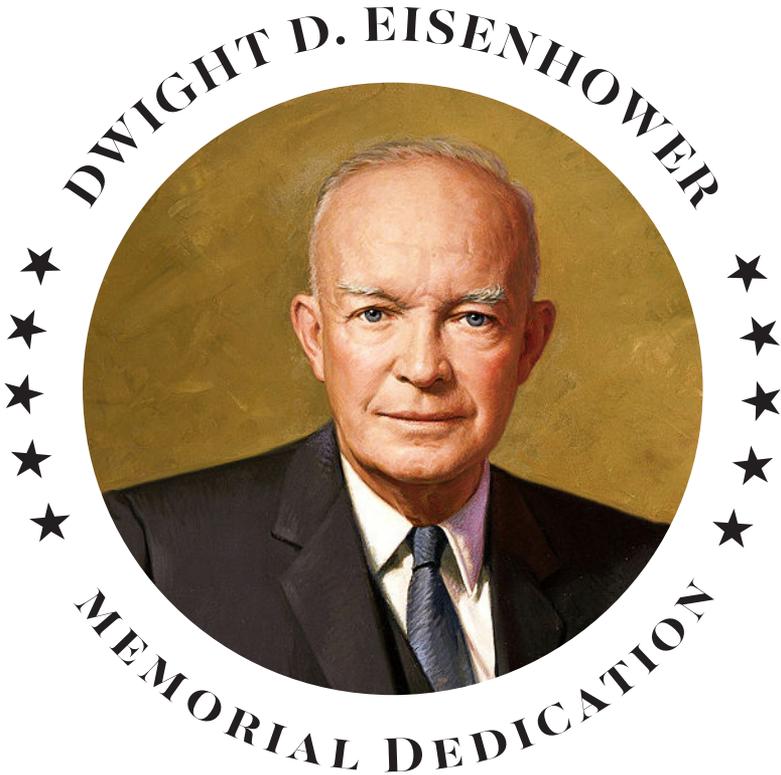


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America's Re-Appreciation of

DWIGHT D. EISENHOWER

Summary of remarks by Yanek Mieczkowski
honoring the dedication of the Dwight D. Eisenhower
Memorial — September 17, 2020

Eisenhower's Guiding Principle

by Yanek Mieczkowski, Ph.D.

This is a special week, honoring a special American. Our country now has a memorial to Dwight D. Eisenhower. We have this tribute for many reasons. Eisenhower was a true hero, and this memorial honors what made him a hero — his service to the country he loved and his achievements over his long career. For generations to come, the memorial will remind Americans of what Eisenhower accomplished and the legacies he left.

But this is not only a memorial to the past. It is also a classroom. This memorial will teach Americans from this day onward about Eisenhower's legacies — legacies that many citizens will learn by visiting the memorial. It was not just what Eisenhower did in his life that made him a great American. His legacy was also his principles, which resonate today and will be valid for centuries, as long as this country exists. These principles can guide us today; they give us instruction and direction.

One of Eisenhower's presidential aides, Arthur Larson said that for every decision, Eisenhower had some underlying principle that he could reference to give him guidance. That was one of Eisenhower's gifts to us. We can now refer to his principles and use them to guide us.

Eisenhower was a complex man, and he had many principles. If we could distill his principles into just one today — one that we can remember after this week is done — what would it be?

Take a close look at Eisenhower's Farewell Address, his last message to his country as president. A key Eisenhower

principle is right there. Almost everyone who knows anything about the Farewell Address is thinking right now — “military-industrial complex.” Yet he mentioned that phrase only once in his Farewell Address. There is another word that Eisenhower invoked nine times in his Farewell Address. It is easy to overlook, but it is hiding in plain sight. That word is key to understanding Eisenhower.

The word is balance. Eisenhower deployed it nine times in his Farewell Address. That word, that concept was a fulcrum on which many of Eisenhower’s views rested. He even described his political philosophy as The Middle Way, a path he arrived at by balancing competing political interests.

So I wanted to talk about Eisenhower and balance — how the Memorial embodies this concept, and why it’s a fitting principle that we can use to understand Eisenhower. I’d like to look at three examples of Eisenhower and balance:

- 1) balance between America’s military and civilian sectors
- 2) balance between liberty and security
- 3) balance between the modern world and the past

I. Balance between the military and civilian sectors

Picture yourself at the Memorial right now. You’ll see two sets of statues, one of Eisenhower as a World War II general, the other of him as president. You’ll also see the General Column, closer to the World War II Memorial, and the Presidential Column, closer to the Capitol building. Those two sets of statues and the two mighty columns have a symbolic significance. They represent the balance between the military and civilian worlds — a balance that Eisenhower embodied his whole life.

