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Evan Thomas. *Ike's Bluff: President Eisenhower's Secret Battle to Save the World.* New York: Little, Brown, 2012. 496 pp. $29.99 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-316-09104-6.

Reviewed by Al Berger (University of North Dakota, History Department)
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"Every Gun That Is Made ..."

Dwight Eisenhower, like Harry Truman, has been remembered more fondly in recent years than he was at the time he left office. The way that an interested public remembers (and cherry-picks) Eisenhower's observation on the "military-industrial complex" is one reason why. Current Eisenhower scholarship is most likely to be found somewhere on a spectrum ranging from friendly to adulatory and Evan Thomas's new biography is very much part of that historiographical trend. Specifically, the duffer, the man who could barely keep a sentence on track when in office, now emerges as the man who fought (and in Thomas's opinion) won a "secret battle to save the world." Thomas paints him as a Kansas card shark, a personally complex master of calculated risk, and a wizard–in failing health but still successful–simultaneously in front of and behind the curtain.

Ike's Bluff is a crisp and accessible account of Eisenhower's presidency, creating a startlingly intimate portrait of the way official and private life in the White House intertwined. Thomas worked from all manner of official documents, manuscript collections, oral histories, interviews, and a wide selection of secondary sources, and *Ike's Bluff* provides full annotation and an extensive bibliography. He has made especially good use of diaries and interviews left by four key members of Eisenhower's official family: Gen. Andrew Goodpaster, his aide, Dr. Howard Snyder, his physician, Ann Whitman, his secretary, and Col. John Eisenhower, his son. (From references in text and notes, one gets the impression that none of them, especially John Eisenhower, "sugarcoated" the president.)

The result is a very friendly treatment, perhaps just a shade too friendly. Thomas, like Jim Newton and Jean Edward Smith, is asking the right questions though, providing answers to some of them, and returning to our attention significant matters often overlooked or, more frequently, misunderstood. The case in point is the nuclear arms race between the United States and the Soviet Union and the grim prospects of nuclear war that characterized the age.

Few presidents have involved themselves so personally in the strategic planning aspects of their role as commanders-in-chief. (Of course none–not even Ulysses Grant–have been so qualified by education and experience to do so.) Further, until recently, the public never saw through Ike's folksy, cheery "mask of command" to the cold, subtle, and ruthless operator that mask concealed.

The bluff in Thomas's title refers to "massive retaliation," the centerpiece of the Eisenhower policy toward the Soviet Union, the threat that the United States could and would destroy the Soviet Union in retaliation for any strike against the United States. World War II experience confirmed that even the best defense could not defeat 100 percent of an incoming air strike force. And the cost of even one successful strike with one nuclear weapon would be unbearable. The only defense plan with any hope actually to protect the country was a plan whose objective was preventing a Soviet strike in the first place. The policy's objective had to be deterrence of an adversary, not the defeat of one.

Eisenhower had been the U.S. Army chief of staff and NATO supreme commander during the years when the Pentagon wrote the first American strategic plans for the use of nuclear weapons. Those experiences taught him that any hostilities between the United States and the Soviet Union would necessarily be a nuclear war in which the United States would suffer mightily if not fatally and the Soviets would suffer the same fate. Eisenhower's plan depended on the Soviets knowing that. Eisenhower, thoroughly anticommunist, did not believe that the Soviet leaders were crazy, stupid, or blinded by their ideology so thoroughly that they would aggress recklessly.

At the same time, Eisenhower–a genuine, traditional conservative–feared the enormous Keynesian deficit spending the Truman administration had been calling for to pay for its Cold War plans. That cost was, to Eisenhower, a danger as great as the enemy: "[O]ur military strength and our economic strength are truly one," he insisted in that same summer of the "cross of iron" speech: "neither can sensibly be purchased at the price of destroying the other." This was about more than economics: "There is no such thing as maximum military security short of total mobilization," he said. "This total mobilization would mean regimentation of the worker, the farmer, the businessman–allocation of materials–control of wages and prices–drafting of every able-bodied citizen. It would mean, in short, all the grim paraphernalia of the garrison state."[1]

As Eisenhower understood it, he was responsible for the defense of the United States as a free country with "freedom" defined by the tenets of classical economics and traditional conservative benchmarks: low taxes, a balanced budget, and limited government. The nation's adversary was the Soviet Union; Eisenhower's adversaries included many of his former colleagues in the military, a band of hard-right senators (of whom Joe McCarthy was only the best known), and the Democrats. The Democrats' Keynesian understanding of the budget allowed them to take the lead in protest, first about a "bomber gap," and, later, about a "missile gap," both nonexistent.

