



alg-images/Newscom

"I LIKE IKE" Button (Top Right): Independent Picture Service/UG via Getty Images



IN THE YEARS AFTER WORLD WAR II, DWIGHT D. EISENHOWER WAS THE MOST FAMOUS MAN IN THE WORLD AND MOST TRUSTED MAN IN AMERICA

BY DAVID HOLZEL

The weather forecast over the English Channel for June 5, 1944, was for storms. The greatest amphibious assault in history was poised to get underway—but would the Allies' attempt to dislodge the Nazis from France founder due to bad weather?

The final decision to launch Operation Overlord was with the supreme Allied commander, Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower. Steady, indefatigable and a master of detail and morale building, the 53-year-old Kansan had led the painstaking planning for what has since become known as the D-Day invasion.

Overlord relied on Allied air superiority to help break the German line. So when it came to its execution, Eisenhower argued for total commitment. "Every obstacle must be overcome, every inconvenience suffered and every risk run to ensure that our blow [is] decisive," he wrote to the Combined Chiefs of Staff, supreme military staff for the Western Allies. "We cannot afford to fail."

They had only a small window of opportunity to act. The launch had to be made at dawn, on low tide, with at least a half moon the night before. In the spring of 1944, those conditions were met only in early May and the first and third weeks of June. May was now past, and the first week of June was



General Dwight D. Eisenhower giving orders to American paratroopers in England on D-Day, June 6, 1944.

almost over. The Allies were running out of time.

Eisenhower decided to take the chance. After meeting with the top Allied commanders in their London

headquarters, Eisenhower gave the order to launch the attack at 9:45 p.m.

In clearing weather, more than 156,000 troops landed on June 6. It was, one historian said, as if a medium-sized city had been moved 100 miles away in one night, against violent opposition. The D-Day invasion was like a vast machine of moving parts and systems, a bureaucracy of departments, each responsible for its own job. The only man responsible for seeing the whole picture, for knowing if the machine was working correctly, was Eisenhower.

"Plans are worthless," he told an audience when he was president, "but planning is everything."

In the first week, the Allies consolidated a bridgehead. And although Allied victory was a long way from being assured, D-Day was the beginning of the end of Nazi Germany.

Out of that defeat, Eisenhower, with his lopsided grin, straight talk and modest demeanor, became the most famous—and possibly most popular—man in the world.



U.S. Army via CNP/Newscom



US Official Photograph Micropix

Left: Cadet Dwight D. Eisenhower kicking a football at West Point in 1912. Above: American troops drive an amphibious vehicle aboard an invasion landing craft in preparation for the Normandy invasion.

As commander of the Allied Forces in Europe in World War II and two-term president, Dwight D. Eisenhower had helped lead America's transformation into a superpower on a permanent war footing. America had entered a new age on Eisenhower's watch—the nation was prosperous beyond belief but sat on the edge of nuclear conflict.

LITTLE IKE

He was born in 1890 in Denison, Texas, but spent his formative years, until he shipped out to West Point, living in Abilene, Kansas. One of six brothers, he was early on given the nickname “Little Ike”—“Big Ike” was big brother Edgar. The boys rolled and tumbled, fought and played sports. Parents David and

Ida Stover Eisenhower taught their children to be honest and self-reliant.

As a boy, Eisenhower studied military history on his own. Athletic as a youth, he discovered leadership talents while organizing baseball and football games during high school. At West Point, a knee injury ended his career as a football player, but he quickly became a coach. Coaching brought out the best of him: his organizational ability, his enthusiasm that roused his players to victory. During World War II, his approach as a commander would remind some of a good football coach.

Eisenhower graduated from West Point in 1915 but was not sent to Europe to fight in World War I. Instead, he put his coaching skills to work training troops.

After the Armistice, Eisenhower remained in the peacetime army. As the

years went by, the ambitious Eisenhower had little to show for his dedication to the armed forces. He served ably as an assistant to Gen. Douglas MacArthur in the Philippines and was a protégé of Chief of Staff Gen. George Marshall. But when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, Eisenhower was 51 years old and had never seen battle.

Once war was declared, however, Eisenhower's rise was swift. Marshall and President Franklin D. Roosevelt saw how essential Eisenhower's diplomatic skills would be in holding together the fractious allies.