Eisenhower began his career in the military and dedicated

his life to serving his country. He was the only president to wear the military uniform in both world wars. During World War II, he served as a ligament connecting the military with civilian leaders, balancing those two realms. This effort represented a masterful coordination between civilian leaders — statesmen like Franklin Roosevelt and Winston Churchill — and military commanders like General Bernard Montgomery of Great Britain and George Patton of the U.S., with Eisenhower as the balance point. In that role, Eisenhower helped to ensure the success of D-Day. And as the Memorial quotes Eisenhower, with D-Day, “The tide has turned.” The Allied victory was ever closer, and with that, the Allies helped to save Western civilization.

In the Memorial’s statues of Eisenhower meeting U.S. troops just before launching D-Day, you can see balance. He was sending soldiers into harm’s way, even to their deaths, which required blunt, cold leadership. Yet he balanced that with the warmth to visit the troops, talk to them, ask them where they were from, even chat with them about a topic as mundane as fly fishing.

Here’s another example of Eisenhower’s balance, this one from his civilian life: When he was president, Eisenhower almost never said thank you to his hard-working staff. I once asked William Ewald, who served in the administration and then helped Eisenhower write his presidential memoirs, how he could work so hard and devote years of his own life to helping a boss who never expressed thanks. Dr. Ewald said this: Eisenhower had a way of making the task at hand so important, so noble that it just lifted you up into the clouds to think of working with him on the project. There it was again, the balance: the stern taskmaster balanced with the master motivator, who led people — he led by inspiring them and giving them a sense of mission, a sense of service, that they

were working on an important crusade and doing it as a team together. That is leadership.

After the war, Eisenhower shed his uniform, almost like molting his skin, to serve as a civilian, the president of a private institution, Columbia University. But from that civilian position, he left and created a new military role, NATO Supreme Commander. And then he served our country at the acme of all civilian positions, President of the United States. Imagine that: one individual served at the highest possible levels of the military and civilian worlds: five-star general and president.

One of Eisenhower's legacies was to show how to preserve the delicate balance between the military and civilian government. In the military, he had to wage war. As president, he "waged peace," as he put it. And when his presidency was over, and he returned to private life, he was immensely proud that had presided over eight years of peace. He said that during his presidency he gave up not a single inch of soil to an enemy and not a single soldier or sailor's life in combat.

When Eisenhower retired, he continued to balance his military and civilian sides. He was a private citizen, but he asked President John Kennedy to restore his rank as General, and he preferred to be addressed as "General Eisenhower" rather than as "President Eisenhower." And note where he chose to retire. He and Mamie had a home in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, private citizens in the shadow of one of the military's greatest battlefields.

Eisenhower knew that the balance between the military and civilian worlds was essential to preserving the liberty and freedom that we cherish so much in America. The military defended liberty and freedom; civilians embodied it in the way

they acted, worked, and governed themselves. The military and civilian branches of our government preserve liberty and security. And just as Eisenhower balanced the military and civilian worlds, he also balanced liberty and security.

II. Balance Between Liberty and Security

That was another key Eisenhower balance point. When Eisenhower was Columbia University president, he used to address the freshmen class to welcome them. And he doled out some Eisenhower wisdom. He talked about liberty and security, and he told the freshmen that if they wanted security — complete security — they could commit a crime and go to prison. They'd get complete security there. But they would also give up their liberty. In other words, there is a balance between liberty and security.

Americans are extremely proud of their liberty. Eisenhower was, too. He devoted his career to protecting the liberties we enjoy. He knew that to protect liberty, Americans needed military security. But there was always a delicate balance between liberty and security. Democracy is fragile, and a key to making it last is to find that right balance between liberty and security.

In NATO, Eisenhower had to wean America away from its isolationist tradition and engage it in a new internationalism. Then, he had to balance America's interests against the collective security of the group. This was an enormous contribution that Eisenhower made in the Cold War. He balanced security with liberty, for America and its allies. One result was strong alliances, which promoted the peace that Eisenhower preserved throughout his whole presidency.

One of Eisenhower's great insights was into how economic liberty balanced with security. He relished the study of

economics, far more than most presidents do. At the time of his death, he was planning to write an economic history of his presidency — that’s how much he liked economics. An essential element of a healthy economy was balanced federal budgets. Eisenhower watched over the federal budget like a hawk. Balanced federal budgets were healthy for the economy, but also essential to preserving democracy and a free society. In his Farewell Address, Eisenhower warned that if we fail to be vigilant about federal debt, democracy could become “the insolvent phantom of tomorrow.”

But here again is where the dilemma of balance comes in. A country must spend on the military! It is costly! And it runs up deficits. “Good defense is not cheap defense,” Eisenhower liked to say. The key is, again, finding the right balance — balance between too much military spending and too little, balance in federal budgets, and ultimately, balance between liberty and security. Eisenhower got this formula right: he achieved three balanced budgets during his presidency.

