay of Pigs “a stupid adventure—like trying to get

half-pregnant.” But of the 1962 Cuba quarantine he had this to say: “Not only did we get Soviet offensive missiles out of Cuba, but we demonstrated U.S. readiness to use nuclear weapons if necessary.”

Of “Black Irish” descent, son of a New Jersey judge, Hughes is tense and intense, alternately sanguine and saturnine. He refuses to disdain the demands of his material, alters his style, painful as it may be, to suit the substance. “You can’t talk about everything in the same tone of voice,” he said in the manner of a conductor pleading for less vibrato. “I don’t have a set style and never will. When I wrote the polemic ‘America, The Vincible,’ an eighteenth-century baroque style seemed appropriate. It came easily. The laconic, nonrhetorical mode of ‘The Ordeal of Power’ didn’t.”

The Eisenhower speeches, masterpieces of that genre, were also painstakingly chiseled and polished. He considers himself fortunate to have been able to work *à deux* with the ex-President (“All you get when a committee writes a speech is garbage.”) He is most satisfied by the talk written for Eisenhower to deliver before the American Society of Newspaper Editors in April 1953. In it Eisenhower put forth a set of principles for disarmament and spelled out the advantages to be gained.

Did Hughes think a U.S.-U.S.S.R. accommodation possible? “We must continually remember that the colossal Soviet peace propaganda is just as real and insistent inside the Soviet Union. The Russian people are being told with drumbeat insistence that their government wants and will bring peace. If this is the way to gear a poorly fed, poorly housed, war-sick people for the savage sacrifices of a major war—well, I’m back in the sixteenth century again.”

Last January *Newsweek* publisher Philip Graham invited Hughes to become part of the team, for which he was offered a bi-monthly column (to alternate with Walter Lippmann) as an incentive.

Often misunderstood because he refuses to be compartmentalized, Hughes is something of a neo-Renaissance man. The phrase etched on the dedication page of his new book, “*ex umbris et imaginibus in veritatem*” (“out of the shadows and symbols toward the truth”), will no doubt continue to be both his sextant and North Star as he proceeds in the years ahead to serve as a self-appointed witness and recorder of history-in-the-making.

—MARY KERSEY HARVEY.