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The Ike Years All Over Again

EISENHOWER: And the American Crusades.
By Herbert S. Parmet.
(Macmillan. 680 pp. $12.95)

Reviewed by
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The reviewer, who served briefly on special assignment at the White House during the Eisenhower administration, is a visiting fellow at the Institute for Policy Studies.

If you want to relive the Eisenhower years, this is the book for you. It has what seems to be 40 million useful references to Eisenhower sources, piled up as the foundation for what is almost a daily log of the General-President's years in the White House, and the several immediately before, as he backed-and-filled about heeding what eventually he came to see as his bounden duty to lead the nation.

It cites dozens of interviews. It obviously is written by a man who has read himself bleary in his subject but who, at the end of it all, simply says that to call Eisenhower "a great or good or even a weak President misses the point. He was merely necessary."

Necessary for what? By contenting himself with observing Eisenhower rather than with trying to understand him, his friends, his particular role in the society, Herbert Parmet does not provide even a hint of answer. But because he is such a voracious reader and studious observer, the clues are all there.

First, there is Eisenhower the anti-Communist. Like Kennedy-Johnson-Nixon, Eisenhower saw the confrontation with communism both apoplectically and apocalyptically. Eisenhower's New Look defense policy, diplomatically extended through John Foster Dulles' brinkmanship, meant to deter the Soviets and the Chinese, at least, from big moves in the world by rattling the sword of nuclear retaliation. As Parmet meticulously recounts—without seeming to be impressed—Eisenhower's rhetoric about the New Look was seriously compromised by the old look of some of his crucial actions: when he landed Marines in Lebanon, for instance.

Also, when Eisenhower supported the covert U.S. operation that overthrew the Guatemalan government, he was well into a world of old-fashioned, even if newly-equipped, coup and counter-coup, terror and covert warfare. That, as a matter of fact, is just the way Eisenhower wanted to fight the war in Indochina—secretly and discreetly. But he did want to fight it. On that he was as dedicated

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a hawk as Kennedy, Johnson or Nixon. (If there was a difference in style it would probably be mostly in Eisenhower was dead set against a big land involvement. The Nixon policy of ordering bombing while taking peace probably would have appealed to him more, and the early Kennedy policy of secret raids most of all—except that Eisenhower always seemed skeptical of how well such secrets could be kept. His explicit skepticism about the U-2 overflights was, of course, brilliantly justified.)

Beyond his fervent anti-communism, there is six other aspects to Eisenhower that might mark him very special (and necessary) place for him in our country's development, his total visceral and intellectual commitment to the rectitude of American corporate enterprise—as he understood it from his closest friends, all big businessmen—disposed him to believe that the expansion of corporate enterprise abroad, indeed, would ultimately, globally, defeat the Communist menace by putting it to bed back the Communist menace by putting it to bed back the Communist menace.

Although Eisenhower is justly famous for having said that we must hold onto Indochina because of its raw materials, he should be equally famous for the shrewd speech in which he warned against the excesses of a military-industrial complex which would become the main, to become the main, and legacy of American life.

Eisenhower's speech, which was prepared to our foreign policy establishment, dispatch Marines, lack of massive retaliation against the U.S.S.R., and generally rebut anyone tried to tell him how to run an Army—why was such a man so concerned at the end about the military, he had faithfully served and the industry he had patronized? Parmet finds several curious explanations, are screened through this storehouse collection of facts. One is under these other great the owners of the speech. Eisenhower spelled out the dangers to be that it is a menace to be that it is a [illegible] and not just the MIC [illegible] strictly. To him, that just seemed [illegible] to the General-President.

At any rate, deep concern along these lines may be merely academic after all. Thanks to Eisenhower's foreign-most bequest to a grateful nation, Richard Nixon, it looks like we are going to have both a garrison state and a company store anyway.

He thought that the new, scientifically-based weapons companies would muscle their way into policy-influencing positions. Also, he seems to have been disturbed by the possibilities of a garrison state, totally dominated by a defense budget. He was never disturbed by the company-store domination of the lives of most ordinary Americans by the financial elite which already does own control of most the capital and industry, as well as control of those who make policy. Maybe that just seemed traditional to the General-President.

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