Chapter One

Years of Preparation, 1890–1941

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Introduction

For many people, Dwight David Eisenhower represents the American Dream in action: the idea that a poor boy from a hardscrabble family living in a small town in the middle of America could rise to become one of the most important military commanders in United States if not modern history, and then follow that with two terms in office as president of the United States at the height of its economic and political influence in the world. For scholars attempting to make sense of Eisenhower's accomplishments, part of the exploration requires understanding the formative experiences that helped to shape his outlook, capabilities, and motivations. If, as Henry Kissinger has pointed out, officials in positions of great responsibility have no time once in office to develop an interpretive framework with which to understand what they are observing but must instead rely upon the ones they created earlier in life, what was Eisenhower's and how did he construct it (Kissinger, 1979: 54)? How, as scholars, can we decide which events shaped the future leader? How do we know what made the formative years or events formative? Relying upon Eisenhower's own recollections and reflections, historians have traced much of this story, but not entirely, particularly as more comes to light about the things that Eisenhower may not have wished to remember or did not want others to ponder much about his legacy. Moreover, scholars seeking to understand the man must contextualize what Eisenhower experienced, to be able to make sense of certain events or times even if Eisenhower himself did not fully understand at the time.

Eisenhower has been the object of lengthy biographical works since the end of World War II and will likely remain so for the foreseeable future. The more prominent earlier biographies include Kenneth S. Davis, *Soldier of Democracy* (1945); Steve Neal, *The Eisenhowers: Reluctant Dynasty* (1978), and Stephen E. Ambrose's two-volume work (1983–1984). Ambrose's biography, while a standard in the field, must also be

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qualified by the later revelations that Eisenhower had not, in fact, approached Ambrose to write the work and that Ambrose did not conduct the extensive interviews with Ike that he later claimed to have done (Rayner, 2010; Rives, 2010). The most recent full-life treatments include Carlo D'Este, *Eisenhower: A Soldier's Life* (2002); Michael Korda, *Ike: An American Hero* (2007); and Jean Edward Smith, *Eisenhower in War and Peace* (2012). Each of these recent works draws upon the earlier standard biographies, Eisenhower's own published reminiscences, particularly (for this period) *At Ease: Stories I Tell to Friend*s (1967), and the plethora of archival material available at the Eisenhower Presidential Library and elsewhere.

Childhood, 1890–1911

Dwight D. Eisenhower was born on October 14, 1890, in Denison, Texas, where his father David was working for a railroad. Shortly afterwards, the family moved back to Abilene, Kansas, where David and Ida Eisenhower had been married in 1885 and with which the Eisenhower name would be forever associated. David Eisenhower's family had been farmers and businessmen, members of the Church of the United Brethren in Christ, or River Brethren, who moved to Kansas from Pennsylvania in the 1870s in a great migration organized by his grandfather Jacob. Dwight D. Eisenhower's mother Ida, though born in Virginia, followed her brothers on the migration in 1883 (Neal, 1978).

Once back in Abilene, Dwight and his five brothers enjoyed a modest upbringing in a lower-class house on the south (and poorer) side of town. His father worked at the creamery, while his mother raised the boys. Historians, channeling Eisenhower's own reminiscences and those of his brothers, note the great influence of both parents in shaping the boys' determination, discipline, ruggedness, and responsibility. Physically and emotionally warm, Ida in particular was selfless, hardworking, and very religious. Observers in the 1940s and historians since have also presented Abilene of this era as the quintessential American small town, one where the boys could have grown up safe and happy, exposed to both the country and the street, and where success in life could be measured on a much smaller scale than it might be a century later, while opportunities abounded for any who sought to strike out for greater things (Kornitzer, 1955; Jameson, 1961). Biographical treatments detailing the boyhood adventures and formative experiences in Abilene include the most recent by D'Este (2002), Korda (2007), and Smith (2012), and all frequently draw upon Eisenhower's own recollections in *At Ease* (Eisenhower, 1967).

One area of particular interest more recently for scholars plumbing Eisenhower's wartime and presidential thinking, particularly on the dangers of nuclear warfare, has been his religious influences. Here, however, much less is known, perhaps because Eisenhower himself left little information about his religious views and was not especially active in his practice, and because of the particular circumstances of his upbringing. Through his extended family, Eisenhower was brought up within the cultural milieu of the River Brethren sect. Religious guidance appears to have come mostly from his mother Ida, who later turned toward what would later become known as the Jehovah's Witnesses, while the boys were young. By the 1950s, when Eisenhower was in the public eye, and then in the 1960s, when he was shaping his legacy, this religious denomination remained on the periphery of Christianity in America. Several scholars have suggested that Eisenhower and his brothers deliberately downplayed discussion of Ida's influence lest there be negative consequences of association with what was seen by mainstream Christians as a fringe millennial sect (this at a time when it was still controversial that a Catholic would run for, let alone win, the office of president) (Bergman, 1998, 1999; Smith 2006).

