



Kenneth A. Osgood, “Form before Substance: Eisenhower’s Commitment to Psychological Warfare and Negotiations with the Enemy,” *Diplomatic History*, Volume 24, Issue 3 (Summer 2000): 405-433.

Commentary by **David L. Snead**, Texas Tech University, david.snead@ttu.edu
Published by H-Diplo on 24 July 2000

Kenneth Osgood’s interesting and informative essay attempts to redirect and refocus analyses of President Dwight Eisenhower and his efforts to wage the Cold War. He takes to task revisionists and even post-revisionists who have generally given Eisenhower high marks for his foreign policies. By focusing on Eisenhower’s psychological warfare policies especially in his first two years in office, Osgood concludes that the new president developed contradictory policies that accelerated the arms race and impeded a reduction of tensions between the Soviet Union and the United States. While raising significant points, especially the need to more seriously consider the importance and influence of psychological warfare in the Eisenhower administration, Osgood’s arguments need greater development and a more careful assessment of the many issues that went into making policies.

Osgood “argues that Eisenhower’s commitment to psychological warfare exerted a profound influence on the overall direction of his foreign policy, especially in the fields of peace and disarmament.” (405) In making his arguments, he focuses most of his attention on the evolution of Eisenhower’s Atoms for Peace proposal. He clearly shows that psychological factors played an important role in its origin by carefully tracing the involvement of such advisers as C.D. Jackson and stressing the administration’s desire to make a peace initiative that would win a propaganda battle with the Soviet Union. This argument is not particularly novel. Where Osgood ventures away from the traditional revisionist assertions is his assessment of Eisenhower’s motivations. He claims, “such gestures [Atoms for Peace and Open Skies] were never premised on breaking the disarmament deadlock. They were political warfare moves, intended to bolster the United States’s image and stiffen Allied resolve. As such, they were intended not to bridge the gap with the Russians but to strengthen the capacity to contain them.” (422)

Osgood’s arguments raise several important issues, but at the same time overly simplify the complexity of factors that influenced Eisenhower’s decision-making. He definitely points to a neglected area in the study of the Eisenhower administration. Clearly, psychological factors played a vital role in his presidency. The Atoms for Peace and later Open Skies proposals were at least in part propaganda initiatives, and if you include covert operations such as in Iran and Guatemala, it is quite apparent that Eisenhower placed a priority on taking the offensive against the Soviet Union. The question is whether “Eisenhower consistently placed form before substance,” as Osgood asserts. (409)

On this point, Osgood needs to delve deeper into the complexity of decision-making. He should more clearly define exactly what psychological warfare is or at least what it meant to Eisenhower

and his advisers. Osgood argues that under Eisenhower's "leadership, the totality of U.S. policies-foreign, domestic, economic, military-became a consideration in the conduct of psychological warfare." (407) Based on this definition any issue influencing Eisenhower's decision-making could be considered as a psychological factor. This seems overly broad and not that helpful in understanding why Eisenhower made the decisions that he did. Psychological warfare was certainly a factor in many of Eisenhower's decisions, but it was still only one factor.

Furthermore, while Osgood dismisses Eisenhower's Atoms for Peace proposal as "above all, a political warfare initiative, predicated on exposing as fraudulent the post-Stalin peace campaign and elevating the U.S. position as the foremost champion of peace and disarmament," he does not address what else Eisenhower could have done. (431) In the context of the early to mid-1950s, Eisenhower had to deal with many difficult challenges. He had opposition within and outside his own political party. He wanted to balance the budget while facing a clarion of calls for increased spending from a variety of interest groups ranging from the left to the right of the political spectrum. Not least of his problems, he was unsure of the new Soviet leaders' intentions. Yes, they made some overtures for peace, but in the mindset of most Americans, there was reason to doubt their sincerity. On several occasions, Osgood suggests that Eisenhower should have developed a "step-by-step program for enhancing trust between the super powers" or "a gradual approach to disarmament". (429, 431) There is some truth to this, but in the cold war atmosphere of the 1950s, was it really possible?

Osgood's essay does force scholars to more critically analyze the role of psychological factors not only in Eisenhower's decision-making but also for other presidents. While these factors were probably not as prominent as Osgood contends, he is right to point out that they were much more significant than most other scholars have recognized. His challenge is to show where psychological factors fit within the complexity of issues influencing Eisenhower's decision-making and to address more clearly what alternatives Eisenhower had in the 1950s. It is relatively easy in 2000 to discount the fears that many Americans had towards the Soviet Union in these early stages of the Cold War, but they were very real to those who held them. Eisenhower's Atoms for Peace and Open Skies proposals may have been motivated in part by propaganda reasons, but they were also initial steps in the negotiating process that indicate Eisenhower's desire to reach some accord with the Soviet Union.

Copyright © 2000-2004 by H-Diplo, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For other uses contact the H-Diplo Article Discussion Co-ordinator, George Fujii, gfuji@umail.ucsb.edu.
