"EISENHOWER RISING: The Ascent of an Uncommon Man"

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Good evening. There have been 54 Harmon lecturers before me, but none were more humbly appreciative of the opportunity to speak to you than I am. The first Harmon Lecture in 1959 was delivered by Wesley Frank Craven, a distinguished academic who, as some of you know, was the lead author in the seven-volume official history of the U.S. Army Air Forces in World War II. Professor Craven titled his talk, "Why Military History?" I don't know that I can answer that question better than he did more than half a century ago, but I would suggest that *any* inquiry into the past will quickly wander into the province of military history. The scholar Will Durant once calculated that in three and a half millennia of recorded history there have only been 268 years during which there was not a war in progress, *somewhere.* Not one of those 268 years has unfolded during the lifetime of anyone in this room or on this planet. War is the warp if not also the woof of our society, our culture, and our political existence; to understand who we are and how we got here, you have to know something about war.

I'm not a theorist of historiography or an academic intellectual. I'm a narrative writer who accepts, and in fact *embraces* the ground rules of academic rigor. For writers of my ilk, history is best understood, and certainly best conveyed, by narrative—by storytelling: even as we ponder the past intellectually, we can also respond to it viscerally, through history illuminated by emotion. As a narrative historian I am drawn to characters, much as a novelist would be, except that I cannot fabricate mine. And in truth many of the figures I am privileged to write about—both those still famous and those now obscure—are beyond the creative power of any novelist to invent.

We can all profit by knowing something about singular characters who have gone before us; we learn from their successes and failures, draw inspiration from their achievements, or find cautionary tales in their stumbles, professional and personal. For those of you committed to the profession of arms, and perhaps especially to those of you who will soon be commissioned as military officers, this pillaging of past lives can be especially rewarding. Not least, it can assure you that however dire your predicament, others have faced worse; however heavy your burden, others have carried more.

Tonight I'll talk for a few minutes about one of those figures you certainly have heard of—Dwight David Eisenhower. ***[#1, Ike in Africa*]** I'm going to dwell very little on his biography—go read the Wikipedia entry if you want to review his career chronologically. Rather let's try to isolate some of the characteristics that made him a successful general, a war-winning general, and a character who, though he's been dead for more than 40 years, seems to have relevance for us today, even if you're not a general officer. A reader once wrote to me and said that studying Eisenhower's life "gives hope to those of us who are still a work in progress."

First, let's acknowledge the trait Napoleon most prized in *his* generals: luck. George S. Patton secretly grumbled that the initial's "D.D." stood not for Dwight David but "Divine Destiny." [***#2, Ike and Patton*]** If our man had been born Manfred Wilhelm Eisenhauer in Düsseldorf in Oct. 1890, instead of Ike Eisenhower in Texas, it's likely that *even* had he followed a military calling his career would have been considerably less illustrious. As it was,

Eisenhower served as a major for sixteen years in that sad, ignored interwar U.S. Army. He thereafter ascended from lieutenant colonel to five-star in 42 months, an average of six months between promotions.

He arrived at his first field command, in the caves of Gibraltar in Nov. 1942, on the eve of the invasion of North Africa, having never commanded even a platoon in combat; now suddenly he's a theater commander. Think of it: virtually every lieutenant colonel in the Army today has more combat experience than Lieutenant General Eisenhower had in 1942, and there are captains today who have more combat experience than Eisenhower ever accumulated. But of course combat command experience was rare in the Army in the early months of World War II; those who'd gained a bit of it in World War I, and who were still in the Army in 1942, had been mostly quite junior in 1917 or 1918.