Eisenhower did not refer to religious influence much in his writings, and the archival materials do not support any sense that he and his wife Mamie had an active religious life. (Smith 2006; Holmes, 2012) His recognized familiarity with the Bible stemmed from deep exposure in childhood, through his mother. D'Este notes that by the time Ike went to West Point, he had read the Bible twice through (D'Este, 2002: 33). Ida apparently directed Ike toward religious, ethical, and moral instruction to temper his growing fascination with the ancient wars of the Greeks and Romans. Reading *The Pilgrim's Progress* was, according to Gary Smith, particularly influential (Wirt, 1965; Smith 2006). While as an adult he did not formally join a church (but maintained, through Mamie, an alignment with the Presbyterian Church), his relationship with God appears to have been deep and personal, if not expressed publicly or through his papers.

West Point, 1911–1915

Graduating from high school in 1909, Eisenhower was not admitted to West Point until 1911. He spent the two years working to pay for his brother Edgar to attend the University of Michigan, in an arrangement that was to have seen Edgar make Ike's attendance possible. Chance led to Eisenhower applying for Annapolis and West Point, and securing the appointment to the military academy in January. His four years there were both formative and transformative. Attracted initially more by the opportunity to play sports and obtain a college degree than by the idea of a military career, Eisenhower changed under West Point's emphasis on teamwork and the suppression of individuality in favor of the corporate. Biographers have explored how Eisenhower developed his abilities as a leader and guide here. Not an academic standout, he impressed his peers well enough that they granted him influence over them. The traits he acquired at West Point, particularly in organizational ability, competitive energy, and motivation, would be key to his continued success, a point highlighted by David Jablonsky among others (Holland, 2001; Jablonsky, 2010). The West Point that Eisenhower saw has been well described by historians (Ambrose, 1966; Fleming, 1969; Ellis and Moore, 1974).

Active participation in athletics, and particularly football, was a key motivator for Eisenhower at this point (indeed, it was part of the reason he went there) (D'Este, 2002: 67). Eisenhower was involved in football at the exact time when the modern rules, particularly involving passing and downs, were developed. The 1912 Army–Carlisle Indian School game saw Eisenhower struggle against the great Jim Thorpe, and he watched from the sidelines the famous 1913 Army–Notre Dame game (where Notre Dame's successful repeated use of the forward pass brought this existing play to common notice). This, Ambrose and others note, tweaked his attention and his enthusiasm, and he was urged to coach the junior varsity team, which he did very well.

Though he would never play again (he wrenched his knee, with permanent damage, after the 1912 Carlisle game) he would continue to coach, and acquired a strong reputation for his coaching. While Eisenhower's involvement was significant more in retrospect, historians such as Lars Anderson have focused on the 1912 game as a key one in the sport's history (Anderson, 2008). On the history of football, development of its rules, and its significance in this period in understanding the context of Eisenhower's experiences, see also the works by David Nelson (1994) and John Watterson (2002). But the emphasis on athletics as part of military preparation was not unique to Eisenhower by any means, and provided part of his bonding with his fellow officers in the years to come (Holland, 2001).

World War I and Fort Meade after the War, 1915–1922

In his first years after West Point, Eisenhower established the key professional friendships that lasted through his career, grasped the measure of the responsibilities that his chosen career entailed, and met the love of his life. Without these firm connections, it might well have been the case that the subsequent disappointments with his experiences in World War I and the years immediately after would have destroyed his career. With his knee injury ruling out cavalry service, and having considered going to Argentina to seek his fortune, Eisenhower opted for the infantry and had requested service in the Philippines when he graduated in June 1915. He was instead assigned to the 19th Infantry Regiment at Fort Sam Houston near San Antonio, Texas, and arrived there in late 1915. Historians have tended to focus on his coaching football for two different institutions (Peacock Military Academy and St. Louis College), learning the rudiments of being a junior officer, gaining a lifelong friend in Leonard T. "Gee" Gerow, and meeting Mamie Doud, whom he would marry in July 1916. Mamie's perspective on their courtship is covered in the work by her granddaughter Susan Eisenhower (Eisenhower, 1996). Eisenhower would also be caught up in the aftermath of the Pancho Villa raid on New Mexico and the mobilization of the National Guard to the frontier. He requested service with Pershing's Punitive Expedition, which was rejected; instead he was assigned to training a newly mobilized National Guard regiment—the 7th Illinois—stationed at Fort Sam Houston. Eisenhower ran most of its training, and D'Este in particular sees this as a significant moment in Eisenhower's career development and his acceptance of an army career (D'Este, 2002; Coffman, 2004).

When the United States entered World War I in April 1917, the officers and enlisted men of the existing army formed the cadre around which to build the massive wartime army. In May, Eisenhower was assigned to the new 57th Regiment. As supply officer, Eisenhower had the responsibility of acquiring the necessary essentials to make the unit come together. Under great pressure and competition for scarce resources, Eisenhower learned the importance of logistics, planning, anticipation, and foresight. Effective at the task, he came to hope that he would go overseas with the unit. (Interestingly, it was never sent abroad.) Instead, the army saw fit in September to use his skills at Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia, at one of the eight Officer Training Schools with which the army would obtain—after only 90 days—the essential lieutenants to command the drafted soldiers in the American Expeditionary Force (AEF), a process detailed by J. Garry Clifford and decried most recently by Richard Faulkner (Clifford, 1972; Faulkner, 2012). Several weeks later the army realigned officer training under the divisions, and Eisenhower transferred to Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, to oversee training of new officers there. Despite his repeated requests for combat duty, Eisenhower's skills at training and organizing kept him right where he was. While this was going on, Mamie had given birth to their first son, Doud David (known as "Icky"), and was raising him while she remained in Texas. (It is worth noting that the correct spelling is Icky, but some biographers have persisted with the spelling "Ikky.")