That feat seems out-of-reach now, and Eisenhower’s thinking might seem old-fashioned today. We live in an age of trillion dollar deficits, which would horrify Eisenhower. In the 1950s he warned that federal spending and debt “is going to be a hundred times worse for our children and our grandchildren.” Here we are today. We are in the era of Eisenhower’s grandchildren. Federal spending and deficits are more than a hundred times worse! His warning is relevant today precisely because what he warned about is true. It’s not old-fashioned. It’s not even old.

III. Balance Between the Modern World and the Past

The current, modern relevance of Eisenhower’s warnings about deficits and debt evokes one final topic about Eisenhower and balance. Eisenhower balanced the modern

world and the past. In his lifetime, Eisenhower journeyed all over the world, but one of the most symbolic journeys was from Abilene, Kansas to Washington, as U.S. president. If you have ever been to Abilene, you can understand another way the Eisenhower Memorial speaks to us. It provides evidence that the American Experiment works.

Carved in the memorial are the words of Eisenhower’s June 1945 Homecoming Speech, in which he said that “the proudest thing I can claim is that I am from Abilene.” His was an exceptional story. A young boy from Abilene, whom you can see sitting in one corner of the memorial, goes to West Point, and then begins a career in which he became the Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces during World War II, NATO Supreme Commander, five-star general and U.S. president.

But if you visit Abilene today, you’ll also be struck by how much the town seems like it must have been when Eisenhower grew up there, more than a century ago. It is still a farming community that instills people with the values of faith, hard work, optimism, and patriotism.

Eisenhower was born in 1890, the last president born in the 19th century. He witnessed chaotic change compressed into his 79 years: two world wars, the advent of automobiles, airplanes, atomic power, computers, the Space Age.

Yet Eisenhower, a product of 19th-century small-town America, knew how to balance traditional values with these modern impulses. He also knew how to change with purpose. He did not just react to change. He leveraged change so as to improve the country. Eisenhower engaged with change in a positive, constructive way to make America better in every way — economically, militarily, and as he liked to say,

“spiritually.”

Just think: Eisenhower was born in the age of the horse and buggy, yet he supported an interstate highway system that today bears his name.

Eisenhower was born before the Wright Brothers first flew at Kitty Hawk, yet he deployed the B-52 bomber, the U-2 spy plane, ICBMs, and space satellites.

Eisenhower served in uniform when wars between superpowers were possible — and happened — but he was president when a superpower war was unthinkable.

Eisenhower was born a little more than a decade after Reconstruction ended, when the South practiced segregation. Yet as president, Eisenhower signed the Civil Rights Act of 1957, the first major civil rights act since Reconstruction, and he sent federal troops to Little Rock to implement desegregation.

Eisenhower was born at the tail end of America’s long century of isolationism, yet he became part of the World War II generation that fostered a new internationalism for the U.S., helping this country become an active superpower on the world stage, a role unthinkable when Eisenhower was born. As a symbol of America’s growing power and commitment, Eisenhower oversaw the admission of two new states, the most distant and far-flung of the 50 states. And here, too, Eisenhower applied balance. He hesitated to admit Alaska because it was so undeveloped and would require much federal aid. But he balanced Alaska’s admission with the entry of Hawaii, a much more developed and commercial state that would need less federal aid.

Eisenhower guided the nation through bewildering change.

Yet here again, he applied a healthy balance. For all the modern technology he witnessed, for all the enormous growth of the federal government and grants and aid to huge universities and corporations, he still thought that the cure for cancer might be found by a solitary individual tinkering in a home attic.

For all the new modern measures of national prestige, such as a high-tech military, human spaceflight, modern interstate highways, Eisenhower still believed the best reflection of a nation’s greatness were old-fashioned virtues: productive farmers, healthy industry, grocery stores stocked with food, comfortable homes, a strong economy.

These were, again, Eisenhower principles — principles that stand the test of time. They will ring true centuries from now, when people still come to this memorial and reflect on Eisenhower and appreciate his leadership.

Eisenhower’s old-fashioned, time-honored virtues will continue to balance well with the world’s modern progress, as long as this memorial and this country exist.

So whenever we visit these beautiful four acres, we have to appreciate Eisenhower’s journey. He went from Abilene to a permanent memorial here in Washington. He represents the perfect balance between venerable small-town America, the nation’s capital, and everything in between. That balance was a guiding principle for Eisenhower, and it is enshrined here on this site. This new memorial celebrates a great American, his principles, and his lifelong service to our country — and the memorial gives visitors a chance to contemplate all of that.

Yanek Mieczkowski



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He has worked as a Writing Fellow for Oxford University Press and contributed more than forty articles to OUP's American National Biography. He is an editorial board member of ABC-CLIO's award-winning "Idea Exchange" program, writing a dozen articles for its "Enduring Questions" series.



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