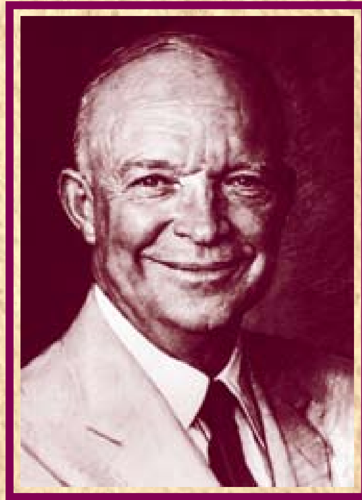

EISENHOWER FELLOWSHIPS

EISENHOWER AND EUROPE

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EISENHOWER AND EUROPE

In Europe, we ask that enlightened and inspired leaders of the Western nations strive with renewed vigor to make the unity of their peoples a reality. Only as free Europe unitedly marshals its strength can it effectively safeguard, even with our help, its spiritual and cultural heritage.

Eisenhower's First Inaugural Address, 20 January 1953

During the winter of 1944-1945, many citizens of the increasingly embattled Third Reich may well have wondered at the fact that the coalition of armies converging on them from the west was commanded by a general with the impeccably German name of Eisenhower. It is one of the curiosities of the Second World War that the Allied commanders of two of the greatest forces ever assembled were both Texans of German descent, Admiral Chester W. Nimitz in the central Pacific, and General Dwight D. Eisenhower in western Europe. The coincidence is even greater when we think that Nimitz, the greatest sailor in the country's history, had wanted to be a soldier, while Eisenhower's hopes had been for a career at sea. More significantly, however, both men possessed the temperament to act alongside, or lead, such talented, but headstrong, colleagues as MacArthur and Halsey in the Pacific, or Montgomery and Patton in Europe. There any parallel ends abruptly, since while Nimitz slipped into honourable retirement in California, in January 1953 Eisenhower was sworn in as Thirty-Fourth President of the United States of America. He did so at a critical time in international affairs. The Cold War, which had begun in Europe, had become a fighting war in Korea, while the United States was largely financing France's increasingly hopeless campaign in Indo-China. Europe presented potentially an even more dangerous prospect, since the continent was divided by the Iron Curtain into two armed camps, ideologically bitterly opposed, and led by the two remaining great powers, each possessing weapons of unimaginable destruction. Eisenhower was in office just over a month when Joseph Stalin, undisputed leader of the Soviet Union, died on 5 March 1953, creating new possibilities but also uncertainties.

Eisenhower was an unlikely soldier. His family came, not from the mass German migration of the nineteenth century, but from a much earlier movement of pietistic German Protestants, many of them Mennonites, committed to non-violence. Like the Puritans of New England, the Catholics of Maryland, the

Quakers of Pennsylvania, and those Irish Presbyterians who felt ill-rewarded for their exertions at the siege of Derry, they valued the religious tolerance shown in the British colonies of north America. Eisenhower's family background was opposed to violence, but they did not stand in the way of his military ambitions. By entering the army, he had parted company from the traditions of his ancestry, and by adopting Presbyterianism, rather than Lutheranism, he seemed to be making a statement about his identity as an American. He had no part in the predominant German-American culture of the time, with its beer halls, German-language newspapers and the *Turnverein*, all of which was to change abruptly with America's declaration of war on Germany in April 1917, as it happened. While of European descent, Eisenhower was an American through and through.

Eisenhower was not just an unlikely Supreme Commander by virtue of his pacifist ancestry. The man who organized, launched and commanded the most complex military operation in history, the invasion of Europe on 6 June 1944, had neither seen front line service nor commanded troops in action in the previous war, a fate he shared with his friend and principal field commander, Omar N. Bradley. This gap in his experience was through no desire of Eisenhower's own, far from it; rather, he was the victim of his own early reputation as an organizer and trainer of men. Instead of accompanying the American Expeditionary Force to Europe, he was set the task of establishing the army's armoured corps. Had the war lasted into 1919, as even experienced British generals fully expected that it would, Eisenhower's armour would have been in the spearhead of the American advance. As it was, his command never left the United States. While some were prepared to compare them unfavourably to such seasoned veterans as Patton and Montgomery, who had been badly wounded in 1914, there was perhaps something to be gained by the fact that Eisenhower and Bradley had missed combat experience. It is one of the clichés of military affairs that generals try to fight the previous war. When it came to the liberation of western Europe and the defeat of Hitler's Germany, Eisenhower's mind was free from the debris of the trenches.

