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Political Pundits, Conventional Wisdom, and Presidential Reputation, 1945-1963
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An elite cadre of political journalists shaped presidential reputation in the years between the end of the Second World War and Kennedy’s assassination.

These pundits influenced politics in a way that is scarcely imaginable today. Walter Lippmann was easily the most prominent journalist of the 20th century. From the negotiations at Versailles to the Vietnam War, the most powerful people in the world read his columns and valued his insight. Arthur Krock and his colleague James Reston at the New York Times had access to, and the trust of, presidents and government officials of the highest rank. Drew Pearson occupied the opposite end of the spectrum of respectability, but he was perhaps the most popular of all the political pundits. In addition to his newspaper columns, Pearson also had a radio show with millions of faithful listeners. Marquis Childs’ column for the United Features Syndicate ran in all the largest markets in the United States and occupied a prominent place on the editorial page of the Washington Post. Joseph and Stewart Alsop collaborated on their “Matter of Fact” column and were at the center of a Georgetown social scene that included cabinet members, Supreme Court Justices, ambassadors, and foreign heads of state.

Taking their experiences and prejudices into account, the elite journalists established the reputations of the presidents in three chronological phases. They formed their First Impressions before the president even took office. The period After the
*Honeymoon* determined the working conventional wisdom of Truman, Eisenhower, and Kennedy. As each president approached the end of his term, the columnists interpreted their *Perceived Legacy*.

Taken together, the elite political journalists shaped and distorted how the interested public understood the deeper significance of contemporary events until Kennedy’s death. By the end of the 1960s, the pundits had lost the ability to create conventional wisdom. But between the deaths of Franklin Roosevelt and John Kennedy, they reigned.

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Just before Harry Truman left the White House in 1953, columnist Walter Lippmann called the Truman administration “a bad case of fatty degeneration.”¹ Yet, in 1995, following the publication of Robert H. Ferrell’s book Choosing Truman, USA Today Magazine ran a story with the headline “Harry S. Truman: America’s Last Great Leader?” With the benefit of four decades of hindsight the authors were able to run through a list of Truman’s accomplishments including items such as the support for the United Nations, the decision to drop the atomic bomb, the Truman Doctrine, the Marshall Plan, a democratic Japan, the National Security Act of 1947 (introducing the Office of Secretary of Defense, Department of the Air Force, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and eventually the Department of Defense), the 1948 executive order ending racial discrimination in the armed forces, the Berlin Airlift, recognition of Israel, the creation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), protection of South Korea, and his recommendation for universal health coverage.² Historians seemed to agree with the reevaluation as well. A 2001 poll of historians conducted by the cable television channel C-SPAN found Truman to be the 5th greatest president.³ The historians polled at the

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beginning of the 21st century clearly saw something in Truman that Walter Lippmann had not seen at the end of 1952.

In his diary entry for September 9, 1958, columnist and political pundit Drew Pearson recalled a conversation he had that day with the Soviet ambassador. The Russian wanted to know “why [Secretary of State John Foster] Dulles had so much power over Eisenhower. I didn’t like to say that it was because we had a lazy President. I explained it was because Eisenhower likes to delegate responsibility.”

Columnist Joseph Alsop went even further, referring, in private, to Eisenhower as a “yellow son of a bitch” for failing to confront Red-baiting senator Joseph McCarthy. Yet decades later, in the same C-SPAN poll of historians that had ranked Truman so highly, Eisenhower ranked as the seventh greatest President in the category of “Administrative Skill” and number five in the category of “Moral Authority.”

In addition, Stephen Ambrose, one of the most popular historians of the last twenty years and Eisenhower’s most important biographer, told an interviewer that he considered Eisenhower “the finest man I’ve ever known.”

Ambrose continued:

“Whenever I’m facing a tough decision, and especially if there’s any morality involved in it, I always ask myself, ‘What would Eisenhower do?’ Now I don’t always live up to that. But I do ask myself that. He was the most moral man I’ve ever known. I would rank my father in a special category, of course. But Eisenhower knew the difference between right and wrong, and he never did something that was wrong, certainly not knowingly. He almost never lied. He did lie to Hitler about where he was going to invade, and he lied to Khrushchev about what Francis Gary

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6 http://www.americanpresidents.org/survey/historians/33.asp
Powers was doing over in the middle of his country. But other than that, I never caught him in a lie.”