Eisenhower's career shifted in February 1918. Assigned to Camp Meade, Maryland, and the 65th Engineers, he found himself involved in the creation of the first tank units for the US Army. Ambrose suggests, Smith echoes, and Matthew Holland cites materials from the Eisenhower Library to clarify that Eisenhower had taken a course on tanks at Fort Leavenworth, but the other major biographies do not note this as determinative in why Eisenhower went to Fort Meade (Ambrose, 1983; Holland, 2001; Smith, 2012). The true reason may well be that the first director of the Tank Corps being assembled there was Lt. Col. Ira C. Welborn. According to Holland, Welborn had been Eisenhower's superior at Fort Oglethorpe and specifically requested Eisenhower when he moved to Meade. Preparing the 301st Tank Battalion to go overseas, Eisenhower threw himself into the task, but learned that his success was his undoing: Welborn needed him to continue training others.

Rather than going to France, Eisenhower went instead to Camp Colt, Pennsylvania (adjacent to Gettysburg), to oversee the army's new tank-training facility. Deeply disappointed at the evaporation of his chance to go to war, Eisenhower had been given, nonetheless, a very significant responsibility. Arriving in March 1918, he had by July more than 10,600 officers and men under his command at a sprawling facility, and by October he had been promoted temporarily to lieutenant colonel at the age of 28. By war's end, some 20 tank battalions had been created and undergone initial training under Eisenhower's purview. Most accounts of Eisenhower dwell on the stories recorded of his experiences there rather than on the work done to create the idea of a tank corps, but we should recognize that the real mark on Eisenhower was the positive feedback of running what was a substantial organization, engaging problems of leadership and morale (including the ravages of the Spanish flu coming through the camp), and doing it well. At last in November he received orders to sail for France to take command of a tank unit there. The armistice of November 1918 stopped that. Eisenhower instead oversaw the reduction of Camp Colt in December, and withdrawal of materials to the Tank Corps to Fort Benning, Georgia. After a short time at Fort Benning, Eisenhower went to Camp Meade in March 1919. The Tank Corps would be based permanently at Camp Meade. The tank units that had been overseas now returned, and with George S. Patton in Washington, DC with the Tank Board, Eisenhower was assigned temporary command of the 304th Tank Brigade. Eisenhower remained embarrassed by his having missed the war, but Ambrose suggests that, in a way, it meant that he would not be burdened with the later fears and memories that haunted others, such as Marshall, who did see combat and its effects (Ambrose 1983; Wilson, 1989).

Another formative, if under-examined, event for Eisenhower was his participation in the army's famous Transcontinental Motor Convoy in July–September 1919. Eisenhower volunteered to be a Tank Corps observer, together with Maj. Sereno

Brett, and joined nearly 300 other participants. Patton held Brett in high esteem as an aggressive tank officer who had commanded one of the two tank battalions in France. Like Patton and Eisenhower, Brett had chosen to remain on after the war, but unlike his two more famous peers his life and his influence have largely escaped historical notice (he did not, for example, have a Wikipedia page until 2012). Eisenhower and Brett thus accompanied the convoy shortly after its departure from Washington, DC (joining at Frederick, Maryland) and accompanied it all the way to San Francisco. Along the way they came to understand much about the endurance capabilities of the vehicles available at the time and the poor condition of the national road network in the United States. Most historical observers do little more than cite this as a formative event that influenced Eisenhower's later efforts to establish the Interstate Highway System, though Carlo D'Este provides among the best accounts yet. He also notes that Eisenhower himself remembered the event in his *At Ease*, mostly for the shenanigans that he and Brett got up to on the trip (Wickman, 1990; D'Este, 2002: 140–143; Davies, 2003). Considering the intensity of the previous two and a half years, it may well be that this simply was for Eisenhower his first well-deserved rest since the summer of 1916.

Following the transcontinental trip, Eisenhower returned to Camp Meade, where he, George Patton, and other tank enthusiasts considered the implications of the new devices for the future of warfare amid the unwinding of the massive wartime army. Historians have rightly pointed out the significance of this period both in Eisenhower's life and in the development of the US military. Eisenhower and George Patton, living and working closely together, developed a lifelong personal and professional relationship, as D'Este in particular has exhaustively detailed (D'Este, 1995, 2002). At Camp Meade through 1919 and 1920 Patton, Eisenhower, and others (though who these others were is little detailed in the standard biographies) worked on armor and ideas for using tanks in future combat. Eisenhower also took over the coaching of the Fort Meade football team, though he felt that he was past this duty.