From the start, Eisenhower was clear that full cooperation with the British held the key to the liberation of Europe, even when that meant indulging them. In 1942, when he came to the European theatre, the British, unlike the Americans, were fully armed and experienced in fighting the Germans. By 1944, on the other hand, the Americans were clearly the senior partners in the alliance, both in men and *matériel*, a reality recognized by Eisenhower's appointment

to command Operation Overlord. The figures for the final assault on Hitler's Germany in the spring of 1945 tell their own story. The combined British and Canadian strength of seventeen divisions was dwarfed by sixty-one American divisions, all but one of which saw combat. Even so, Eisenhower went to great pains to treat the British as equals. Fortunately, he had an excellent relationship with Churchill, and with his own deputy, Air Chief Marshal Tedder, but Montgomery, with his mixture of self-assurance and military prudence, was a different matter. Relations with his British subordinate tested all of Eisenhower's skill as a diplomat, but were essential to the working of the alliance. Perhaps he was too indulgent, since he sanctioned Montgomery's Operation Market Garden, which ended in disaster at Arnhem, instead of insisting on capturing the Scheldt Estuary approaches to the port of Antwerp, which really held the key to a swift advance into Germany. Eisenhower held his peace with Montgomery until 1958 when some of the more contentious claims in the field-marshal's war memoirs at last stung him into action, even though his position as President held him back from making his feelings public. Also aware of French sensitivities after the debacle of 1940, Eisenhower saw the need to ensure that they played their part in the final assault on Germany, respecting the feelings of the prickly de Gaulle, and in the knowledge that the reconstituted French army was entirely reliant upon American supplies. Sadly, when de Gaulle returned to power in 1958 Eisenhower's generosity was not reciprocated.

As the war drew to an end, he made two decisions which affected the future of Europe. With American troops poised some fifty miles from Berlin, he refused to sanction any advance on the German capital, leaving its capture to the Red Army. He was criticised for this, both at the time by Churchill and Patton, and later by others in the light of the Cold War, but the reality was that the city had already been assigned to the Soviet zone of occupation, and the Russians suffered some 80,000 casualties in taking it. Moreover, the Soviets were to respect the rights of the three western allies to occupation zones in the city, even if these were later challenged in the Berlin blockade. He was also adamant in keeping faith with the Russians over the German surrender. The only card left to Admiral Doenitz, Hitler's improbable successor, was that by surrendering in the west, he might rescue as many German soldiers and civilians as he could in the east. This was something which Eisenhower refused to countenance. In short, he did everything possible to ensure continuing goodwill between the western and eastern allies. Whatever the subsequent breech between them, it was not of his doing. One thing he made a point of

was to visit a liberated concentration camp, making sure that its grim legacies were fully publicised, so that future generations might be in no doubt as to what had happened. It was not for nothing that the war memoirs which he published in 1948 were entitled *Crusade in Europe*.