Not a single officer on duty at the time of Pearl Harbor had commanded a unit as large as a division in World War I; what mattered more was to have punched your ticket in the Army's education system, and Eisenhower, who'd been a rather indifferent cadet at West Point, which incidentally he attended *not* because he wanted to be Napoleon but because it was *free*, graduated first in his Leavenworth class. He read widely, and pondered what he read; he'd concluded shortly after the First World War that a second was inevitable; his friends called him Alarmist Ike. And he served for six years between the wars—in Washington and in the Philippines—on the staff of that American Machiavelli, Douglas MacArthur. Theirs was a very complex relationship; at the end of their tenure together they were barely on speaking terms. At one point Eisenhower asked, "How did that damned fool ever become a general?" Some of you in the future may wonder which iron major is asking that about *you*.

What is the context for his ascent? The Army of 1939 numbered just 190,000, with only 15,000 officers, and that of course included the Army Air Forces. The average age of majors was 48; in the National Guard, nearly one-quarter of first lieutenants was over 40. That Army would grow to 8.3 million, a 44-fold increase, within five years. By the fall of 1944, there will be 1,300 general officers.

The American Army that Eisenhower led in the Mediterranean Theater had such shaky senior leadership that three of the first five corps commanders in combat against the Germans were relieved and sent home: Lloyd Fredendall in Tunisia; Ernest Dawley at Salerno; John Lucas at Anzio. Eisenhower, in January 1943, even *before* the Kasserine Pass debacle in Tunisia, believed *he* was going to be relieved. His aide, Harry Butcher, wrote, "His neck is in a noose and he knows it"; Patton talked to him late one night during the strategy conference at Casablanca, in late January 1943, and then wrote in his diary that Eisenhower "thinks his thread is about to be cut." When things were darkest *during* the battle of Kasserine Pass, Eisenhower wrote to his son, John: "It is possible that a necessity might arise for my relief and consequent demotion…It will not break my heart and it should not cause you any mental anguish…Modern war is a very complicated business and governments are forced to treat individuals as pawns."

So how *did* he evolve, grow, succeed? The American Army as a whole in the first couple years of World War II was going through a great sifting out, from platoon leaders to corps

commanders, of the capable from the incapable, the physically and mentally fit from the unfit, of the lucky from the unlucky. Eisenhower sifted to the top. Why is that?

Let's also acknowledge what he was *not.* He was *not* a particularly good field marshal, he was *not* a Great Captain. Frankly it gnawed at him; he had a lifelong admiration for Hannibal, and he longed to orchestrate a double envelopment, like Cannae. But he lacked the gift of seeing a battlefield in depth spatially and temporally, or of inexorably imposing his operational will on an enemy. There are repeated examples where he simply did not grasp the battle. For instance: when the Germans and Italians escaped from Sicily across the Straits of Messina in August 1943; when he approved a hare-brained scheme to drop the 82nd Airborne Division on Rome in September 1943, with the nearest substantial supporting ground force landing at Salerno, 200 miles away; when he was with Omar Bradley and various missteps by the high command lead to part of the German force escaping from the so-called Falaise Gap in Normandy in August 1944; and when he failed to heed clear warnings about the importance of capturing the estuarial approaches to Antwerp—the River Scheldt—in addition to the city itself, so that when Allied forces captured this absolutely vital port, *intact*, in early September 1944, the Germans kept the approaches and the port was useless for almost three more months.

When Eisenhower left the Mediterranean Theater in Dec. 1943, to command OVERLORD, the invasion of France, he told reporters that Hitler is "going to write off this southern front, and I don't think he is going to defend it long." That was quite wrong. He had a penchant for underestimating the Germans; a year later he would fail to recognize the regenerative powers that permitted the enemy to put together the Ardennes offensive, in the battle of the Bulge. On Sept 5, 1944, he told his diary: "The defeat of the German armies is complete." That too is quite wrong.

He was a man of character, but when we put someone on a pedestal it's easier to see that he has feet of clay, as Eisenhower surely did: he was not above subtly looking for scapegoats when things went wrong, or occasionally taking credit for success that would more properly have been attributed to a subordinate.