Hence "the New Look," a strategic formulation named for (of all things) a Paris fashion show. The primary strike force would be the air force, especially Gen. Curtis LeMay's Strategic Air Command, standing ready at bases around the world to make "a smoking ruin" out of the Soviet Union if ever it should attack the United States. The nation's other military forces, the army in particular, complained that the country lacked the means to fight a war too small to warrant a global thermonuclear confrontation. Thomas agrees, and maintains that Eisenhower was knowingly, deliberately denying the generals those means. It was part of the plan. If the New Look's budget spared the country a ruinous burden of spending, it also acted as a brake on any tendency to get into small wars. A small war can grow into a large "general war" rapidly; and Eisenhower genuinely believed that any "general war" with the USSR would be nuclear. By guaranteeing that it would be, Eisenhower sought to ensure that it would never take place.

The catch, of course, was that the world–and especially U.S. adversaries, would have to believe that American willingness to use nuclear weapons in the right circumstances was certain. At the same time, however, Eisenhower could never permit the world–including his own staff, his military commanders, or the U.S. Congress–to be certain as to what those right circumstances might be. Hence "the bluff" in Thomas' title. Eisenhower's youthful poker playing has become well known; it helped make him "colorful." Bridge night has a somewhat milder connotation, however, quite unfairly. Here, Thomas makes excellent use of his intimate sources to develop Eisenhower's very frequent evenings playing bridge as a metaphor for the calculations of risk and the covert communications of the Cold War. Eisenhower was a cutthroat player; he was sufficiently hard on his partners that his son eventually refused to play with him any more. However, the game out in the world was a nasty and dangerous one. In deterrence, the threat must be credible; the adversary must be afraid of it. At the same time, one can't make adversaries too afraid, lest they do something precipitous and dangerous out of panic. Eisenhower, who famously was ready to "confuse 'em" if reporters raised an awkward question, sought to create both certainty and uncertainty in order to strike that balance.

Thomas has a case to make and he makes it well: it is documented, persuasive, and interestingly written. Getting this argument up on its feet would raise a great many provocative and useful questions about the nature of American international power at its height. However, Thomas' apologia for Eisenhower's lack of leadership on civil rights does not fully persuade. At the same time, Frederik Logevall's 2013 Pulitzer Prize-winning *Embers Of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America's Vietnam* presents a well-documented, very different picture of the Eisenhower administration's policies in that region than the one Thomas presents. Logevall points out that while Eisenhower and his White House were not willing send troops to fight in Vietnam, the president and his men were doing far more intervening in Vietnam than Thomas concedes. And if Eisenhower disdained a Korean War-style military force in the region, he had been willing to approve of CIA-sponsored coups d'état in Iran and Guatemala. He was certainly willing enough as well to sponsor Iran- and Guatemala-style CIA operations, the better to control what was left of a noncommunist Vietnam after Dien Bien Phu.

Thomas's picture of Ike's "secret battle to save the world" is attractive. It might even describe the reality; but it has not yet stood up to some serious questions. These still face those of us pursuing this revision of Dwight Eisenhower. Thomas does very well by this

emerging scholarship, and he presents his story accessibly and with aplomb. One may, one should, raise questions about this or that in Thomas's book; but most of us would rest easy if we do as well as he has done here.

Note

[1]. *Selected Speeches of Dwight David Eisenhower, 34th President of the United States: Selected from the Three Principal Periods of his Life: As Supreme Allied Commander in Europe during the War Years, as Supreme NATO Commander [and] as President* (Washington DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1970), 90.

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