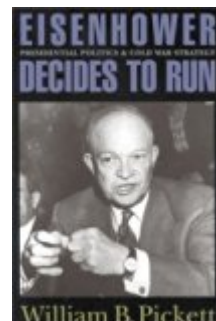


**William B. Pickett.** *Eisenhower Decides to Run: Presidential Politics and Cold War Strategy*. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee Publisher, 2000. ix + 269 pp. \$27.50, cloth, ISBN 978-1-56663-325-3.



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## A Transcendent Duty

The first generation of historians to study Dwight D. Eisenhower portrayed him as a relatively passive player in his own political career. According to their view, he delegated many of his duties to his subordinates: John Foster Dulles made foreign policy, George Humphrey made economic policy, and Sherman Adams handled the day-to-day business of the White House. If the 1950s were a time of peace and prosperity it was not because of anything that Eisenhower did, but rather because he had few critical issues with which to deal.

Historians began to challenge this interpretation in the 1970s. As the National Archives began to declassify documents, a different picture of Eisenhower emerged. Historians saw that Eisenhower played the key role in meetings of the Cabinet and National Security Council. While Eisenhower's subordinates often got credit for major policy decisions, they made few without Eisenhower's explicit approval. Furthermore, historians came to realize that the decade was not a time when "nothing happened," but rather a period

when important decisions and actions by Eisenhower prevented many events from escalating to the crisis stage. This period of revision improved Eisenhower's ranking in one poll of presidential performance from twenty-second (1962) to ninth (1982).[1]

Despite three decades of revisionism, however, one aspect of the early interpretation of Eisenhower's political career went unchallenged: his decision to run for president. This interpretation holds that Eisenhower, due to the incredible popularity he enjoyed as a symbol of American victory in World War II, was the recipient of a genuine presidential draft, the first since George Washington. No less an authority than Stephen Ambrose, in the first volume of his biography of Eisenhower, claimed "There is not a single item in the massive collection at the Eisenhower Library prior to late 1951, that even hints that he would seek the job [the presidency] or that he was secretly doing so." [2]

In *Eisenhower Decides to Run: Presidential Politics and Cold War Strategy*, an important work of Eisenhower revisionism, William B. Pick-

ett challenges this view. Pickett agrees that spontaneous pressure for a draft existed within both parties and among the general public. "What the general and his closest supporters concealed from the public and, until recently, went undiscovered by historians," Pickett argues, was that Eisenhower "worked behind the scenes to encourage a popular movement for his candidacy" (p. xiv). Although Eisenhower would have preferred to stay out of politics, as the Cold War intensified he became concerned that the United States lacked the necessary leadership to preserve the ideals for which it had fought two world wars. Eisenhower's sense of duty, therefore, compelled him to actively seek the presidency. "Far from remaining aloof and waiting for a draft," Pickett argues, "Eisenhower began to work closely with the partisan efforts that created the appearance of a public seeking him" (p. xvi).

As evidence that Eisenhower had no political ambitions prior to 1951, historians often cite the so-called Finder letter of January 1948. Leonard Finder was publisher of the *Manchester Union* and leader of a citizen's movement to draft Eisenhower for the presidency. In a well-publicized response to a letter in which Finder sought support for his cause, Eisenhower wrote that his decision to remove himself completely from politics was "definitive and positive" (p. 40). Pickett uses previously uncited materials from the Eisenhower Library to argue that this letter, while effectively eliminating his name from consideration in 1948 (and, not coincidentally, Douglas MacArthur's as well), did not reflect his long-term ambitions. In private correspondence, Eisenhower encouraged the activities of Finder and others in such a way that they could have had little doubt that one day, given the right circumstances, their efforts would be successful (p. 43-56). In contrast to Ambrose, Pickett argues that Eisenhower's political activities prior to 1951 amounted to no less than "participation in a quiet conspiracy" (p. 91).