So what *did* he have going for him? Of course his job was *not* to be a field marshal; it was to be the theater commander of an extremely complex, sprawling, rambunctious multi-national coalition. He defined his role as a sort of chairman of the board—that's the metaphor he used—chairman of the biggest enterprise on earth. In a private note in the spring of 1943, he wrote, "It is not the man who is so brilliant [who] delivers in time of stress and strain, but rather the man who can keep on going indefinitely, doing a good straightforward job." He occasionally quoted Napoleon, whom he claimed defined military genius as "the man who can do the average thing when all those around him are going crazy." Here are 10 salient traits that help understand Eisenhower's success in doing at least "the average thing" when those around him were often going crazy. Collectively they made this average man into an uncommon leader.

Trait #1) He passionately preached coalition unity. He knew in his bones that in a global war the best *team* wins. [***#3, Ike w/ de Lattre***] He knew that every alliance is beset with centrifugal forces that can pull it apart, from national chauvinism to personal vainglory. His preeminent mission is to counter those forces. The American Army was infested with

Anglophobia, from George Patton and Omar Bradley to Mark Clark and Orlando Ward—almost all of them detested the British. Eisenhower, the kid who grew up in isolated, small-town Kansas escaped that; he *liked* the Brits, drank tea, adopted words like "petrol" and "tiffin." He was broad-minded, *not* arrogant. The Brits were vital allies, both in the military coalition and personally. Churchill, Air Marshal Tedder, Admiral Andrew Browne Cunningham very much liked him. [***#4, Ike and Churchill***] He was capable of turning the other cheek in the face of impertinence or insolence from the likes of Bernard Montgomery, for the sake of Allied unity. He was a master of the sensible compromise; he said that an Allied commander must lead by considering disparate national viewpoints and, as he put it, "solve problems through reasoning rather than by merely issuing commands."

He was perceived as absolutely fair-minded; like Gen. George C. Marshall, probity and integrity were at the core of his success. [***#5, Ike and Marshall***] Others may have doubted Eisenhower's decisions, but never his fair-mindedness. It sometimes irritated his American brethren, who grumbled that "Ike is the best general the British have got." But this aura of judicious integrity—that he was, as one admirer puts it, "good and right in the moral sense"—was really at the core of his success as a coalition commander. Montgomery described him as "the very incarnation of sincerity," with "the power of drawing the hearts of men towards him as a magnet attracts bits of metal."

President Roosevelt chose him as supreme commander for OVERLORD not only because he was a "natural leader," in the president's phrase, but also, as Roosevelt said, a military man with "exceptional political instincts." Eisenhower did not find that offensive; he said that the U.S. armed forces are the biggest political institutions in the country. Roosevelt, the master politician, also knew how vital political savvy is in commanding a multiservice, multinational operation. E.J. Kingston McCloughry, a British air vice marshal who worked at SHAEF—Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force—said that Eisenhower "had a genius of getting along with most people, combining the art of persuasion and of inspiring good will."

Trait #2) He liked responsibility and shouldered it comfortably. [***#6, Ike and Butcher***] Before each Allied invasion, he privately drafted a press release accepting blame should the operation fail. The conditional note he wrote on June 5, 1944, is a testament to his character, in which he announced that the Normandy invasion had failed and added, "If any blame or fault attaches to the attempt it is mine alone." He misdated the document—*July* 5, 1944—indicative of how exhausted and stressed he was. MacArthur in his evaluation of Eisenhower in 1932 wrote that this young officer is "distinguished by force, judgment and willingness to accept responsibility…This officer has no superior at this time [within his cohort] in the Army."

On the other hand, he grew more hard-nosed about his subordinates. When Lloyd Fredendall failed as the II Corps commander in Tunisia in the late winter of 1943, he was given a third star and sent home to command an army. That would be the last time Eisenhower was so soft-hearted; he, and the Army, became quite ruthless about perceived command failures. He could cut a throat without remorse—sometimes it was unfair, or precipitous—but in his mind the stakes were too high to act otherwise.