In November 1952, with his incomparable war record, his trademark winning grin, and the irresistible slogan, 'I Like Ike', Eisenhower roundly defeated his Democratic rival, Adlai Stevenson, to become Thirty-Fourth President. His victory brought the Republicans back to the White House after an exile of twenty years. This entry into Republican politics at the age of sixty-two was almost as paradoxical as his military career, for it seems that he had also been approached to run for the Democrats in 1948. Eisenhower's win was important for the Republican Party not just in domestic politics. Over six decades of American military and political involvement in Europe, should not blind us to the fact that internationalism had so far chiefly been associated with the Democrats. The country had gone to war under Democratic Presidents in 1917 and 1941, while it was the Democrat Harry Truman who had presided over the emergence of the Cold War, and the creation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in 1949. The Republicans were divided between internationalists, who supported European involvement, and neo-isolationists led by former President Herbert Hoover and the formidable Senator Robert A. Taft of Ohio, who had voted against the NATO alliance, was opposed to the deployment of American troops in Europe, and considered by many to be the party's main hope for success in 1952. If they had a preference, the neo-isolationists, alarmed at the communist success in China and by the wars in Korea and Indo-China, would have turned east rather than west. Not only had Eisenhower been Supreme Commander in Europe during the war, but in 1950 Truman had recalled him to service as NATO's Supreme Allied Commander Europe to weld together with the American and Canadian forces those of a still impoverished continent. Eisenhower came to the presidency fully convinced by, and committed to, Europe's central place in American diplomatic and military thinking, even though he knew that his most urgent task was to end the inconclusive war in Korea.

The NATO alliance was the cornerstone of Eisenhower's relations with Europe. Although formed under his predecessor, Eisenhower had been instrumental in pulling its strands together as Supreme Allied Commander. The Truman administration had also set the terms of American diplomatic and military strategy in the Cold War. In 1950 both Stalin and Truman

authorized the development of the hydrogen bomb, a thermonuclear weapon with a destructive power one thousand times greater than the atomic bombs which had obliterated Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In November 1952, just as Eisenhower was elected, the United States detonated its first hydrogen bomb, followed by the Soviet Union the next year. The year 1950 also saw the massive rearmament of the United States though the adoption of the recommendations of 'NSC 68: United States Objectives and Programs for National Security', which sanctioned a massive increase in defence spending.

Eisenhower was not long in office before he realised the economic and financial implications of what was under way. The result was a reassessment of American defence priorities which came to be known as the New Look, a term which in Europe was more associated with the world of *haute couture* than the grim implications of what was being discussed. Realising that NATO conventional forces in Europe could never match the strength of the Red Army, except at ruinous cost, Eisenhower's New Look sought to emphasize instead that defensive strategy would be based upon nuclear weapons. The policy enabled the United States to reduce her expenditure on conventional forces, but it carried disturbing implications for United States-European relations, not least that nuclear weapons would be used from the start of any conflict. With thermonuclear weapons an American monopoly, though Britain was also developing them, the countries of western Europe had to be certain that the United States would use them in the event of a Soviet attack. The obvious question was whether the Americans would be prepared to sacrifice Detroit in the defence of Dusseldorf or Baltimore for that of Birmingham, or, even if they did, would the end result not be the same, the obliteration of Dusseldorf and Birmingham? A strong undercurrent of anti-nuclear sentiment emerged in Europe, witnessed by the degree of support for the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament in Britain, and the strong opposition, not least in Britain and West Germany, to President Carter's proposal to deploy the neutron bomb in Europe, the extent of which led him to drop the idea. We may be eternally grateful that those in power in Washington and Moscow never put such things to the test. The alternative does not bear contemplation.

The problem of providing forward conventional defence in Europe led inevitably to the question of German rearmament, a matter of great sensitivity so soon after the war. In 1952, France, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg agreed with the newly constituted Federal Republic of Germany to form the European Defence Community, but when the French failed to

ratify this, an alternative had to be sought. In April 1955, Eisenhower gained the approval of Congress for a rearmed Federal Germany of twelve divisions within NATO, to which she was formally admitted on 9 May 1955. Exactly ten years after he had presided over the surrender of the German army in the west, Eisenhower was helping to usher in a new phase in the country's history as an integral and respected part of the Atlantic and European communities.

As the fate of the European Defence Community revealed, relations with his European partners were not always smooth. In 1953, the French were preoccupied with their increasingly desperate struggle to hold on to Indo-China in the face of Viet Minh opposition. On 20 November, the cream of their army was parachuted into Dien Bien Phu in the hope of destroying the Viet Minh in pitched battle, but instead on 13 March 1954 they themselves came under unrelenting attack. While the French appealed for American assistance, Eisenhower was not prepared to contemplate a land war in Asia so soon after the end of that in Korea. When Dien Bien Phu was overrun on 7 May, it was the end for the French in southeast Asia. Out of the wreckage of the French empire came the fateful partition of Vietnam, with Eisenhower supporting anti-communist South Vietnam. We can see why. On 7 April 1954, as the crisis unfolded, Eisenhower made his famous 'falling domino' statement, in which he saw failure in Indo-China leading to a succession of collapses across Asia. It was an ambivalent legacy.