Eisenhower's personal life also swayed greatly. Mamie joined Ike at Camp Meade in 1919 only to return to her parents in Denver after several weeks of dismal living conditions. Rejoining Ike in 1920, she and son Icky fashioned comfortable married quarters next door to the Pattons, and most biographers identify this as a pleasant year for them, though perhaps best seen as calm before the storm of professional chaos and, in January 1921, the death of Icky from scarlet fever. Most biographers, drawing on Eisenhower's own remembrance, note that the death was significant and long felt for both parents, and a turning point in the marriage (Eisenhower, 1967). Interestingly, no biographer notes that it led to any special turn toward religion, as a similar death of a child had motivated Ike's mother Ida.

Professional turmoil as well occurred. Eisenhower, Patton, and others, at the urging of Brig. Gen. Samuel Rockenbach, the new head of the Tank Corps, formulated their thinking about armor into articles that would be circulated to the army through its professional journals (Eisenhower, 1920; Wilson, 1989). Though Secretary of War Newton Baker and Army Chief of Staff Peyton C. Marsh wanted tanks to become an independent branch, AEF commander and General of the Armies John J. Pershing did not. Congress deferred to his wishes. With the 1920 National Defense Act, the Tank Corps merged into the Infantry. Eisenhower, for his outspokenness, would face rebuke from the Chief of Infantry, while Patton opted to transfer to the cavalry instead of remaining in what now seemed to be a professional dead end. Ideas for how to use armored vehicles in war continued to circulate, but their position in the army would not change for more than a decade (Johnson, 1998).

It was at a dinner organized by George Patton at Camp Meade that Eisenhower met Brig. Gen. Fox Conner, who would profoundly alter Eisenhower's career and life. Conner had been Pershing's chief of operations and consequently held particular sway in the army in the years after the war. Conner, impressed by his lengthy conversation with Eisenhower after the dinner, began to shape the direction of Eisenhower's career. For all the significance of the meeting, it is remarkable that biographers have given different dates for it, though Holland believes it to have been in June 1920, citing the diary of Floyd Parks, while D'Este argues for September 1919 (Holland, 2001; D'Este, 2002; Smith, 2012).

Transformation, 1922–1926

The four most critical years for Eisenhower's professional intellectual development were those from 1922 to 1926. During this time, Eisenhower served under the close tutelage of Brig. Gen. Fox Conner in Panama, and then, with Conner's intervention, attended the Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth. In his early thirties, Eisenhower was also experiencing the additional transformative experiences of being a father once more, with the birth of son John S. Doud in 1922, and keeping a family together through difficult assignments.

Eisenhower went to Panama at the express request and intervention of Brigadier General Conner. As Jean Edward Smith points out, neither Eisenhower himself nor the first generation of biographers (including Ambrose) explained the full circumstances for Conner's subsequent intervention (or the debt Eisenhower would owe Conner). Ambrose writes that Brig. Gen. Samuel Rockenbach repeatedly blocked Eisenhower's 1921 requests for transfer elsewhere, on the grounds that Ike was essential for the Tank Corps (and Camp Meade's football team), and that this changed with Pershing becoming army chief of staff. That opened the way for Conner to have Pershing approve a transfer, and it came out of the blue (Ambrose, 1983). The reality was more complex. Conner had, in early 1921, indicated to Eisenhower that he desired him to be his executive officer in Panama with the 20th Infantry Brigade. Eisenhower's chain of command disagreed (D'Este [2002] concurs with Ambrose that it was Rockenbach who blocked it). This happened weeks after the death of Icky and could only have darkened the mood. Then, in the summer of 1921, the army investigated Eisenhower for financial irregularities: he had improperly drawn around $250 in reimbursement for Icky's stay in Iowa with family in 1920. Despite Eisenhower's repayment of the money, and the support of his superiors, the army's inspector general wanted to make an example of Eisenhower for the signing of a financial document and misuse of public funds. The investigation dragged on through December 1921, and there were preparations for a court martial. Ike's career would likely have been over. At this point, as Smith clarifies, Conner intervened with Pershing (who had become chief of staff in July 1921), who presumably then pressed the inspector general to reconsider an earlier rejected punishment of formal reprimand. This rebuke then came from a senior officer who was also a close friend of Conner's.

Shortly afterwards (within days) Dwight and Mamie left for Panama. Conner's intervention could not have been invisible to Eisenhower, even if he did not share it with others later (Holland, 2001; Smith, 2012).

In Panama, Eisenhower's involvement with Conner extended far beyond his nominal duties as executive officer while Conner commanded the 20th Infantry Brigade. Part of the Panama Canal Division, formed in 1921 (and deactivated in 1932), the unit was based at Camp Gaillard in the Canal Zone (Wilson, 1997). For Eisenhower, the daily responsibilities were comparatively light, if the living conditions were dreary and the pressures on the marriage great. Conner, sensing Eisenhower's mood, quickly pushed him to read and think about military affairs rather than dwell on the recent personal and professional calamities. The result was an intense intellectual study that Eisenhower himself later referred to as a "sort of graduate school in military affairs," that shaped his thinking for the remainder of his career (Eisenhower, 1967: 183–185).