He also came to realize that a commander must acknowledge the hardest of hard truths, which in his war he defined in stark and irrefutable terms: "Sometimes it just gets down to the dirty job of killing until one side or the other cracks." Yet he never forfeited his humanity; there was an authenticity about him which subordinates and superiors alike sensed and responded to. In the spring of 1944 he wrote his wife, Mamie—the only letters he did not dictate—and he mused, "How many youngsters are gone forever. A man must develop a veneer of callousness that lets him consider such things dispassionately." That callous never obscured the sentient human being beneath.

Trait #3) He had had a good mentor early in his career, a cerebral officer named Fox Connor, and as a general officer he had the best mentor of all: the chief, George Marshall. Eisenhower sent Marshall more than a hundred personal letters during the war—the salutation was always, 'Dear General'—and he relied on Marshall, cultivated him, sometimes flattered him although usually not to the point of being smarmy. Marshall in turn kept Eisenhower well-apprised of the thinking among the chiefs, and in the White House, and he helped protect him from the British Chiefs, and from Prime Minister Churchill.

Trait #4) He had one of the greatest chiefs of staff in the Army's history, Walter B. Smith. [***#7, Ike with Smith, commanders***] SHAEF—again, Supreme Headquarters, Allied Expeditionary Force—first in England and then in France, grew into an immense, chair-borne force, just as AFHQ—Allied Forces Headquarters—did before it in Algiers. Beetle Smith did quite a good job of keeping it functioning, and of helping the boss focus on issues of preeminent concern. This was important; one of Eisenhower's problems early in his tenure as theater commander was an inability to uncouple himself from distracting inessentials, often having to do with French political issues in North Africa. He empowered his chief, and his other senior staff officers.

Eisenhower's command style was quite decentralized, which is ironic because he threatened to quit two months before Normandy if control over the strategic bomber force was not centralized under his command. But he essentially allowed his army group commanders and senior airmen to run their campaigns, sometimes to a fault, and again under the chairman of the board concept.

Trait #5) Eisenhower became more adept at making his case. Many Americans think of him as a syntax-mangling president whose diction at times was baffling, if not incoherent. In truth, General Eisenhower was exceptionally articulate, both orally and in writing. He spoke and wrote with clarity and concision. He was so articulate that Churchill privately noted, suspiciously, "Good generals do not usually have such good powers of expression as he has." He honed his communication skills as the war went on, much as the Army institutionally became more competent at making its case, particularly in debating strategic issues. [***#8, Ike on balcony***]

During the conference at Casablanca in early 1943, Eisenhower was asked to brief the Combined Chiefs on an offensive he was planning in Tunisia. He was unprepared, unpersuasive, and perhaps a bit intimidated. General Alan Brooke, chief of the Imperial General Staff and George Marshall's counterpart, ate him alive. Eisenhower was humiliated.

Contrast that to Eisenhower in London at 10 Downing Street in late 1944, at a conference with Churchill and the British chiefs, including Brooke. He explained the logic behind his broad-front strategy on the Western Front, in contrast to the narrow, single-thrust advocated by Field Marshal Montgomery. Brooke, whose nickname was Colonel Shrapnel, used the same phrase in Dec. 1944 that he had used two years earlier—"*I flatly disagree."* But Eisenhower had learned. He was prepared, nimble, and cool. This time he more than held his own. **[*#9, Ike w/ Brooke***]

Trait #6) Eisenhower cultivated the press, not because he was a glory-hound looking for headlines, but because he believed he needed the megaphone that only the press could provide to let people back home—including people in Washington—understand what he was trying to do.

