

Eisenhower and War

by George Friedman - October 29, 2021

In my mind, Dwight Eisenhower was one of the great American presidents, and in particular, he was one of the few presidents who really understood global strategy. That was not a surprise given who he had been. But what is interesting is that his presidency was relatively free of military adventures. He ended the Korean War as his first act, blocked British, French and Israeli operations during the Suez crisis, intervened in Lebanon for a short time and rapidly withdrew after achieving a clear goal, refused to involve the U.S. in Indochina alongside the French, and built significant alliances (he was the first commander of NATO). One of the greatest generals in American history, he was deeply cautious about and even averse to the use of military force. Since he was the only president in the 20th and 21st centuries to have had senior command of a war, his aversion is interesting and worth considering in light of Afghanistan and other conflicts.

We all remember Eisenhower's warning about the military-industrial complex and sometimes misinterpret it as a fear of a conspiracy by the military and contractors. But when he issued his warning, the general who organized the invasion of Europe and defeat of Germany was not seeing the military, or the corporations that produced the weapons that defeated Hitler, as a threat. What he was warning against was that Congress and even presidents were not doing their jobs in overseeing this complex. Generals necessarily want substantial armies and weapons. They are focused on their job and being responsible in that context. Defense companies were indispensable in World War II, and the creation of defense production lines was fiendishly expensive. Of course they wanted to sell weapons to the military. Each was doing its job, but Eisenhower was wary because, while their jobs had to be done, Congress and the president had to understand their imperatives and manage them. His warning was not that they were up to no good, as many read it. It was a warning that the U.S. government had to be aware of their necessarily limited views and management. His fear was that presidents and congressmen would not do their jobs but would allow the military-industrial complex to do its job without controls.

Eisenhower issued a second warning. He warned against having too large a military force. This is odd for a president who had commanded the largest military force in history, but it was precisely because of his experience that he expressed this concern. He worried that an excessive force would be too tempting and would cause the United States to engage in wars casually. He saw a situation in which military force would shift from the last resort to the first. Eisenhower believed in the limits of

power. In Korea, he ended the war in a stalemate because he regarded the war as not worth the cost. Harry Truman had entered the war in spite of strategic considerations because in the course of a few days he felt the need to do something, and the only option he had was military. Truman did not have the opportunity to calmly consider the costs of the war, intervention by China and Russia, and the diversion of forces from Europe, the major area of concern. Truman was concerned with credibility, a word that haunts American foreign policy. Credibility is the belief that failing to act would embolden hostile forces.

This was a difficult policy to fulfill. The commitment to defend Europe meant that the U.S. had to have a large force in place and in reserve. That large force wound up being used in other places like Vietnam. Containing the growth of a military force while engaged in a fundamentally important confrontation is impossible. Eisenhower understood this but still believed the principle. The U.S. military would have taken on a different look after the fall of the Soviet Union if his principle had been followed. The contraction would have been more substantial.

From Eisenhower's point of view, the U.S. did not have to concern itself with credibility. American history would show any enemy not to underestimate American will and power. The Japanese and Germans had learned that, and their experience brought the U.S. all the credibility it needed. Rather, he argued that the promiscuous use of force would drain and disperse U.S. military force, and create conflicts that had no clear value to the U.S. in victory, and hurt its credibility in defeat. Eisenhower was presented with numerous opportunities to insert forces, as happened in Indochina. He knew war and knew that winning wars is hard, and thus should be pursued only when a direct U.S. interest is at stake. It also, above all else, had to have a compelling and practical goal, proportionate to American interests and worth the possibility of casualties, which should always be substantially overestimated from the first military analysis. War planners always overestimate the importance of a conflict and underestimate the possibility of defeat. War planners turn into warfighters, and they need to believe. Presidents need to doubt the importance of a war and the confidence of advisers and commanders.

The use of war as a foreign policy tool should be rare, while the use of small-scale covert operations more extensive. During World War II, Eisenhower learned the value of the Office of Strategic Services and applied it with the CIA. But he had commanded a large-scale war in Europe and understood that while that was essential to the United States, it should not become a habit, as he had learned that defeat was always a possibility. A large military has a large number of careers at stake. If war is a profession, no professional wants to sit around waiting. The availability of force will trigger the promiscuous use of force, with lunatic goals like eliminating terrorism in Afghanistan, a

country where terrorism is the national sport. Or trying to get a force designed to fight on the North European Plain to engage in a tropical guerrilla war in Vietnam. Lack of forces limits opportunities for wishful thinking even among the best and brightest.

Eisenhower more than anyone understood the dangers of a small military if the enemy chooses to surprise you. He knew a larger force that he might be comfortable with was inevitable. The solution he found was the creation of global alliances, starting with NATO and then with multilateral and bilateral relationships. It was not the Democrats who created the post-war alliance system but a fairly conservative Republican whose goal was to have allies shoulder the burden of war, but who wound up doing the opposite, with the U.S. rushing to the aid of allies unable or unwilling to defend themselves. Eisenhower's vision might have worked under Eisenhower, who did not feel that wars liable to fail enhanced U.S. credibility. But after he left office, these "prestige wars" as I would call them continued to be waged without a definition of victory.

It is interesting to remember that Eisenhower was despised by left and right. The left regarded him as stupid, incapable of speaking coherently and showing little concern for newly created countries. Jokes were made of his limited grasp of foreign policy. He was also attacked from the far right. The John Birch Society (the leading conspiracy believers) thought that Eisenhower was a communist agent, primarily for his refusing to take Berlin and giving it to Russia. They published a book called "The Politician" showing him as maneuvering into this position. Eisenhower did refuse to take Berlin, but he did so because he didn't feel that it was worth tens of thousands or hundreds of thousands of dead. One extreme looked down on him because being a general didn't give him the smooth polish they confused with intelligence, and the other thought him a traitor for protecting lives at the end of a war. America is unchanged, which, oddly, Eisenhower wouldn't mind.

Eisenhower is emerging as the president to base a strategy on. He was far from perfect, of course, making his share of mistakes and changing policies. All presidents do. But he did provide a framework for thinking about how to move beyond the forever wars we have fought.

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