While Eisenhower's early political activities might be the most noteworthy contribution of this volume (the Ambrose line above is quoted in the publisher's publicity materials), the rest of Pickett's story is no less important. The circumstances Eisenhower's political supporters awaited presented themselves in 1950 when Ohio Senator Robert Taft's landslide re-election to the United States Senate made him a leading candidate for the Republican presidential nomination in 1952. Taft's presidential ambitions also made him a key spokesman for his party in the field of foreign relations, a position he used to promote his belief that the United States needed to re-examine its post-war commitment to European security. Eisenhower, recently appointed as Supreme Allied Commander in Europe (SACEUR), was convinced that America's own security depended on its commitment to NATO. He was, therefore outraged by Taft's isolationism. In February 1951, before leaving to take up his post as SACEUR, Eisenhower met privately with Taft, seeking the Senator's assurance that he would support America's commitment to European collective security. Taft refused.

By failing to grant the assurances Eisenhower sought, Pickett argues, Taft essentially guaranteed that Eisenhower would challenge his run for the Presidency. In October 1951, Pennsylvania Senator James Duff, the leader of a group of professional politicians whose goal it was to make Eisenhower the Republican candidate, alerted the general through an intermediary that "positive aggressive organization and action was needed." Duff was convinced that Taft's broad support among the party regulars nearly eliminated the possibility of a draft either before or at the convention. Unless Eisenhower was willing to accept the possibility of a Taft candidacy, he would need to give "definite and unqualified assurance" to his supporters "that he would be a candidate on the Republican ticket." Eisenhower acquiesced. Pickett argues that Eisenhower's response (known as the Duff letter), even though it was only shown to

a select group and could have been disavowed if necessary, removed Eisenhower "inexorably" from the political sidelines (p. 127-28). Eisenhower's deliberations over the next few months would not be over whether he should run, as most have argued, but over what the next step in his campaign should be.

Pickett's re-interpretation of the process by which Eisenhower became a candidate for President does not, in this reviewer's opinion, detract from Eisenhower's reputation. Some Eisenhower admirers may prefer to believe that he had no political ambition whatsoever, and only agreed to run for president when drafted. Pickett's interpretation, however, like other works of Eisenhower revisionism, portrays Eisenhower as a more active player in his own political career. Rather than waiting to be drafted into political service, Eisenhower took action out of concern that a Taft presidency would endanger the security of the United States. Preventing a Taft presidency, therefore, became what Eisenhower referred to as a "transcendent" duty, the only kind that would make him take on what was, to him, such a distasteful job. This route to the presidency, arguably, was more honorable than waiting for a draft.

Pickett's book is an important contribution to the historiography of Eisenhower revisionism. What remains in question, however, is whether Pickett's book lives up to its billing as a major re-interpretation of when Eisenhower decided to become a presidential candidate. As the author himself points out, a key difference between his interpretation and earlier ones is how one defines the term "candidate." If Eisenhower became a candidate in 1948 by virtue of leaving his supporters some hope that he may eventually run, as Pickett argues, then this work does differ significantly from earlier interpretations. On the other hand, if Eisenhower's activities prior to 1951 are interpreted as merely the actions of someone keeping their future options open, then some may not consider it a major reinterpretation. This semantic argu-

ment, however, should not detract from this book (and would not even be necessary if Ambrose had not stated his case so definitively). By pulling together, in monograph form, all the relevant information regarding Eisenhower's decision to run for president, Pickett has produced an important and enlightening book. While all political historians will find this book interesting, it should be required reading for Eisenhower specialists.

#### Notes:

[1]. For a more complete discussion of the changing nature of Eisenhower scholarship see Chester J. Pach, Jr., and Elmo Richardson, *The Presidency of Dwight D. Eisenhower*, revised edition (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1991), xi.

[2]. Stephen Ambrose, *Eisenhower, Vol. 1: Soldier, General of the Army, President-Elect, 1890-1952* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983), pp. 489-490.

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