

## Intelligence in Public Media

### ***The Age of Eisenhower: America and the World in the 1950s***

William I. Hitchcock (Simon and Schuster, 2018), 672 pages, acknowledgments, notes, bibliography, index, photos.

### **Reviewed by James Van Hook**

*Occasionally, we realize that we have overlooked an important contribution to the literature of intelligence. Reviewer James Van Hook corrects one such oversight in this assessment of William Hitchcock's best-selling history of the Eisenhower administration, first published in 2018.*

— Ed.

The 1950s—and especially the Dwight D. Eisenhower administration (1953–61)—were foundational in CIA's development. Although created in 1947, not until the early 1950s did the CIA begin to develop its place in national security policy making, consolidating around a stable bureaucratic structure and able to undertake long-term collection and analytic programs that by the end of the decade provided a more detailed and strategically accurate picture of the Soviet threat. Intelligence professionals today continue to look to the 1950s for lessons learned on everything from covert action to analytic support to policymakers. Yet one of the enduring challenges for intelligence professionals and scholars is placing the agency into its historical context.

William Hitchcock's history of the Eisenhower administration provides just such context. Hitchcock has spent his career writing about the Western allies during the early Cold War—his first book was on US policy toward post-World War II France—and he is now Corcoran Professor of History at the University of Virginia. In *The Age of Eisenhower: America and the World in the 1950s*, Hitchcock aims to make three general points about the Eisenhower presidency. First, he shows how Eisenhower established the foundations for a long-term Cold War strategy, instead of Truman's ad hoc containment approach epitomized by the Korean War. Second, Eisenhower set out to create an enduring political-social consensus in the United States that combined core elements of the New Deal, such as social security, with traditional moderate, pro-business Republicanism. Lastly, and perhaps the element least appreciated at the time, he established a modern presidential mode of governance that lent a greater discipline to structures that had arisen

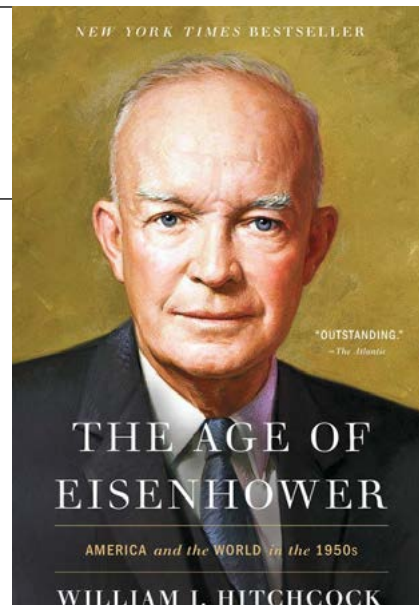
since the Roosevelt administration.

Central to Eisenhower's presidency was his strategy for the Cold War. He became president in 1953 in part by promising to end the Korean War, which he felt had grown into a

quagmire. He walked away from that conflict determined to avoid getting entangled in proxy wars, as shown by his frantic efforts to avoid involvement in Vietnam, when French forces there collapsed in 1954. Instead, he aimed to develop a long-term strategy for the Cold War that would survive the vicissitudes of US politics and economic fluctuations.

On the surface, Eisenhower's strategy, and that of Secretary of State John Foster Dulles (brother of CIA Director Allen Dulles), offered a "New Look" that promised to roll back Soviet influence rather than just contain it. In reality, however, recognizing that the United States could not match the Soviet Union weapon by weapon or in manpower, Eisenhower reshaped the nascent national security enterprise into a system centered on policymaking led by the National Security Council and based on a manageable defense budget focused around nuclear weapons rather than expensive conventional forces. Eisenhower's reliance on CIA-led covert action—about which more below—were crucial to this strategy.

The flip side of Eisenhower's long-term Cold War strategy was his effort to guide American politics and ease, or at least, recast, the ideological conflicts that had driven the US political system since the Great Depression. To that end, he was determined to shape American conservatism in the Republican Party in ways that lasted



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until the arrival of Ronald Reagan 30 years later. As he entered the race for the party's presidential nomination in 1952, he blocked the Old Guard around Senator Robert Taft, a wing that with the help of McCarthyism had come to dominate the Republicans. Taft, and by extension McCarthy, represented the small-town Midwestern form of conservatism: suspicious of government and virulently anti-communist. To relative moderates in the party who felt more comfortable with two-time nominee Thomas Dewey, Eisenhower saved the party and big-business capitalism from the radical populists. As president, Eisenhower shaped a consensus later known as Rockefeller Republicanism that ideologically pushed back against the dynamic of the New Deal while retaining its popular programs, with balanced budgets and pro-market ideology.

CIA played a crucial role not just in Eisenhower's Cold War strategy, but indirectly in his overall governing philosophy of keeping costs low; a prime motive for making use of CIA's covert action capabilities was to achieve vital foreign policy ends on the cheap. Hitchcock adopts a critical view of CIA's role within Eisenhower's overall Cold War strategy. He implies that DCI Allen Dulles, who took over from Bedell Smith in 1953 and led the CIA until John F. Kennedy fired him after the Bay of Pigs disaster, capitalized on Eisenhower's effort to avoid a hot war with communist forces after the Korean War ended in 1953, while pushing back on perceived communist inroads into what Eisenhower administration officials and the coalescing foreign policy establishment referred to as the "free world." Dulles spotted this willingness of Eisenhower to embrace covert action with the 1953 coup against Iranian premier Mohammed Mossadegh, a feat repeated in Guatemala with the ouster of Jacobo Arbenz Guzman in 1954. Along with covert action, Eisenhower enthusiastically embraced Dulles's sponsorship of the U-2 program, which provided a gold mine of intelligence on Soviet strategic capabilities.

By the late 1950s, Eisenhower's system began to unravel. Hitchcock's account of the last years of Eisenhower's presidency is the book's most dramatic and

offers a brilliant narrative of how all the different strands of Eisenhower's governing strategy—an enduring Cold War defense posture resting on a continuum from nuclear threats to covert action combined with balanced budgets and sober administration—began to fall apart under the onslaught of a reinvigorated Democratic Party with a youthful leader in John F. Kennedy.

Eisenhower's approach had always been vulnerable to the widespread fear during the 1950s that the Soviets represented a larger, almost omnipresent threat. Unbeknown to most of the public until 1960, Eisenhower administration officials and some in Congress benefited from the groundbreaking U-2 intelligence that revealed the Soviet Union's nuclear forces were not as robust as commonly thought. When the Soviets launched Sputnik in 1957, however, the dam holding back the sum of all fears broke and the administration struggled to address public pressures to acknowledge—inaccurately, according to CIA assessments at the time—that Eisenhower had underestimated the Soviet threat. Democrats, including Kennedy, who had access to CIA analysis, hammered the Eisenhower administration relentlessly on all manner of domestic and foreign policies, especially Eisenhower's containment strategy as both too dangerous (as it relied too much on nuclear retaliation), and too weak (with insufficient conventional forces to counter Soviet proxy wars in the developing world), including in Southeast Asia. With this in mind, the Bay of Pigs invasion, green-lighted by the Eisenhower administration in 1960, represented an ignominious end to Eisenhower's foreign policy and the Allen Dulles era at CIA.

Hitchcock offers a comprehensive and helpful history of the Eisenhower administration that should resonate among readers who may not specialize in any particular aspect of the Eisenhower era but who require a good overview to guide them to the larger arena of historical literature on the 1950s and America's role in the Cold War. For intelligence historians and readers of this publication in particular, *The Age of Eisenhower* offers a well written, judicious, and appropriately critical account of Eisenhower presidency that is well worth the read.



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