The interviewer then asked if Ambrose considered Eisenhower the greatest American of the last fifty years. Ambrose corrected him. “Hundred. Now I'm not pushing this, and I know that I'll never get agreement on it, but when people talk about who was the greatest American of the twentieth century, there is no question in my mind who it was.”7

John Kennedy’s historical reputation followed a very different path. In his memoirs, columnist Joseph Alsop recorded how he looked back at the Kennedy years with “the most unabashed feelings of romantic nostalgia and delight.”8 Just before Kennedy’s election in 1960, Walter Lippmann informed his readers of “the precision of Mr. Kennedy’s mind, his immense command of the facts, his instinct for the crucial point, his singular lack of demagoguery and sloganeering… his coolness and courage.” To Lippmann, Kennedy had all the, “recognizable marks of the man who, besides being highly trained, is a natural leader, organizer and ruler of men.”9 Despite Kennedy’s short time in office, historians agreed with many of those favorable first assessments. The

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9 Ronald Steel, Walter Lippmann and the American Century, (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1980), 522. Steel went on to note that most pundits followed Lippmann’s lead in praising Kennedy, except for Arthur Krock, who felt that Lippmann had lost all sense of proportion. Krock reportedly said, “I may be getting old and I may be getting senile, but at least I don’t fall in love with young boys like Walter Lippmann.” Ibid.
same poll of historians that had confirmed the rehabilitation of the reputations of Truman and Eisenhower also reaffirmed that Kennedy’s reputation had not suffered with time.\textsuperscript{10}

Why did the historical judgments of Truman and Eisenhower differ so much from the assessments of contemporary pundits, while both journalists in the past and current scholars praise Kennedy’s leadership? It is easy enough to scrutinize the various historians’ polls on presidential greatness. The questions of the various historian-pollsters make it simple enough to determine what historians care about. In the case of the C-SPAN Survey of Presidential Leadership, the criteria were: Public Persuasion, Crisis Leadership, Economic Management, Moral Authority, International Relations, Administrative Skills, Relations with Congress, Vision/Setting Agenda, Pursued Equal Justice For All, and Performance Within Context of Times.\textsuperscript{11} But surveys of historians only provide half of the explanation. We find the other half of the equation in the process of how a small cadre of political pundits (whose popularity and reputations rested on their perceived ability to examine and explain the significance of contemporary events) created conventional wisdom during the unique years between the death of Franklin Roosevelt and the assassination of John Kennedy. They were tremendously influential, with large

\textsuperscript{10} Kennedy’s highest ranking came in the category of “Public Persuasion,” ranking as the 5\textsuperscript{th} greatest president in that area. Kennedy also made the top ten in “Crisis Leadership” (8\textsuperscript{th}), “Economic Management” (9\textsuperscript{th}), “Vision/Setting an Agenda” (9\textsuperscript{th}), and “Pursued Equal Justice For All” (7\textsuperscript{th}). Kennedy came close to the top ten in “Performance Within Context of Times” (11\textsuperscript{th}). Historians judged Kennedy to be the 13\textsuperscript{th} greatest president in “International Relations,” “Administrative Skills,” and “Relations with Congress.” His lowest score came in the category of “Moral Authority” (15\textsuperscript{th}).

audiences, and access to policy-makers. But they had a very different vision of what constituted successful presidential leadership than any later historians’ poll.

**Punditry**

The role of the pundit in postwar American politics is, perhaps, a perfect illustration of the difference between power and influence. Pundits had no real power, but they certainly had influence. Their influence came from their longevity (Stewart Alsop said, “Presidents may come and Presidents may go, but a James Reston or a Marquis Childs goes on forever.”\(^{12}\)), the “pack” mentality of reporters, the close-knit world of Washington reporters, and most importantly, their perceived ability to determine the significance of events, prioritize the news, and decide which stories deserved further scrutiny. Finally, the most elite political journalists did have widely admired powers of analysis and scrutiny.

