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Review of Eisenhower

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H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Peter G. Boyle. *Eisenhower.* New York: Pearson Longman, 2005. xi + 200 pp. $17.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-582-28720-4.

Reviewed by David Snead (Department of History, Liberty University)
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On Par With George Washington?

Numerous scholars have written studies of Dwight Eisenhower and his presidency since 1980 and generally speaking they have concluded that, while far from perfect, Eisenhower was a strong leader and an effective president. This interpretation replaced an earlier view of Eisenhower as a weak president who allowed his subordinates to run his administration. In *Eisenhower*, Peter Boyle has synthesized some of the most significant interpretations of Eisenhower and his presidency. Boyle wrote the book as part of Pearson Longman's "Profiles in Power" series that is designed to present complex subjects in an understandable manner to undergraduate students. For all of us who have worked with undergraduates, this is no easy task. However, Boyle has succeeded admirably. Eisenhower scholars will find nothing particularly striking about the facts Boyle presents or the evidence he uses, and they might quibble with some of his comparisons to other presidents, but they should find the book valuable in the undergraduate classroom. Boyle's study could be used in a U.S. survey course and in more advanced courses on twentieth-century U.S. history.

While Boyle cites several documents from the Eisenhower Library, he relies heavily on recent studies of the Eisenhower administration and published collections of primary sources. He organizes the book using a brief introduction, a prologue describing Eisenhower's career before he became president and then eight chapters where he examines two years of the Eisenhower presidency at a time with separate chapters on domestic and foreign affairs. He completes his study with a conclusion where he compares Eisenhower to other presidents. While the approach can sometimes seem disjointed and, at other times, obfuscate the connections between domestic and foreign policies, it generally provides a clear view of the unfolding of events. Boyle at least briefly describes all the major policy decisions in the Eisenhower administration and even examines some, like agriculture policy, that have not received a great deal of attention.

Boyle clearly admires Eisenhower. He argues that Eisenhower compares very favorably to his successors and ranks near the top of his predecessors. Besides Abraham Lincoln and Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Boyle only mentions one other president, George Washington, whom he would rank higher than Eisenhower. He concludes "if George Washington is justifiably acclaimed as first in war, first in peace and first in the hearts of his countrymen, Eisenhower can justifiably be ranked as a good second" (p. 161). These are words of high praise that Boyle does not necessarily support within the book. The problem is that the book is not a comparison of presidents but a study of one man and his administration. Scholars might feel comfortable making these types of assertions, but students who have not examined the other presidents would have no basis for the comparison. Since Boyle wrote his book for undergraduates, he would have been better served to offer brief statistical comparisons and to avoid the hyperbole.

This criticism aside, Boyle has provided a balanced interpretation that should challenge students to possibly re-evaluate their views of Eisenhower. Boyle stresses that Eisenhower was a moderate who operated within numerous constraints–domestic politics, the national mood, and foreign crises. He asserts that Eisenhower, and every other president, should be viewed with those constraints in mind. For example, while Boyle is critical of Eisenhower's civil rights policies, he also recognizes that Eisenhower needed the support of Southern Democrats on many issues and was "very aware of the dangers of alienating the South over civil rights" (p. 33). This balance is refreshing as it clearly shows that presidents face a great deal

of conflicting ideas in making decisions and that they do not have the advantage of 20/20 hindsight.

Boyle accesses Eisenhower's overall domestic policies positively. While he believes Eisenhower could have done more for civil rights, he credits the president with genuinely seeking a balanced budget, maintaining a relatively steady economy from which most Americans benefited, and expanding several New Deal programs including the minimum wage and the number of people eligible for Social Security. He also recognizes Eisenhower's limits as a political leader and judges Eisenhower's inability to groom a successor as one of his greatest failures. In the end, Boyle asserts that Eisenhower sought the middle of the road on most issues and "succeeded to an important extent in fulfilling the role of the president who embodies the aspirations of the American people" (p. 50).

In the area of foreign policy, Boyle also gives Eisenhower a great deal of credit. He observes that Eisenhower's overarching goal was to maintain peace. For Boyle, there is no better example than the fact that after the conclusion of the Korean War, "peace was preserved and almost no American soldiers died in conflict" during the remainder of the 1950s (p. 39). Boyle believes Eisenhower effectively defused many crises including those over Quemoy and Matsu, in the Middle East, and with Berlin. In each of these cases, Boyle makes a point to note where Eisenhower could have adopted a better policy. For example, he asserts that critics of Eisenhower's intervention in Lebanon in 1958 "have the stronger case" (p. 115). However, he takes a broader perspective when evaluating Eisenhower's foreign policies as a whole and believes that the successes far outweigh the failures.

Does Boyle prove that Eisenhower was on par with George Washington? No, but that really was not his objective. He sought to write a new synthesis of the Eisenhower administration, and he was successful. He clearly shows that Eisenhower made decisions within specific constraints that limited his range of options. From Boyle's perspective, Eisenhower developed wise policies that created a steady and generally prosperous environment at home and kept the United States out of wars–achievements many of his successors and predecessors failed to match.

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