



Martha Smith-Norris, “The Eisenhower Administration and the Nuclear Test Ban Talks, 1958-1960: Another Challenge to ‘Revisionism,’” *Diplomatic History*, Volume 27, Issue 4 (September 2003): 503-541.

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Published by H-Diplo on 14 October 2003

Martha Smith-Norris has written a document-driven, traditional history of the policies undertaken by President Eisenhower and his administration regarding the Nuclear Test Ban treaty, and arms control generally, during the period 1958-1960. Her extensive archival research allows her to demonstrate conclusively that Eisenhower made few serious attempts to reach agreement with the Soviet Union on nuclear testing during the latter years of his presidency, despite his own stated desire to achieve such agreement. Smith-Norris usefully incorporates new British primary documentation to bolster her case; she shows persuasively that the Macmillan government in London recognised and was concerned by Eisenhower’s ambivalence. Her research will put to rest any existing claims that the Eisenhower administration regarded the attainment of a test ban treaty as a main foreign policy priority in the late 1950s.

Two important problems damage this article. The first is Smith-Norris’s consideration of Eisenhower historiography, and particularly how the “school” of Eisenhower revisionism has dealt with his cool approach to arms control. The second is her isolation of Eisenhower’s attitude toward arms control from the larger context of U.S. foreign policy and, in particular, the Cold War crises of the late 1950s. The rest of this review will discuss these two problems.

Smith-Norris suggests that there is a revisionist school of thought that contends that the president “determinedly sought an agreement to end nuclear testing” and “took the lead in his administration on promoting . . . arms control (p. 503).” This is simply incorrect. In advancing this claim Smith-Norris cites Robert Divine’s book *Eisenhower and the Cold War* and Stephen Ambrose’s *Eisenhower: The President*, but neither of these authors made such an argument. Divine notes in passing that Eisenhower took an interest in the test ban in 1957, but that the Soviet Sputnik test and the later Berlin crisis distracted him from this objective—a matter we will deal with later. In one sentence of a 700-page book, Ambrose mentions that Eisenhower was amenable to the idea of a limited test ban; more important, in the conclusion of his book Ambrose actually attacks the President for failing to pursue the test ban treaty out of an “excessive distrust” of the Soviet Union (1). Neither Divine nor Ambrose can possibly be accused of applauding Eisenhower’s record on arms control.

More important, the two books that Smith-Norris cites in making her historiographical claim were written 22 and 19 years ago. Over the past decade or so many books have been published which deal directly with the topics of Eisenhower and nuclear arms, Eisenhower’s foreign policy, and the question of “revisionist” interpretations of these important matters (2). Smith-Norris does not mention, much less contend with, any of them. I suppose this would be less

striking of an omission had the author portrayed her article simply as the monographical work of policy history that it is, but the sub-title to it is “Another Challenge to ‘Revisionism.’” Smith-Norris fails to identify any contemporary school of thought that might be called Eisenhower revisionism, misinterprets the two-decade old comments of Divine and Ambrose that she does raise, and hence offers the reader no means of understanding how her scholarship challenges revisionism or indeed any branch of Eisenhower historiography.

An underlying theme in this article is Smith-Norris’s suggestion that Eisenhower’s inattention to the test-ban treaty and to arms control proves that he was more belligerent and short-sighted a Cold Warrior than many revisionists would claim. In developing this theme, she separates other features of US-Soviet relations at the end of the 1950s from the discrete goal of arms control. This gives us a skewed picture of Eisenhower’s performance.

In 1958 and 1959, two of the three years with which Smith-Norris is primarily concerned, the Eisenhower administration had to deal twice with Cold War crises that raised, for the first time, the real possibility of a thermonuclear World War Three. In August and September 1958 Eisenhower had to decide how to react to the resumption of Chinese bombing of Quemoy and Matsu, an action that had the Nationalist leader Jiang Jieshi and many American military figures clamouring for war. And then from November 1958 to July 1959, Eisenhower was forced to respond to Nikita Khrushchev’s announcement that the western powers had six months to leave Berlin, an ultimatum that many American leaders, including his ill Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, insisted must be met with force rather than negotiation. In both crises Eisenhower cleverly avoided conflict, negotiated under ultimatum, and in so doing enraged many of his more belligerent advisers and provided political ammunition to hawkish Democrats like John F. Kennedy.

Arms control is one, though not the only, way to reduce the chances of war in the future, and a test ban had the added benefit of putting an end to the radiation of populations near testing sites in the Pacific, Siberia, and other locations. The U.S. record in either failing to protect Pacific Islanders from radioactivity or forcing them to abandon their ancestral homes was abominable. For Eisenhower, however, the aims of arms control and a test ban were fundamentally less important than the successful management of the harrowing crises over Quemoy-Matsu and Berlin. By ignoring the deep effect of nuclear crisis upon Eisenhower, Smith-Norris gives us a one-dimensional picture of the president, one that both simplistically equates his indifference to arms control with militarism and fails to imagine how arms control might have figured in his larger pursuit of nuclear war avoidance.

To understand what such a pursuit might have required, one has to consider the obvious question this critique begs: namely, what prevented Eisenhower from both managing nuclear crises and concluding arms control agreements, or at least a test ban treaty, with the Soviet Union? The answer to this question is, in this reviewer’s opinion, crucial in understanding Eisenhower’s presidency. In both the Quemoy-Matsu and Berlin ultimatum crises Eisenhower resisted the incessant demands of militaristic advisers that the United States use its nuclear superiority to push the crises toward war. This was a politically difficult process, beginning not in 1958 but with the Sputnik test in late 1957, in which Eisenhower was subject to extreme pressure not only from war-mongers in the military but also from arms manufacturers, their allies in Washington,

academic strategists keen on the idea of winnable nuclear war--in short, the “military-industrial complex” Eisenhower identified in his farewell address. In contending with these forces, it is just possible that Eisenhower regarded the neglect of arms control as a price he would have to pay to fend off the critics of his dovish management of the nuclear crises and his refusal to increase military spending. This is not certain, and it surely does not excuse Eisenhower from the indefensible testing in the Pacific. To contend with “Eisenhower revisionists” on the subject of arms control, however, Smith-Norris needed to consider these kinds of arguments.

Endnotes:

(1) Robert Divine, *Eisenhower and the Cold War* (Oxford, 1981), pp. 105, 124; Stephen Ambrose, *Eisenhower: The President* (New York, 1984), pp. 523, 621.

(2) For recent studies of Eisenhower’s foreign and nuclear policies, and considerations of the “revisionist” school on these policies, see Chester Pach and Elmo Richardson, *The Presidency of Dwight D. Eisenhower* rev. ed. (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1991); Peter Roman, *Eisenhower and the Missile Gap* (Ithaca, 1996); Andreas Wenger, *Living With Peril: Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Nuclear Weapons* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 1996); Philip Nash, *The Other Missiles of October: Eisenhower, Kennedy, and the Jupiters, 1957-63* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); Richard Immerman and Robert Bowie, *Waging Peace: How Eisenhower Shaped an Enduring Cold War Strategy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Richard Immerman, *John Foster Dulles* (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 1998); Campbell Craig, *Destroying the Village: Eisenhower and Thermonuclear War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998); Marc Trachtenberg, *A Constructed Peace* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); and David Snead, *Eisenhower and the Gaither Committee* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1999). Nor does Smith-Norris mention the pioneering work of Eisenhower revisionism, Fred Greenstein’s *The Hidden-Hand Presidency* (New York: Basic Books, 1982).

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