The list of influential political journalists during this period is both short and easy to discern. They were the columnists at the most influential newspapers and journals of opinion. They were the ones the White House took seriously. They had all the best leaks and most of them lunched at the Metropolitan Club together during their working years. When they died, they attended each other’s funerals to deliver the eulogies. They were insiders in a way that scarcely exists today. They counted among their ranks journalists Walter Lippmann, Arthur Krock, James B. (Scotty) Reston, Drew Pearson, Marquis Childs, and Joseph and Stewart Alsop.

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Walter Lippmann was the most influential journalist of the twentieth century. His writing both mirrored and summarized conventional political wisdom, especially in foreign affairs. He was the journalist for journalists, politicians, and commentators. Just as the *New York Times* thinks of itself as the newspaper of record, Lippmann was the pundit of record. The other pundits took their cues from him.

He was a star from the outset. Born in New York City in 1889, Lippmann attended the best schools as a boy, and entered Harvard College in 1906. At Harvard, his Jewish ancestry kept him from joining the most exclusive clubs, but he managed to distinguish himself both with his writing for various student publications and by founding Harvard’s Socialist Club. His professors recognized his talents almost immediately, and his mentors included both William James and George Santayana. Upon graduation in 1910, Lippmann moved into a world where ideas and policy mixed freely as he worked for various reform publications and politicians. He published his first book, *A Preface to Politics*, in 1913; it impressed Herbert Croly, the founding editor of *The New Republic*. Lippmann joined the staff of the fledgling magazine and became one of the architects of modern liberalism.

Indeed, it seemed as if Lippmann’s career and outlook was destined to take him through each of the twists and turns of liberalism. By 1915, Lippmann was advocating American intervention in the European war. After a 1916 interview with President Woodrow Wilson, Lippmann helped deliver the endorsement of the *New Republic* to the Wilson campaign. With the United States’ entry into the war, Lippmann volunteered his services and found himself serving on the Inquiry, a commission to make
recommendations for the eventual peace settlement. It was this committee that would develop the ideas behind several of Wilson’s “Fourteen Points” to end the Great War and remake the world. However, like many intellectuals of the era, after the war Lippmann and the New Republic opposed the ratification of the Versailles treaty and the formation of the League of Nations, although Lippmann later regretted his position. In the 1920s, he extended his readership by writing a regular column for Vanity Fair magazine that continued until 1934. Yet, even while his writing grew in popularity, Lippmann did not neglect his more sober intellectual duties.

He left the New Republic in 1921 to write Public Opinion, his most influential book. In Public Opinion, Lippmann criticized the idea that the average citizen could make informed judgments if the press presented facts objectively. The effectiveness of wartime propaganda convinced Lippmann that emotion, prejudice, and habit too easily distorted the human mind. Lippmann believed that in order for democracy to work, society had to abandon the fiction that everyone could hold a competent opinion on all public affairs. Instead, society needed to rely on those who had been trained to assess and examine specific information without prejudice or stereotype. “Intelligence bureaus” would advise the legislature and executive while the public could only accept or reject the recommendations. Intellectuals would furnish information to “insiders” who made law, while the average man, whom Lippmann called the “outsider,” was incapable of discerning what was relevant to any given issue.13

After its publication, Lippmann did not return to the New Republic; instead, he joined the New York World as the executive editor, where he stayed until the World was

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purchased by the *New York Telegram* in 1931. Lippmann then moved to the *New York Herald Tribune* where he began his “Today and Tomorrow” column. An immediate success, the column was eventually syndicated in more than two hundred newspapers.\(^{14}\)

When Lippmann officially moved his column to the *Washington Post* in 1961 (his columns had been syndicated in the *Post* for years), he had an estimated following of around ten million readers.

