

Dwight D. Eisenhower at the National Press Club, January 14, 1959



Dwight D. Eisenhower (left) with National Press Club president John V. Horner (right), January 14, 1959. National Press Club Archives

President Dwight D. Eisenhower (1890-1969) answered questions at a National Press Club luncheon in January 1959, halfway into his second term in office during a time of political and diplomatic conflict. The first Republican president in 20 years, Eisenhower won his first election in 1952 espousing a “Middle Way” philosophy of moderation and limited government—somewhere between the “reactionary right” and the “radical left”—to attain goals of a peaceful world and prosperous nation. He sought to halt further expansion of social welfare programs created during the Great Depression that, he felt, threatened personal initiative, but also acknowledged the federal government’s responsibility to, in his words, “prevent or correct abuses springing from the unregulated practice of a private economy” and establish “some kind of security for individuals in a specialized and highly industrialized age.” While holding government responsible for maintaining “a solid floor that keeps all of us from falling into the pit of disaster,” Eisenhower cautioned a campaign crowd, “let’s not interfere with the incentive, the ambition, the right of any of you to build the most glorious structure on top of that floor that you can imagine.”

His national security policy, or “New Look,” as it was termed, differed from that of the preceding Truman administration, during which defense spending rose significantly following the outbreak of the Korean War. Condemning deficit spending except in times of emergency, Eisenhower, the former supreme commander of Allied forces in Western Europe during World War II, sought to

balance military needs with budgetary solvency. He believed that out-of-control defense spending could lead to deficits, tax increases, and spiraling inflation, a condition that might require controls and weaken the free enterprise system. Eisenhower rejected alarmist notions of an imminent Soviet threat and adopted a policy of nuclear deterrence through threatened “massive retaliation,” collective security initiatives involving regional alliances, increased covert operations, and economic efficiency achieved through reliance on hi-tech arms systems, cutbacks in conventional forces, and a reorganization of the Defense Department.

Believing that social change should not occur until individual attitudes have changed and that racial integration should not be imposed by the federal government, Eisenhower refused to endorse the Supreme Court’s *Brown v. Board of Education* decision of 1954, which declared segregation in public schools to be unconstitutional. His policy of governmental restraint abetted the growth of white southern resistance to school integration.

In his 1956 reelection campaign, Eisenhower identified himself as a “modern Republican,” distinct both from his “Old Guard” Republican colleagues, who fought to roll back the New Deal, and Democratic “spenders,” who, he felt, paid little heed to inflation. While he won that election handily, the next two years brought numerous challenges that threatened his philosophy of limited government: a sharp recession lasting eight months; rioting in Little Rock, Arkansas by opponents to school desegregation, a conflict that provoked Eisenhower to send federal troops to protect African-American students; the launching of the first Sputnik space capsule by the Soviet Union, causing many Americans to question the quality of their own educational system; and a perceived “missile gap” with the Soviets that critics blamed on Eisenhower’s conservative defense spending policy. In the November 1958 mid-term congressional elections, Democrats achieved huge gains winning nearly two-thirds majorities in both houses. That month, Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev delivered a chilling ultimatum on the divided city of Berlin that threatened the peace. Eisenhower called 1958 the worst year of his life.

The partitioned Berlin and the equally split country of Germany mirrored the postwar division of Europe into polarized Soviet and Western spheres of influence, a failure of the war’s victors to institute a permanent reconstruction plan for the vanquished country. Western powers had begun to rearm West Germany and planned to install nuclear-capable weapons systems. West Berlin, some 110 miles inside East Germany, had become the principal channel for a growing exodus of East Germans escaping communism to participate in West Germany’s “economic miracle.” Khrushchev, who vividly described Berlin as “a sort of malignant tumor,” announced on November 27, 1958, that if the West did not agree by the end of six months to a peace treaty that would recognize two sovereign German states and transform West Berlin into a demilitarized free city, the Soviet Union would sign a separate treaty with East Germany granting it

control over avenues of access into the city. The Joint Chiefs of Staff advocated military action should access roads be closed. A world war, it was feared, could then erupt.

Eisenhower believed that the Soviets would back down if the Western powers remained firm in their “resolve never to negotiate under threat,” as he wrote in his memoirs. Still, he wanted to avoid provoking Khrushchev. In his State of the Union address five days before his talk at the National Press Club, Eisenhower did not overemphasize the Berlin conflict. He expressed displeasure over the Soviet Union’s “disdain of international obligations,” but maintained his resolve “to prevent war at any place and in any dimension” and warned Congress against the “feverish building of vast armaments to meet glibly predicted moments of so-called ‘maximum peril.’” Responding to anxieties over Sputnik, Eisenhower announced an initiative to devise long-term goals in education. He also linked civil rights to the Cold War struggle, noting, “The image of America abroad is not improved when school children, through closing of some of our schools and through no fault of their own, are deprived of their opportunity for an education. The government of a free people has no purpose more noble than to work for the maximum realization of equality of opportunity under law.”

Three days after the National Press Club luncheon, Eisenhower met with Soviet First Deputy Premier Anastas I. Mikoyan, visiting the U.S. in an unofficial capacity, who assured the President, “We do not want to fight over Berlin.” After a visit to Moscow by British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan and a foreign ministers’ conference was planned, Khrushchev withdrew his deadline. Eisenhower invited Khrushchev to the U.S. later in 1959 and planned a Big Four summit and visit by Eisenhower to Moscow the next year, as a thaw in Cold War relations appeared to be at hand. After an American U-2 spy plane was shot down over Russia in May 1960, however, the summit collapsed in acrimony, and negotiations for a nuclear test ban treaty stalled. Eisenhower, according to an adviser, blamed “the stupid U-2 mess” for ruining his efforts to end the Cold War and “saw nothing worthwhile left for him to do now until the end of his presidency.”

-- Alan Gevinson, *Special Assistant to the Chief*,
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