Perhaps because he served in a staff role during the war (he was too valuable for combat) and because he never became chief of staff (Douglas MacArthur was his rival), historians have remembered Fox Conner more for his influence over Marshall and Eisenhower than for his own accomplishments. Most note his wealthy Mississippi upbringing, his graduation from West Point in 1898, and his successful career that saw Pershing select him for the AEF's staff. From November 1917 onwards, Conner was the G-3 (assistant chief of staff for operations) and among his smartest subordinates was Lt. Col. George C. Marshall. Had Eisenhower's assignment been anywhere but the remote one in Panama, Conner might not have had the time to be the valuable teacher to the willing student. Though more could be done, there has been some focused scholarly work on Conner (Bigelow, 1984; Brown, 1987; Kingseed, 1990). Possible mentoring lessons are the focus of works by Edward Cox and F. Douglas Mehle (Mehle, 1978; Cox, 2010). Conner's role on Pershing's staff is recounted in James Cooke's study of the AEF command and staff (Cooke, 1987).

During this time in Panama, Eisenhower had effectively a multi-year individual tutorial in military strategy and policy under Conner's close direction. Beginning with historical fiction to rekindle his interest (Ike had lost his enthusiasm for history at West Point), Eisenhower then moved on to serious history while drawing on Conner's personal library. These studies included the US Civil War, the wars of Frederick the Great, the campaigns of Napoleon and the military history and theory of French Army colonel, Ardant du Picq. Conner would quiz Eisenhower extensively on the material and its implications, and in the process conveyed to Ike significant insights about controlling large forces, managing alliances, and anticipating future conflict. In particular, Conner was distilling for Eisenhower the experiences he had gained directing the operations and alliance problems of the AEF. Conner also emphasized to Eisenhower his concerns with the Versailles settlement and the likelihood of war again in Europe, ideas that would later shape Eisenhower's own writings in the 1930s. Comparing him favorably with Marshall (with whom Ike was advised to connect), Conner did not constrain Eisenhower with precise rules on what he should do but rather provided the intellectual framework for him to grapple with the intense psychological challenges of high command as they came up. Most significantly, Conner compelled Eisenhower to read—in its entirety—Carl von Clausewitz's key work *On War*, not once but three times. Eisenhower would later identify this as the most influential work he had ever read (D'Este, 2002). The insights about policy and strategy it contained would guide his actions for the remainder of his public life. Part of the significance of Eisenhower's close study of Clausewitz is that US Army officers in this period were not particularly familiar with Clausewitz or his ideas, though they had heard of him. Only a few motivated officers examined the tome (Conner and Patton among them), most likely through one of the few English translations. It is not clear when Conner digested the work, or what edition Eisenhower read from Conner's library, though we can speculate that Conner owned either the Col. J. J. Graham translation or Maude's subsequent edition of Graham (Pickett, 1985; Bassford, 1994).

Prepared by this tutorial, Eisenhower went on to further instruction at the army's Command and General Staff School. Having left Panama in September 1924, he returned to Camp Meade as much to be a football coach as anything else. Ordered then to Fort Benning to command the 15th Light Tank Battalion, he protested this reassignment personally in vain with the chief of infantry in hopes of going to the Command and General Staff School. As Mark Bender found, Eisenhower had already tentatively been slated to attend Leavenworth for the 1925–1926 class, but no one told him (Bender, 1990). Eisenhower likely also saw Conner, in the same building, who arranged the now-famous diversion. Eisenhower was transferred to the Adjutant General Corps to be a recruiting officer at Fort Logan, Colorado (near Denver, where Mamie and son John were staying) pending his assignment, as the adjutant general's selection (at Conner's request) to Leavenworth for the 1925–1926 class. Given the tutorial (and Patton's notes from his own attendance), few officers were more ready for the year than Eisenhower.

Historians have clarified what the Command and General Staff School experience would have been like for Eisenhower through detailed studies of its development and its evolution through the interwar period (Nenninger, 1978, 1994; Schifferle, 2010; Muth, 2011). The best account of Eisenhower's experience is that of Mark Bender, while Eisenhower's own (unsigned) reflection appeared in *Infantry Journal* (Eisenhower, 1927; Bender, 1990). Part of the success came from Eisenhower's close work with his study partner and old friend Leonard T. Gerow, who would later go on to be one of Eisenhower's key lieutenants if largely overlooked by biographers (Weigley, 1990). The focus was on army tactical and operational-level staff work, and on presenting the "correct" answer to the posed problems. The essential need for teamwork and unity of effort was a lesson that remained with him even if he disagreed with the instilled doctrine (Holland, 2001; Jablonsky, 2010). Graduating at the top of his class (with Gerow right behind him) Eisenhower had completed the course earlier in his career than most and had acquired a reputation for being one of the smartest rising officers in the army.

Washington and Paris, 1926–1931

Over the next three years, Eisenhower's career took him to Washington, DC, to join the American Battle Monuments Commission (ABMC) and the Army War College. A brief interlude at Fort Benning as commander of the 24th Infantry Regiment—the segregated unit being used in support of the Infantry School, and a career backwater for officers—ended with another Fox Conner intervention. In January 1927 Eisenhower joined the ABMC, under the direction of General Pershing, with the responsibility of writing a narrative account of the AEF's time in Belgium and France. After six months of intense work, Eisenhower had written a historical account of the AEF's work in Europe that gained copious praise from Pershing. He finished by August, having learned in the spring that he had also been selected to attend the Army War College that fall. Biographers do not much examine the guide beyond noting its thoroughness and the significance of that assignment as indicating Eisenhower had been marked for greater things. Eisenhower was, however, writing as a historian, and a close analysis of the guide (and what he chose to highlight and omit) against what he had studied at Fort Leavenworth might well yield interesting results.