Lippmann’s most important biographer, Ronald Steel, described the reasons for Lippmann’s influence and success. Lippmann’s was “the first political column devoted entirely to opinion.” His brand of journalism was “not about facts, but about interpretations of what seemed to be ‘facts.’” Public life was complex, and the pundit could explain complex events to the public. “With the New Deal and the expansion and centralization of the federal bureaucracy,” Steel explained, “the effective capital of the United States moved from New York to Washington, and the Washington journalist insider came into his own.” As Lippmann put it: “But for that historic change the profession of the syndicated columnist would not, I believe, have developed.”\(^{15}\)

While none of Lippmann’s peers or rivals could match his influence, some very nearly matched his longevity.

Arthur Krock’s role as the D.C. bureau chief for *The New York Times*, as well as his weekly editorials, ensured both his influence and access to powerful politicians for the better part of a half century. Krock was never coy about his political views or his powerful friends. His memoirs described his encounters with most of the Presidents from

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\(^{14}\) Lippmann lived and worked in New York city for the most part, until 1945 when he moved to Washington, D.C.

\(^{15}\) Ronald Steel, *Walter Lippmann and the American Century*, 281.
Theodore Roosevelt through Lyndon Johnson. The Kentucky-born journalist began his career after dropping out of Princeton and earning an associate degree at the Lewis Institute in Chicago in 1906. His work in journalism began casually enough, with a $15-per-week salary at The Louisville Herald. He worked his way through the ranks of various Kentucky papers, becoming the night editor for the Associated Press in Louisville. While working for the AP, he became engaged to the daughter of one of the owners of The Courier-Journal and The Louisville Times. After her sudden death in 1908, Krock maintained close ties to her family. One late-night telephone call from her father, on a night when Krock felt “especially lonely and bereaved,” left him with an offer to become the Washington correspondent of The Times. Krock went to Washington in 1909 and served as the Washington correspondent of The Louisville Times when it merged with the Courier-Journal. When a friend of Krock’s bought a controlling share of the Courier-Journal, Krock became its editor. After a “breach over the administrative methods” of his Kentucky publisher, Krock moved to New York in 1923.

His first job in New York came by way of Will H. Hays, former chairman of the Republican National Committee, who was then President of the Motion Picture Producers’ Association. Krock worked for the MPPA for a few months and contributed editorials to the New York World while Walter Lippmann was on leave. Upon Lippmann’s return, publisher Ralph Pulitzer created the post of assistant to the publisher for Krock. He joined The New York Times as a member of the editorial board on May 1, 1927. In 1932 he left New York to become the paper’s Washington correspondent and bureau chief. Soon after assuming his role as bureau chief, Krock began writing a
column for the editorial page called “In the Nation.” It remained a fixture on the Times’ editorial page until Krock’s retirement in 1966.

Krock described himself as a liberal (in the classical sense), but his colleagues generally regarded him as a conservative. He was hostile to the New Deal and New Dealers long after Franklin Roosevelt left office.\(^{16}\) No stranger to the rich and powerful, Krock was close to the Kennedy family, even going so far as to help arrange the publication (and some say ghostwriting sections) of John Kennedy’s Harvard thesis \textit{Why England Slept}, as a favor to Joseph Kennedy. In his \textit{Memoirs}, prepared just after his retirement, Krock described himself as “the same Democratic liberal I was when I first took stock of my political inclinations.” But years of covering the executive branch had made him a critic of “the men and events that have reshaped our political system for the worse in the name of a ‘liberalism’ both spurious of ancestry and destructive in practice.” He had been an enthusiastic supporter of the reforms of Woodrow Wilson and the two Roosevelts until the so-called “Second New Deal.” Until Franklin Roosevelt’s “Second New Deal,” Krock believed that government reforms had curbed “the ruthless abuses of power and of individual rights and liberties by the entrepreneurs of the American Industrial Age.” But he was an opponent of “Big Brother, [a] centralized welfare state to which John F. Kennedy became a sudden convert by pledging full support of the platform of the 1960 Democratic National Convention….” At the end of his career, he remained critical of “self-styled conservatives” and “prevailing semantics that divides all private thinking and public expressions on the policies and acts of government into permanently

\(^{16}\) For an example of Krock’s hostility towards New Dealers during the Truman administration, see Arthur Krock, “Sources of the Barrage Against Mr. Snyder,” \textit{New York Times}, 8 June 1946, 17. From the same period, see “A Dilemma for Republicans and New Dealers,” \textit{New York Times}, 31 May 1946, 22.
separate compartments—liberal, moderate, progressive, conservative, hawks, and doves.”

