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Review of The Truth Is Our Weapon: The Rhetorical Diplomacy of Dwight D. Eisenhower

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Chris Tudda, ed. *The Truth Is Our Weapon: The Rhetorical Diplomacy of Dwight D. Eisenhower and John Foster Dulles.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006. 232 pp.p Index. ISBN 978-0-8071-3140-4; $39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8071-3140-4.

Reviewed by David Snead
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Snead on Tudda

As with most historical subjects, the historiography of Dwight D. Eisenhower's presidency has undergone its share of adjustments and readjustments over the past fifty years. The gradual release of previously declassified materials over the last twenty-five years has allowed for more nuanced interpretations of his presidency, yet no true consensus has emerged. The golf-playing do-little president described by some in the 1960s gave way to the strong "hidden hand" president interpretation in the 1980s.[1] Now Christopher Tudda offers a new assessment that shows Eisenhower as an active president but one who was not very effective. Tudda makes an interesting and powerful argument that Eisenhower and his secretary of state, John Foster Dulles, pursued rhetorical diplomacy that severely hampered and, at times, impeded their efforts to achieve the goals they set. While not always convincing, Tudda's interpretation will force historians to re-examine their views of the Eisenhower presidency and the role of public diplomacy in decision-making.

Tudda uses three case studies to examine the Eisenhower administration's rhetoric and the deleterious effect it had on its policy goals. He explores the fight for the creation of the European Defense Community (EDC), the administration's public call for the liberation of Eastern Europe, and Eisenhower's desire for a reunited Germany. Tudda concludes that Eisenhower and John Foster Dulles "failed to understand the power of words in a climate of insecurity brought about by the Cold War. Their confidential decision to ease world tensions failed because Eisenhower and Dulles could not reconcile this with their determination to pursue rhetorical diplomacy" (p. 15). More specifically, while privately recognizing the need to coexist with the Soviet Union, they continually used ambiguous and often bellicose rhetoric that actually increased tensions, not only with the Kremlin but also their own allies–the exact opposite of what they intended.

Tudda argues that Eisenhower and Dulles's rhetoric in their public statements and in their private meetings with their allies and enemies exaggerated the threat of the Soviet Union and expounded the dangers of unilateralism. This rhetoric sharply contrasted with their policy goals that were dependent on careful and cautious thought. The disconnect between the rhetoric and their actual deliberations hampered their efforts to achieve any of their goals. Tudda initially explores the backgrounds of both Dulles and Eisenhower and concludes that each of them had a long history of using rhetoric that did not reflect their true beliefs. He argues: "Even as Dulles publicly preached toughness and confrontation with the Soviet Union in the late 1940s, close examination of the documentary record reveals that he confidentially counseled moderation and restraint" (p. 25). He found that Eisenhower shared many of Dulles's views and used rhetoric in similar ways. The result, Tudda explains, is that Eisenhower and Dulles "publicly pledged to pursue an activist foreign policy, including the pursuit of military, political, and economic unity in Western Europe, promised to liberate Eastern Europe, and endorsed the reunification of Germany on Western terms. All the while they secretly strove for coexistence with the Soviet Union and settled for the status quo in Europe" (p. 47).

Eisenhower and Dulles believed the EDC was the centerpiece of European security, yet Tudda contends that they failed to develop a coherent public message that actually supported their goals. Instead their public statements made many French and other Euro-

pean statesmen fear American unilateralism as much as communism. Furthermore, the American leaders' continued pressure on France to increase its commitment to fighting communism in Vietnam while the United States was publicly implying a possible reduction in its military presence in Europe did nothing to encourage confidence. The end result was that the French refused to support the EDC.

After his examination of the EDC, Tudda addresses the United States's policies towards Eastern Europe. He contends that Eisenhower and his advisers knew that public calls for liberation of Eastern Europe "would force the Soviet Union to react violently to any threats, real or imagined" (p. 75). However, they also knew that abandoning these "captive peoples" to communist rule would not play well in the domestic political arena. That, in Tudda's eyes, led Eisenhower and Dulles to make "ambiguous and dangerous statements" (p.75). He asserts that the Eisenhower administration "had failed to truly think through its rhetorical strategy and could not reconcile its public information campaign with its confidential repudiation of military liberation" (p. 86). The result was that their rhetoric encouraged many Eastern Europeans to believe incorrectly that the United States would provide aid if they indeed sought to break away from Soviet control.

Tudda continues his critique of Eisenhower's policies by challenging the president's private belief in a conciliatory approach to the reunification of Germany, while pursuing a confrontational public stance. Tudda stresses that "Eisenhower and Dulles consistently used bellicose rhetoric in an effort to convince the West of the danger of a permanently divided Germany, and tried to force the Soviets to agree to German reunification on Western terms" (p. 103). The problem was that European countries feared a reunified Germany almost as much as the Soviet Union; therefore, the Eisenhower administration's rhetoric actually encouraged Soviet resistance to reunification while failing to provide the assurance Western European nations needed. This failure intensified the Cold War–just the opposite of what Eisenhower desired. In the end, Tudda concludes, "Eisenhower's public rhetoric angered the allies even as he secretly pursued policies ostensibly designed to accommodate their needs" (p. 127).

Tudda has written a powerful book that will force historians of the Eisenhower administration to re-examine their interpretations and historians more generally to evaluate the importance of public rhetoric. Tudda could have strengthened his arguments by more clearly examining what alternatives Eisenhower did have, especially within the constraints of domestic political realities, and developed more clearly the influence of Eisenhower's rhetoric on other countries' policies. He has clearly shown that it did have influence, but by focusing almost exclusively on the rhetoric used by the Eisenhower administration, he unintentionally minimizes other factors that influence policy development. In other words, would a more conciliatory and less bellicose public diplomacy have produced different foreign policy results? Tudda believes so, but his point is not proven conclusively.

Regardless of this criticism, Tudda has done what any good historian should do. He makes you think and re-evaluate previously held positions. Future studies of the 1950s will have to take into consideration how successful Eisenhower was in devising policy goals and in articulating them to various audiences ranging from the general public to the Soviet Union. Tudda clearly shows in the areas he examined that Eisenhower could have at least done a better job of explaining U.S. goals and offering more appealing reasons for countries to follow the American lead. By not doing so, Tudda concludes that Eisenhower failed to achieve his primary strategic goal–reduced tensions with the Soviet Union.

Note

[1]. Fred Greenstein, *The Hidden-Hand Presidency: Eisenhower as Leader* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982).

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