Eisenhower attended the Army War College in 1927–1928, as did Gee Gerow and others whom he knew at Leavenworth. Located at Fort McNair in Washington, DC, the college emphasized large-scale operations, strategy, industrial mobilization planning, grand strategy, and alliance relations. Historian Benjamin Cooling has indicated that there is little known of Eisenhower's time at the college, other than the research paper he had to write. Subsequent biographers have also accepted this minimalist interpretation, with Ambrose and, later, Smith suggesting it was a relaxing year. But he could not have learned nothing (Cooling, 1975; Ambrose, 1983; Smith, 2012). George Pappas has examined the curriculum, which was mostly a close study of the AEF and its experiences. In one particularly insightful work Holland, looking at Eisenhower's course papers, argues that from the references in them one can appreciate just how broadly Eisenhower had read in military theory and history by this point, and understand better what Eisenhower then did after 1941. It would also have been significant as a time for Eisenhower to connect with other bright rising officers (Pappas, 1967; Ball, 1994; Holland, 2001). But most biographers emphasize the social and cultural life the Eisenhowers experienced in Washington at the Wyoming Apartments, from the close time with brother Milton Eisenhower to the networking that Dwight did with fellow officers and government officials (Cooling, 1975; D'Este, 2002; Smith, 2012).

Upon conclusion of the Army War College tour, Eisenhower had a choice: take a post on the General Staff (a prestigious assignment) or return to the Battle Monuments Commission and go to France, which is what Pershing wanted him to do. Mamie pushed for France. After a year, Eisenhower tired of the work, and according to Smith sought out Conner's intervention once more (Smith, 2012). In November 1929, Ike reported for duty at the War Department as the executive assistant to Maj. Gen. George Van Horn Moseley, the military advisor to the assistant secretary of war, Frederick H. Payne. Payne, Moseley, and thus Eisenhower's charge was to consider the industrial mobilization plan for the country in the event of war. The first 12 or so months were quiet, though Eisenhower worked extensively on economic and industrial issues, and with Bernard Baruch. Moseley's office was out of favor with Chief of Staff Charles P. Summerall, and historians have touched on the subject very little, choosing to concentrate instead on Moseley and his particular views, with the exception of Kerry Irish's account of the 1930 plan and its importance for Ike (Irish, 2006).

Things changed with the arrival of Douglas MacArthur as chief of staff in November 1930. Moseley became MacArthur's deputy, and Eisenhower followed. Assigned to the task of drafting the official procurement and mobilization report for the congressionally established War Policies Commission, Ike successfully pulled off the report and managed the relationship with Congress. As Jablonsky has pointed out, Eisenhower developed a great understanding of the relationship between the industrial and economic resources of a nation and national power and the necessity of interservice cooperation (Eisenhower, 1931; Jablonsky, 2010). Ultimately, the report went nowhere amid the deepening of the Great Depression. The significance of the activities with which Ike was involved, both the industrial mobilization plan and the War Policies Commission, in the longer history of industrial planning for war is clear from the work of Paul Koistinen (Koistinen, 1998). Also notably, for Eisenhower, the work attracted the positive attention of MacArthur, who came to rely more and more on his efforts.

Working for MacArthur, 1931–1939

From late 1931 to 1939, Eisenhower worked closely with Douglas MacArthur, first in Washington and then in Manila. Following the organizational success of the War Policies Commission report, MacArthur asked Eisenhower to stay on for an additional year rather than rotate out to field command in the summer of 1932. Eisenhower agreed, and until late February 1933 was informally attached to MacArthur with an office between the chief of staff and Moseley. From then until October 1935, Ike was effectively MacArthur's executive secretary.

It was a time of intense work for Eisenhower, and, at times, his health declined significantly from overwork. From writing the annual reports to processing the internal memoranda filtering up to the chief of staff, Ike saw how the army functioned in its entirety. He learned from MacArthur as much what to do as what not to do. MacArthur did not mentor; Eisenhower instead simply observed and absorbed. With the United States mired in the Great Depression, the army suffered accordingly from the reduction in resources, and Eisenhower praised MacArthur for the deftness with which he fended off budget cuts. In describing this period of Eisenhower's career, most biographers have emphasized the differences between Eisenhower and MacArthur, the evolution of Eisenhower's political views, and the personal relationships that Ike maintained in Washington at a difficult time (Ambrose, 1983; D'Este, 2002; Smith, 2012). Like a great many educated people in this period, Eisenhower developed particular ideas about an activist president, including ideas about the evolution of the relationship between executive and legislative branches in times of crisis. Some gave Eisenhower the nickname "Dictator Ike" because of his belief in a strong executive. Within months of Franklin D. Roosevelt's inauguration, however, Eisenhower became disillusioned with the role of "theorists and academicians" in the New Deal, but did not stop thinking about the power of the presidency (Holt and Leyerzapf, 1998; Jablonsky, 2010: 25).