17  He was also weary of the newer generation of columnists. “The new syndicated breed, often under the camouflage of the label ‘news analysis,’ is wont to make such assertions as ‘the feeling in Washington is,’ although it is obvious that… the commentator could not possibly make so sweeping a calculation.”

Krock’s younger rival at The New York Times, James “Scotty” Reston, parlayed insider status and influence into respected journalism, although Reston looked to Lippmann, not Krock, as a mentor. Krock jealously guarded his turf during the years they worked together, but Reston managed to carve out his own niche. Reston cultivated a close relationship with Lippmann and mimicked the elder pundit’s cautious style. For his part, Lippmann seemed to enjoy serving as a mentor to the younger reporter. Almost universally known as “Scotty” because of his Scottish ancestry, James Reston would eventually spend fifty years as a reporter for the New York Times, serving both as executive editor and Washington bureau chief. He was a good reporter and a good bureau chief, who hated being “scooped” by his rivals. He kept tabs on the other pundits through an elaborate scheme whereby editors who subscribed to the Herald-Tribune’s (and other) syndicated news services would tip him off any time the Alsops, Lippmann, or Pearson had a big story.

Reston had easy access to leaders in Washington and abroad. He was particularly close to John J. McCloy, a founder of the Council on Foreign relations, Supreme Court

Justice Felix Frankfurter, the Kennedys, and to a lesser extent, Dean Acheson. His personality radiated both dignity and moral authority, yet he always seemed to avoid offending the delicate egos in Washington. He was accustomed to interviewing powerful men and enjoyed leveraging his access in order to scoop his rivals. A later generation of journalists criticized Reston for being too close to his sources, but for decades, it paid handsome journalistic dividends to be a quintessential Washington insider.

Gossip columnist and radio personality Drew Pearson occupied a place at the very opposite end of the spectrum of journalistic respectability, but when it came to audience-size and controversy, no “respectable” journalist could compete. Although he had his share of contacts within the government, and he certainly benefited from them, Pearson worked from outside the social circles so carefully maintained by other pundits. He did not join the Metropolitan Club, where reporters mingled with politicians regularly, and Pearson chose to remain outside the tight circle of pundits who socialized together. He enjoyed thinking of himself as a crusader on behalf of the American people, and would not risk being tainted by the frivolous socializing so common to his peers. By practice and inclination, he was both a scandalmonger and a populist—an important journalist whose status depended on his own popularity rather than his close ties with Washington powerbrokers.

During his busiest years, Pearson wrote as many as eight syndicated columns per week. In the late 1940s and 1950s his columns had a total circulation of forty million readers. In addition, his weekly radio show reached at least twenty million listeners. Pearson was generally liberal, but disliked by most liberals. The average American—the
kind living outside New York and Washington—responded to Pearson’s journeyman prose and muckraking style. As his biographer put it, the American people, “respected and trusted Pearson; in many cases he was the only Washington correspondent they knew by name.”

Pearson was spiteful and cruel to his enemies and managed to provoke hateful responses from some of the most creative haters of mid-century. General George Patton said of Pearson: “I will live to see him die.” In 1958, Dwight Eisenhower said of Pearson: “Personally I think he is a spherical SOB which makes him one no matter from what angle you may view of him.” Douglas MacArthur sued Pearson for libel (and lost). Senator Kenneth McKellar (D-Tennessee) called Pearson “an infamous liar, a revolving liar, a pusillanimous liar, a lying ass, a natural-born liar, a liar by profession, a liar for a living, a liar in the daytime, a liar in the nighttime, a dishonest ignorant corrupt and groveling crook….” Senator Theodore Bilbo of Mississippi said, “He will go down in history as Pearson-the-sponge because he gathers slime, mud and slander from all parts of the earth and lets them ooze out through his radio broadcasts and through his daily contributions to a few newspapers which have not yet found him out.” Senator William Jenner of Indiana called Pearson “a filthy brain-child conceived in ruthlessness and