For example, in June 1943, shortly before Operation HUSKY, the invasion of Sicily, he summoned the reporters accredited to his headquarters in Algiers; told them he was about to disclose his battle plan, which he said must for the time being remain secret; then pulled back a wall curtain to reveal a map of Sicily that showed Montgomery's Eighth Army invading from the southeast and Patton's Seventh Army attacking from the south. One reporter later said to him, "Don't ever do that again." Within the bounds of operational security, he contended that "the press has as much right to information as members of my own staff." Eisenhower told Beetle Smith, his chief of staff, "Tell them nothing sometimes, but *never* deliberately mislead them." Before the invasion of Normandy he told reporters that he considered them "quasi-staff officers"; that he and the American Army needed to nurture public opinion "or we're only mercenaries"; and that "I do not believe that a military man in high places should protect himself." The press trusted him; they were a force multiplier for him.

It's *not* that he was without ego. Early in 1944 he complained in his diary about how the British press treated him. He wrote: "They dislike to believe that I had anything particularly to do with the campaigns. They don't use the words 'initiative' and 'boldness' in talking of me, but often do in speaking of … Monty…It wearies me to be thought of as timid, when I've had to do things that were so risky as to be almost crazy."

Trait #7) He was forceful without rigidity. Montgomery claimed that Eisenhower was swayed by whomever spoke to him last, but in fact he was reasonably consistent. He had a vision early in the European theater planning of the so-called broad-front attack into Germany in 1944, in contrast to the narrow-front advocated by Montgomery, and Eisenhower stuck with it.

Let me add that he could get a fixed, *wrong* idea. He developed a personal antipathy toward Lt. Gen. Jacob L. Devers, the 6th Army Group commander; this bias caused Eisenhower to underestimate Devers, and to ignore his advice. Eisenhower could also nurse a grudge: when Marshall in early 1945 asked Eisenhower to evaluate and rank in order of value all of the senior generals in the ETO, he ranked Devers 24th, and Devers was the only general about whom Eisenhower says anything really negative. Jake Devers in fact was exceptionally capable; among senior American generals, he was second only to Eisenhower himself in his deft touch with Allied forces.

Eisenhower embodied an Emersonian self-reliance. His son John, who can be pretty astute about his old man, once wrote that Ike "appeared not to share the metaphysical feeling that God owed him anything specific, such as good weather on a given day." By the way, he was *not* religious; although his parents had read the Bible each morning and evening, Eisenhower, as the historian Jean Edward Smith notes, is the only man who has been elected to the American presidency without belonging to a church.

He also learned to hate the enemy; early in the war he mouthed the requisite bellicose language about killing Huns; but by 1944 and 1945 you sense that his depth of feeling had become quite genuine. It became a grudge match for him, and that served as a propulsion system. In March 1945, 104 German prisoners asphyxiated in a rail boxcar while being transported to a prison camp in France. Eisenhower wrote to Marshall: "It is irritating to have such things occur because I certainly loathe having to apologize to the Germans. It looks as if this time I have no other recourse." And he did send regrets to the German high command, through the Swiss.

Trait #8) Eisenhower found diversion and relaxation where he could, despite smoking four packs of cigarettes a day. [His blood pressure in July 1944 was 176 over 110—that's high-risk, stage 2 hypertension.] On the night of June 5, before D-Day, he played checkers; on the night of Dec. 16, 1944, the first night of the Bulge, he played five rubbers of bridge with Omar Bradley over a bottle of Highland Piper Scotch. [***#10, Ike in Merkers mine***] He was a fine card player, both bridge and poker. He went horseback riding in Algiers and in England, often with Kay Summersby, his Irish driver. I don't know if he was sleeping with her, nor does anyone else alive today. My guess is *not*, but the appearance of impropriety was so strong—far more titillating than anything Gen. John Allen did in Tampa recently—that he probably would not survive today's hyper-scrutiny.

By the way, Eisenhower's wife, Mamie, could be difficult, insecure, and self-absorbed. In one cry of the heart, he wrote to her in Nov. 1944, after the battles of Aachen and MARKET GARDEN, and during the Hürtgen Forest: "It always depresses me when you talk about…what a beating you've taken, apparently because of me. You've always put your own interpretation on every act, look, or word of mine, and when you've made yourself unhappy, that has, in turn, made me the same."