Few biographers address much more than that, making it difficult to know fully how much Eisenhower learned from this experience of working for MacArthur. Indeed, one part of Eisenhower's time on MacArthur's staff has largely escaped proper historical study. Eisenhower attended the Army Industrial College (later the Industrial College of the Armed Forces) in 1931, but scholars do not seem to address much more than that fact. It is not entirely clear when he actually attended, what he would have studied beyond supply and industrial policy, and on what he lectured there after he completed the course. D'Este is wrong that Ike created it (Holland, 2001; D'Este, 2006). If so little is known of the experience, how can its non-significance for Eisenhower be so solidly accepted?

Whatever the merits of a strong presidency for the challenges of wartime, Eisenhower's views on federal intervention in disorder in peacetime must also have been formed by his experience with the 1932 Bonus March. The concern among the army and the administration of Herbert Hoover that a communist-inspired revolution was nigh was overblown, and General MacArthur's heavy-handed response is generally regarded as reactionary and unnecessarily provocative. Most of Eisenhower's biographers devote considerable attention to the events of May–June 1932, and historians have generally covered them, as well as their ambiguities. Among the most recent treatments is that of Paul Dickson and Thomas B. Allen (Dickson and Allen, 2004). Smith is critical of Eisenhower's later recollections that he opposed MacArthur's decision to observe the clash in person and found the entire episode distasteful, suggesting that instead Eisenhower was supportive at worst and discreet at best (Smith, 2012). D'Este is more circumspect, noting that while Eisenhower wrote the official after-action report in a positive light and likely shared many of the views of his colleagues about the Bonus March, his personal disgust with the scene was probably sincere at the time (D'Este 2002).

Eisenhower followed MacArthur to the Philippines in October 1935 and remained there with him until December 1939. The four years were, in the judgment of Stephen Ambrose and most others, difficult, neither professionally rewarding nor appropriate for him, personally challenging for the marriage, and ultimately fatal for the relationship between the two officers. Eisenhower did, however, continue his exposure to the very highest levels of budgetary planning and organizational management, albeit for a jump-started foreign army in financial straits (Ambrose, 1983). Though Eisenhower may not have fully grasped what had happened, President Franklin D. Roosevelt extended MacArthur's stay as chief of staff into 1935 to block Moseley from succeeding MacArthur, and then managed to exile MacArthur by dispatching him (though at Manuel Quezon's request) to head the military mission to the Philippines. The islands were to become a commonwealth following the passage of the Tydings-McDuffie Act of 1934 and would become fully independent in 1946. MacArthur loved the idea of returning to the islands to build up their army and accepted his retirement from the US Army as the price. Roosevelt replaced MacArthur with Malin Craig the day after the departure, to the general's great anger. It was exile of a sort, and it would hurt Eisenhower by denying him command time and keeping him at his rank behind his peers.

Defense of the Philippines was not an easy task. MacArthur saw it as a moral obligation, a duty the United States had to continue to uphold. The likely opponent was Japan, and MacArthur entertained the idea that the US Navy would deter the Japanese from invading the islands (not what the navy planned to do) and that if they invaded nonetheless, the defenders would stop them on the beaches, though it was not entirely clear what with. Eisenhower's task, a job shared with his assistant Maj. Jimmy Ord until his death in a flying accident in 1938, was to operationalize MacArthur's larger vision about how a citizen army could be created in short order with minimal financial or industrial resources and limited support from the United States. It was a tall order, and ultimately futile, as the Japanese proved in 1941–1942. MacArthur's views are in his memoirs, while Eisenhower's own writings indicate Ike's dissatisfaction with his lot (MacArthur, 1964; James, 1970; Holt and Leyerzapf, 1998). Jablonsky argues that Eisenhower learned from the negatives and gained a greater appreciation for the importance of unity of effort between the political and military leadership on matters of national defense (Jablonsky, 2010). On the evolving ways the US Army envisioned defending the Pacific outposts, Brian Linn's treatment is especially valuable (Linn, 1997).

Preparation for War, 1939–1941

Eisenhower's return from the Philippines coincided with the intense uncertainty of the beginnings of World War II. Between the political infighting with Maj. Richard D. Sutherland, who poisoned Eisenhower's relationship with MacArthur, and the staff reorganization that occurred while Eisenhower was temporarily in the United States, Eisenhower believed the time was right to leave Manila and return to the regular US Army. Eisenhower wrote to old friends T. J. Davis and Mark Clark, who interceded with James Ulio, the executive officer to the adjutant general. As D'Este and Smith have detailed, Ike renewed his friendship with Mark Clark in the summer of 1938, and this intercession had serious consequences for the next few years and indeed the remainder of Eisenhower's life (Blumenson, 1984; D'Este, 2002; Smith, 2012). Having received orders in May 1939 assigning him to Fort Lewis, Washington, the Eisenhowers departed Manila in December 1939 and arrived at Fort Lewis in January 1940. Upon arrival, Eisenhower became caught up in the large-scale exercise of the Fourth Army along the West Coast that the new chief of staff, George C. Marshall, had set in motion. Eisenhower was temporarily reassigned to the staff of the Fourth Army, headed by Lt. Gen. John L. Dewitt. His responsibility was to study the transportation requirements for moving units into California. By early February, DeWitt released Eisenhower, and he headed at last to Fort Lewis.