In 1942, Marshall sent Eisenhower to London as chief of the European theater of operations. There, his straight talk and good humor engaged the British people and the American press, who turned Ike, as the public now called him, into a celebrity. He became the

PULLING RANK: EISENHOWER'S MILITARY ASCENDANCY



N/Syndication/Newscom

July 1, 1916: First Lieutenant, U.S. Army

May 15, 1917: Captain, U.S. Army

June 17, 1918: Major, National Army

October 14, 1918: Lieutenant Colonel, National Army

June 30, 1920: Captain, Regular Army (reverted to peacetime rank)

July 2, 1920: Major, Regular Army

July 1, 1936: Lieutenant Colonel, Regular Army

March 11, 1941: Colonel, Regular Army

September 29, 1941: Brigadier General, Army of the U.S.

March 27, 1942: Major General, Army of the U.S.

July 7, 1942: Lieutenant General, Army of the U.S.

February 11, 1943: General, Army of the U.S.

December 20, 1944: General of the Army, Army of the U.S.

April 11, 1946: General of the Army rank made permanent in the Regular Army

ORDER OF THE DAY: JUNE 6, 1944

“Soldiers, Sailors and Airmen of the Allied Expeditionary Force!”

“You are about to embark upon the Great Crusade, toward which we have striven these many months. The eyes of the world are upon you. The hopes and prayers of liberty-loving people everywhere march with you. In company with our brave Allies and brothers-in-arms on other Fronts, you will bring about the destruction of the German war machine, the elimination of Nazi tyranny over the oppressed peoples of Europe, and security for ourselves in a free world.

“Your task will not be an easy one. Your enemy is well trained, well equipped and battle hardened. He will fight savagely.

“But this is the year 1944! Much has happened since the Nazi triumphs of 1940–41. The United Nations have inflicted upon the

Germans great defeats, in open battle, man-to-man. Our air offensive has seriously reduced their strength in the air and their capacity to wage war on the ground. Our Home Fronts have given us an overwhelming superiority in weapons and munitions of war, and placed at our disposal great reserves of trained fighting men. The tide has turned! The free men of the world are marching together to Victory!

“I have full confidence in your courage and devotion to duty and skill in battle. We will accept nothing less than full Victory!

“Good luck! And let us beseech the blessing of Almighty God upon this great and noble undertaking.”

—Dwight D. Eisenhower

unpretentious incarnation of American can-do spirit.

It was Eisenhower’s first command and when the Allies decided their offense would be to expel the Germans from North Africa, he proved to be a cautious leader. His caution led to delays and missed opportunities, even though his superiors urged him to be bolder.

By then, many perceived a looming Soviet threat to Europe and argued that the defeated German military should be co-opted as a new ally. But Eisenhower, who had spent the war holding the alliance together, had faith in U.S.-Soviet relations and would not double-cross the Russians.

So it was as a Republican that Eisenhower made his candidacy, first for the Republican nomination against party leader Sen. Robert Taft of Ohio and later against Democrat Adlai Stevenson in the general election. When the ballots were counted, the most trusted man in the country and most famous American in the world had been elected president.

His first test was ending the unpopular Korean War. The war had begun in 1950 when North Korea invaded the South. The United Nations adopted an American resolution committing to the defense of South Korea. The war was a stalemate when Eisenhower became president in 1953. He took advantage of a diplomatic

SO GREAT WAS EISENHOWER’S POPULARITY THAT REPUBLICANS AND DEMOCRATS ALIKE SOUGHT HIM AS THEIR CANDIDATE FOR PRESIDENT.

Eisenhower learned from his freshman error. And the next year he was made a four-star general, as the Allies turned toward reconquering Europe. The battle for Sicily began on July 10, 1943, with the largest amphibious assault ever attempted, and saw a race across the island between rival generals, American George S. Patton and British Bernard Montgomery. While these battles are often seen as strategic failures, they did give the Allies, including Eisenhower, valuable experience for the next phase of the war—the 1944 D-Day landing in northern Europe.

When victory came, almost a year later, Eisenhower’s reputation as a hero was sealed. With Hitler dead, the Germans surrendered on May 7, 1945. After the ceremony, the victorious officers were too exhausted to celebrate.

THE INDISPENSABLE MAN

Eisenhower, then, was present at the birth of the Cold War, as Germany was divided by the Allies and Berlin found itself surrounded by Soviet occupation. After being elected 34th president in 1952, he spent eight years trying to keep hostilities from breaking into nuclear war.

