



Emmet John Hughes

# Eisenhower's White House: Confidence— With Open Doors

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The working life of the White House under Dwight D. Eisenhower, the 34th President, as with every Chief Executive from John Adams to Richard Nixon, largely served as a living mirror to the character of the man in the Oval Office. Or as Harold Laski said of any Presidency a generation ago: "The tone is set from the top." The kinds of men around each Chief Executive, the ways they relate to (and debate with) one another, and the views they hold of their own identities and their own duties to the land beyond the White House gates: all such things tell much about the President whom they serve or disserve.

By comparison with other Presidencies, there seemed to me then — as there seems to me now — a couple of qualities missing in the White House of Dwight Eisenhower. There was a painful lack of practical experience on the national political scene: a Republican Party accustomed for 20 years to the dreary decrial of all works of "that man in the White House" could count among its leaders few men prepared for sudden service as Presidential advisers; and given this heritage, even a Sherman Adams, for all his selfless devotion to the task, could not bring the insight or exert the influence of a Harry Hopkins. And there was an equal lack of hospitality for creative or innovative ideas, also a costly consequence of recent history: the long exile from Presidential power had sealed the party's alienating divorce from the nation's intellectual community, and this Republican regime could never feel the ferment, or dare the dreams, of the earlier times of FDR's "brain

*Leaving aside their special relevance to an investigation of Watergate crimes and improprieties, President Nixon's tape transcripts have provided a unique glimpse of the character of the President and the men around him, and of their way of transacting business. Today, in the third of a series of articles by associates of former Presidents, former White House Administrative Assistant Emmet John Hughes reminisces about the ambiance in the Eisenhower White House.*

trustees" or the later times of JFK's New Frontiersmen.

Yet this same rather antiseptic White House atmosphere sustained and nourished its own special disciplines and values. If this atmosphere was not creative, it also was not divisive; and if the President's men were not audacious, they also were not obsequious. Like the hero-President who was *not* much of a partisan leader — and like the soldier-President who would *not* unleash military power in Vietnam — the better qualities of this White House might be called negative. But they seem no less worth remembering for that.

Neither in the Oval Office nor the Cabinet room of those years could this President be heard chatting, callously or even casually, about the sleazy sport of rewarding political friends or punishing political foes. When he talked instead about being "President of *all* the people," as he often did, the party leaders within hearing winced at his naivete. When they ventured to mention patronage, *he* winced — as if the word itself were a tasteless obscenity. I recall once witnessing his being

advised by a GOP national committee-man that a politically influential office-seeker, although a member of the Ku Klux Klan, was going to appeal his case to the Oval Office, and he coldly snapped: "Don't let him. If he does, he'll get thrown out of here so fast he won't touch ground this side of Pennsylvania Avenue." Such asceticism surely helped not at all in rebuilding the power-structure of his party, but it helped a great deal in conveying to the staff of his White House the kind of conduct and concern expected of them.



They were encouraged also to perceive the equally important fact that this Oval Office was *not* a closed operation, sealed or policed to admit only political conformists and personal loyalists. From the first, the very make-up of both staff and Cabinet practically forbade any such rigidity. A President with no long career in politics behind him, and hence no time for gathering a familiar entourage to attend him all the way to the White House, Dwight Eisenhower had to reach out in the most diverse directions for his officers and aides; and the men he chose were, as often as not, mostly strangers both to him and to each other. Such choices were not always dazzlingly wise, but they were made by the test of presumed special competence, not prolonged personal allegiance. So appraised and appreciated, they enjoyed a generous freedom of access to their President. Of the Cabinet, almost all

members could take their problems directly to the Chief Executive for any responsible reason. Of the staff, I was but one of more than a dozen Presidential assistants who never thought of seeking clearance from anyone, including Sherman Adams, before taking my own business into the Oval Office. Nor was the discharge of this business ever inhibited — either with Eisenhower or with other members of the staff — by any discomfort in their knowledge that I was the only non-Republican on the grounds. Both the background and temper of this official family, in short, were as uncongenial to closed cabals as to closed doors; and neither John Kennedy's "Irish Mafia" nor Richard Nixon's "Prussians" would have felt very much at home here.

Nor was this whole White House closed or tense in its attitudes toward the Washington community at hand or the national community at large. To be sure, a few communal whinings over both broke forth recurrently: the media were never sufficiently understanding and sympathetic, of course, and the voters had been brain-washed by Democratic demagoguery for so long that they would need years to regain sense enough to see the sagacity of Republican economic theory. But these random laments never came close to suggesting a fortress mentality — an armored we-or-they sense of politics itself. Far from any such paranoia, the prevailing mood of this White House was a study in rarely bridled confidence. Like all else, this largely flowed from the man who enjoyed the greatest approval and trust of any President in this century: there is nothing to match electoral popularity, of course, to assure personal serenity in the Oval Office. Outside this White House, the critics of its leadership had more than one reason — such as the crisis over civil rights — to deplore its confidence as complacency or indifference. But inside the gates, for reasons good or poor, the trust of the people was easily and happily returned.

There agitated this White House — finally — *no* hanger to sneak more power to itself. This abstinence, too, was Presidentially inspired, for Eisenhower believed — not slackly but seriously — in restoring Congressional powers stolen or smuggled away ever since FDR. (Personally, I found his history deplorable but his sincerity indisputable). And the same restraint

and reticence controlled the conduct of affairs *within* the Executive Branch itself. In domestic affairs, who can forget the almost embarrassing humility with which he accepted Secretary of the Treasury George Humphrey's 1957 attack on *his* budget as foreshadowing "a depression to curl your hair"? In world affairs, who can forget the almost inexplicable ease with which he accepted the distrust of John Foster Dulles toward all detente with the Soviet Union — a detente that *he* believed to be reachable and rational?

I do not know any sure calculus to measure the precise merit or the lasting gift of this particular White House. Without doubt, the years of its life were much flawed by acts of abdication and spells of blindness. But with no less doubt, it was a home for power that was both civil and civilized. In this home, there was little if any room for the brutish or the selfish, and there seemed to echo, from West wing to East wing, a quietly stated command for decency. If it never neared being a heroic arena, it stayed "a clean, well-lighted place," with no dreadfully dark corners.

Long after, it rather has reminded me of the prayer of John Adams, the first President ever to sleep in the White House. "I pray Heaven to bestow the best of Blessings on this House and all that shall hereafter inhabit it. May none but honest and wise men ever rule under this roof." The days and the decisions of the White House in question were surely not always full of wisdom. But they were overwhelmingly honest, untainted by fright for self or greed for power. And for the Presidency itself, this much was quite enough to keep its roof in place and its honor intact.

Wednesday: George M. Elsey on  
President Truman.