He also wrote something to her that I find touchingly human and contemporary. He told her: "We've now been apart for 2 ½ years and at a time under conditions that make separations painful and hard to bear. The load of responsibility I carry would be intolerable unless I could have the belief that there is someone who wants me to come home—for good."

Trait #9) He recognized that world war is a clash of *systems.* Which system can generate the combat power to prevail, whether it's in the form of the 12,000 Allied airplanes on D-Day; the 10-to-1 advantage in artillery ammunition often enjoyed by the Allies; the mass production of penicillin and proximity fuses; the ability to design, build and detonate an atomic bomb? Which system can produce and educate leaders capable of organizing the shipping, the rail and truck transportation, the stupendous logistical demands of global war? [***#11, Ike w/ winning generals***]

It has often been argued that in a fair fight, *mano a mano,* that when one American infantry battalion fought one German battalion, or a regiment fought a regiment, that the Germans were usually better. A fair fight! Who is looking for a fair fight? Germany could not muster the wherewithal to cross the English Channel, 21 miles wide, to invade Britain. The U.S. projected power across the Pacific, the Atlantic, into the Mediterranean, Southeast Asia, the seven seas, the infinite skies. Power projection, adaptability, versatility, ingenuity, preponderance—*these* were the salient characteristics of the U.S. Army in World War II, and Eisenhower in some measure exploited and embodied those traits.

Trait #10) He achieved a certain wisdom, annealed by fire. [***#12, Ike en route Normandy*****]** In December 1942, a month after the invasion of North Africa, Eisenhower wrote himself a note: "Through all of this I am learning many things." One lesson in particular he cited then is "that waiting for other people to produce is one of the hardest things a commander has to do." Through the campaigns in Tunisia, in Sicily, in southern Italy, and then through the invasion of Normandy, the drive across France, and right on until the surrender of Germany, we see him looking to draw lessons, to learn, to grow. Among other things, at the end of the war he demanded that his victorious armies keep to the moral high ground. In July 1945, he ordered all commanders in the European Theater with court-martial jurisdiction to conduct a thorough investigation "into whether enemy prisoners of war have been killed or otherwise mistreated by members of your command." (SS guards had been murdered by American soldiers at Dachau, which provoked this order.) And he explained why: "America's moral position will be undermined and her reputation for fair dealing debased if criminal conduct…by her own armed forces is condoned and unpunished by those of us responsible for defending her honor."

Some of you may have heard that there's a quarrel in Washington over how best to honor Eisenhower. A four-acre site has been set aside for a memorial—on Independence Avenue, just south of the Air and Space Museum—and Frank Gehry, the most prominent architect in America, has designed a contemporary memorial that Eisenhower's grandchildren and some traditionalists have denounced. One architectural writer has concluded that the dispute arises from the fact that it is curiously difficult to adquately memorialize *competence.*

But I think what Gehry, the architect, is trying to capture is not competence but *character.* In closing I'll offer one final vignette that reveals the man, and his character:

On the 12th of June, 1945, a month after the war in Europe ended, Eisenhower was invited to receive honors in London's Guildhall, where he gave a remarkable speech. That speech included this line, now engraved over his tomb in Abilene: "Humility must always be the portion of any man who receives acclaim earned in the blood of his followers and the sacrifices of his friends."

I suspect he wouldn't have been able to articulate that sentiment with such authenticity in 1942. By 1945, he knew it in his bones.

You are his heirs, his fortunate and accomplished professional grandchildren and great-grandchildren. The ultimate accolade came from George Marshall shortly after the

German surrender. He told Eisenhower: "You have commanded with outstanding success the most powerful military force that has ever been assembled. You have made history, great history for the good of all mankind, and you have stood for all we hope for and admire in an officer of the United States Army."

Thank you again for the privilege of speaking to you this evening. I look forward to your questions and your comments.