Britain was the European country closest to his heart. Her three premiers, Churchill, Eden and Macmillan, had all been colleagues in the war, but Eisenhower was not ruled by sentiment. On 15 March 1953, Malenkov, the emergent Soviet leader, appealed for a peaceful resolution of Soviet-American relations. Churchill was anxious to seize the chance for a summit meeting, but Eisenhower, backed it must be said by the American foreign policy establishment, was unmoved by the man he respected more than any other. In 1956, however, an infinitely more serious clash occurred with his other former wartime colleague, Anthony Eden, over that last gasp of British imperialism in the Middle East, the Suez Crisis. To trace its history would be a subject for another day. It was triggered by the decision of the Eisenhower administration, followed by the British, to withhold financial support for the proposed Aswan Dam, on which President Nasir of Egypt had placed his hopes for economic regeneration. In response, Nasir nationalized the Suez Canal Company. There Eisenhower and Eden parted company. In October, Britain and France concluded a secret plan with Israel for military action against Egypt. It began

with an Israeli invasion of Egypt on 29 October, followed by an Anglo-French landing on the Suez Canal on 5 November, under the pretext of separating the combatants. The British seemed to have assumed Eisenhower's good will, and the Israelis not unnaturally believed the British would not have taken the path they did without American support. They could not have been more wrong. Eisenhower was incensed by his allies' patent dishonesty, not least because the presidential election fell the following day, and determined to end the affair. On 6 November, the American Treasury began to obstruct British attempts to shore up sterling in the International Monetary Fund, and the British cabinet capitulated. It was the lowest point in Anglo-American relations, and although Eden's successor, Harold Macmillan, worked hard to restore them, there could be no doubt as to who was now the junior partner.

The Suez affair coincided with a much more tragic crisis in central Europe. In the autumn of 1956, the tensions which had been building up since the death of Stalin finally erupted, first in Poland and then in Hungary. The previous year the Austrian State Treaty had raised hopes of further Soviet withdrawals from Europe. The Eisenhower administration had talked of the liberation of the peoples of eastern Europe from communism, although he himself had been careful to say that this should be done peacefully. On 1 November 1956, the new Hungarian communist premier, Imre Nagy, announced that his country would become a neutral state. Three days later, some 6,000 Soviet tanks invaded Hungary, bloodily suppressing her bid for freedom. No one who heard the piteous appeals for help being broadcast from Budapest can forget that memory, but the west did not respond. Well aware that there was nothing the United States could do, Eisenhower would not even allow the Central Intelligence Agency to come to the aid of the Hungarians. The price of Cold War rhetoric was paid in the elegant streets and squares of Budapest. Europe was divided, and was to remain so until the stirring events of September 1989 when in a new era the Hungarians opened their border with Austria, triggering the events which destroyed Stalin's empire in eastern Europe, and, in the end, the Soviet Union itself.

When Eisenhower left office in January 1961, he was inevitably overshadowed by his younger, and more glamorous, successor. History has, nevertheless, confirmed that Eisenhower was more often right than wrong, never more so than at 4.15 a.m. on 5 June 1944 when he gave the order to launch the liberation of western Europe. This lecture can do no more than offer some observations on one particular aspect of his career; namely his role in Europe.

We can too easily forget the nature of the regimes presided over by Hitler and Stalin. Eisenhower was convinced that, in contrast, the spiritual and cultural heritage his country shared with Europe was worth upholding. He was no intellectual, his was a simple faith, but he was right.

I am grateful to the Eisenhower Fellows for extending the invitation to deliver this lecture, to Grace Fraser and Leonie Murray for their helpful comments, and to Janet Farren for her assistance with its preparation. I am glad to acknowledge the work of various scholars of Eisenhower's career, and especially that of Stephen Ambrose.

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