The next few months were ones of intense work and constant movement that challenged Eisenhower's ambitions. At Fort Lewis, Eisenhower was executive officer and then, additionally, commander of the 1st Battalion of the 15th, aligned under the 3rd Infantry Division. The regiment soon relocated to Camp Ord, California, as part of the Fourth Army maneuvers that Eisenhower himself had helped to plan. Eisenhower relished this experience of being back in direct command of soldiers in the field, and feared that his position and the expansion of the army might well result in his being pulled away to a staff assignment, something he bitterly opposed.

Eisenhower soon became torn between, on the one hand, his personal desires to continue his career path in the US Army with as much troop command time as possible and, on the other, his strong reputation as an effective planner that led to multiple requests for his services in positions away from command. In short order, Eisenhower confronted or was considered in several possibilities as the army underwent massive expansion and reorganization. Maj. Gen. Walter Krueger, commander of VIII Corps, requested Eisenhower to be his chief of staff shortly after taking command in June 1940 (Ike would learn later of the request and the denial) (Holzimmer, 2007). George Patton and Ike corresponded in September and November 1940 over Patton's suggestion that Eisenhower apply for assignment under him (Patton expected divisional command). As D'Este relates, Eisenhower considered that such an assignment would be the likely apex of his career. In November, Gee Gerow, deputy director of the War Plans Division, asked Eisenhower to join him. Eisenhower demurred, and he reached out to Clark to ask that subsequent requests be blocked. The implications of this are unclear—D'Este suggests that Clark, as a favor to Ike, stopped further requests, while Ambrose believes that not only did Marshall monitor these developments but was manipulating the situation with Eisenhower's assignments, something neither substantiated by the evidence he cites nor reiterated elsewhere. It is an interesting outstanding question, then, to what extent General Marshall was already manipulating Eisenhower's career in 1940–1941.

Despite his turning down Gerow's invitation, Eisenhower advanced steadily upwards through the staff ranks. By the end of November 1940, he became chief of staff of the 3rd Division at Fort Lewis (the parent unit of the 15th), at the request of Maj. Gen. Charles F. Thompson. By March 1941, he had been promoted to full colonel, and assigned as chief of staff for Maj. Gen. Kenyon A. Joyce, commanding the IX Army Corps (which included the 3rd Infantry Division). Eisenhower would have overseen the preparations for the Fourth Army maneuvers to occur in mid-summer at Camp Hunter-Liggett in California. But by mid-June 1941 Lt. Gen. Walter Krueger, commanding the Third Army, secured from George Marshall the reassignment of Eisenhower from IX Corps to Fort Sam Houston, Texas. How and why this happened as quickly as it did, given Ike's earlier protestations, is unclear.

Thus, the Eisenhowers moved once again to San Antonio, Texas, where Ike took up the job of planning the Third Army's efforts against General Ben Lear's Second Army in the famous Louisiana Maneuvers of August–September 1941. The war game, structured by newly promoted Brig. Gen. Mark W. Clark, the assistant chief of staff (G-3), would be observed by Gen. Leslie J. McNair, responsible for organizing the ground forces as chief of staff of the general headquarters, US Army. For the particulars of the maneuvers, see the accounts by Christopher R. Gabel (1992) and Francis G. Smith (1945). Some 27 divisions participated in what was the largest exercise by the US Army prior to World War II in an army where very little of the large-unit staff and command experience from World War I remained. In two separate games, Krueger and Eisenhower's army outmaneuvered Lear's both times. Gaining his first star, Eisenhower also won public attention for his role. As both Ambrose and D'Este explain, Eisenhower's effective planning as well as his good nature, honesty, and modesty impressed reporters who were there observing the maneuvers. Interestingly, D'Este, citing memoirs by Robert Eichelberger in his papers at the US Army Military History Institute, indicates that Krueger was resentful of Eisenhower's getting credit for the planning of the operation. It was Eisenhower, not Krueger, who would go farther.

Following the attack on Pearl Harbor, Eisenhower's career altered forever beyond what he could possibly have imagined. On December 12, 1941, Col. Walter Bedell Smith, the secretary to the general staff, summoned Ike to Washington at General Marshall's request. Eisenhower, thinking it was to be a short trip, packed a single bag.

From the War Plans Division General Eisenhower would go on to become the commander of US Army forces in the European theater in June 1942.

From this point forward, Eisenhower had to draw steadily upon the accumulated knowledge and wisdom from his formative years to guide him in his most difficult decisions. The moral and emotional courage required to lead in combat was something that Eisenhower possessed because of his hard work over the previous decades. It was the physical effort (and setbacks) of the team sports, the emotional turmoil of personal loss and career challenges, the intellectual growth from close study of history and leadership, and the professional experiences in training, organizing, and leading large groups of people that together made Eisenhower a suitable candidate for his subsequent assignments. But it was Eisenhower's ability to draw quickly, effectively, and reliably upon those strengths that enabled him to meet the new dilemmas he confronted. Having been tested before, he could meet the subsequent trials. He only passed them by drawing upon everything he had gained in his formative years before 1941.

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