Like his presidential predecessors Washington and Grant, Eisenhower was a war hero who seemed the indispensable man to lead the country. So great was his popularity that Republicans and Democrats alike sought him as their candidate. “His political views, unexceptional and shared by millions of American voters, were quintessentially Republican, Midwestern, middle-of-the-road, patriotic,” writes Tom Wicker in his biography *Dwight D. Eisenhower*.

President Dwight D. Eisenhower and his wife, Mamie Eisenhower, hold up a copy of the *New York Daily News* headlining Eisenhower’s presidential victory, November 5, 1952.



EISENHOWER'S RIBBONS OF ROAD

The Interstate Highway System, that web of limited-access high-speed roads, has a first name: Eisenhower. It was President Eisenhower who signed the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956, and he considered it one of his greatest accomplishments in office.

Eisenhower had been thinking about the national importance of good roads since his early soldiering days. In 1919, as a young lieutenant colonel, he joined a convoy that was road testing Army vehicles by riding them from Washington, D.C., to San Francisco to see what it would take to move the army across country. They made their transcontinental journey at an average speed of 6 miles per hour. During 62 days there were numerous crashes and breakdowns. Vehicles got stuck in mud and sand and crashed through wooden bridges.

"The old convoy had started me thinking about good, two-lane highways," he wrote years later, "but Germany had made me see the wisdom of broader ribbons across the land."

In Germany, as Supreme Allied Commander during World War II, Eisenhower saw the advanced design of the autobahns, which allowed the Nazi army to move quickly through Germany.

As president, Eisenhower championed the idea of an interstate highway system. In his State of the Union Address in 1954, Eisenhower told the nation that it was important to "protect the vital interest of every citizen in a safe and adequate highway system." Congress acted quickly and passed the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1954, which allotted \$175 million for the interstate system.

During the next two years, Congress debated and voted on various highway bills. In his 1956 State of the Union, Eisenhower again called for a "modern, interstate highway system."

In June, Eisenhower was being treated for ileitis at Walter Reed Army Hospital when aides brought in a stack of bills for his signature. One of them was the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956. It called for a 41,000-mile network of interstate highways and allocated \$26 billion to pay for them. The system was extended to about 48,000 miles, and the cost has been estimated at \$425 billion in 2006 dollars.

The interstate highway system was one of the elements that unify the United States, Eisenhower believed. "Without them," he said in 1955, "we would be a mere alliance of many separate parts."



opening from the Communist Chinese, North Korea's patrons, and over the objections of the dictator of South Korea pushed forward an armistice. It has held until today.

Eisenhower's economics were straightforward. He balanced the U.S. budget for two years out of his eight and proposed cuts to the defense budget. He believed in a strong defense but

thought that the strength of the country didn't come merely from its weaponry.

"Throughout his presidency, Eisenhower continually connected the country's security to its economic strength, underscoring that our fiscal health and our military might are equal pillars of our national defense," his granddaughter Susan Eisenhower wrote in 2011. "This meant that a responsible

government would have to make hard choices. The question Eisenhower continued to pose about defense spending was clear and practical: How much is enough?"

Through the tense 1950s, Eisenhower kept the country out of nuclear and conventional war. He didn't allow the U.S. to be drawn into the Suez Crisis of 1956, and he forced Britain, France and Israel to back down from their takeover of the Suez Canal. He did land Marines in Lebanon briefly to reassure Western allies in the region.

While Eisenhower's caution kept the country out of war, his reticence on the domestic front prompted criticism. He tolerated the demagoguery of Wisconsin Sen. Joseph McCarthy and his crusade to expose Communists in the government and the entertainment industry.

And when in 1954, the Supreme Court issued its unanimous *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, which struck down the segregation of black and white children in separate schools, Eisenhower was lukewarm. Privately he disagreed with the court. Publicly he would go only so far as to say that he would "obey" the law of the land.

While he had his detractors, Eisenhower would go down in history as being an enormously popular president, with his public approval rating during his time in office averaging 65 percent.

As he prepared to leave office in 1961, 10 years before his death, Eisenhower offered some truths that may have been forgotten in the years since: that an active citizenry is necessary to preserve its freedom and prosperity, and that every bill rung up needs to be paid.

"Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired, signifies in the final sense, a theft," he said. "The cost of one modern, heavy bomber is this: a modern, brick school in more than 30 cities." ■