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21 Carlo D’Este, *Patton: A Genius For War* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), 560. Pearson broke the story of Patton slapping two soldiers for cowardice. Eisenhower almost relieved Patton, considered by many military historians to be the most talented American general in WWII, of command on the eve of the greatest allied actions of the war because of the furor caused by Pearson’s coverage of the slapping incident.
23 Pilat, 20.
dedicated to the proposition that Judas Iscariot was a piker.”24 Harry Truman once said of Pearson: “There is one columnist in Washington who wouldn’t have room on his breast if he got a ribbon for every time he’s called a liar. In Missouri we have a four-letter word for those who knowingly make false statements.”25 The politicians may not have liked him, but his blend of populism and scandal made his radio show and columns the most popular of their kind.

Far more dignified, Marquis (pronounced “Marcus”) Childs wrote a syndicated column for the United Features Syndicate. At the high point of his career, from 1944 to 1954, over two hundred newspapers carried his columns. In a career that spanned 1923 to 1989, Childs wrote 6,380 articles for the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* alone.26 His 1936 bestseller, *Sweden: The Middle Way*, argued that the United States faced a choice between the violent extremes of Communism and Fascism. The Swedes by contrast, impressed Childs with their high living standard and pragmatic approach to building a social welfare state.27 Although his left-of-center politics had earned him a spot on President Richard Nixon’s “enemies list” in the late 1960s, he was no radical. Like his contemporaries, he relished the exclusive interview and “scooping” his competitors more than scoring ideological points.28 Demonstrating yet again the intimacy of this group, in the late 1950s Childs co-edited a book on Walter Lippmann with Reston. Childs’ brand

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24 Ibid., 21.
25 Ibid., 184.
26 Phil Linsalata, “Marquis Childs’ Columns Reflect Issues Still Vital,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 2 July 1990, 1B. In addition to his syndicated columns, Childs was also the bureau chief for the *Post-Dispatch* from 1962-1969 and a contributing editor from 1969-1974.
of journalism fit somewhere between Reston and Lippmann; more opinionated than
Reston but less wearisome than Lippmann, and with more humor. In *Witness to Power*,
Childs tried to quantify the power and influence of the elite political journalists, and he
came up with a formula:

I would estimate that James Reston of the *New York Times* is the equivalent of,
say, three United States Senators—and not those passive entries from the wide-open spaces but big city Senators with visible force. Joseph Alsop could be
equated with a Deputy Secretary of Defense; he filled his column with dire
warnings of America’s military weakness as though he were a Pentagon
panjandrum before a Congressional committee. Leaking to Jack Anderson [Drew
Pearson’s partner and successor] is like treating with a foreign power; as an
apostle of all that is holy and virtuous he assumes at times the position of a
sovereign state. […] Walter Lippmann presided through the years as a supreme
pontiff, revered by many, and resented by others for his magisterial style.29

The Alsop brothers, Joseph and Stewart, were typical of the kind of journalism
that came to prominence during the New Deal and continued throughout the twentieth
century; in fact, they were among its most vivid exemplars. They were well connected,
sophisticated, controversial, intelligent, domineering, arrogant, opinionated, well-born,
well-educated, tough, liberal cold warriors. Taking Krock as their most explicit model,
the brothers collaborated on their syndicated “Matter of Fact” column between 1946 and
1958. In 1958, Stewart began writing for the *Saturday Evening Post*, while Joseph
continued the column by himself. Years later Joseph Alsop could claim: “Stew and I
were about as well connected with the government as any newspapermen then working in
Washington.”30

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30 Joseph Alsop with Adam Platt, *I've Seen the Best of It: Memoirs*, (New York: W.W. Norton &
Company, 1992), 266.
Throughout their respective careers, the Alsop brothers made use of their social and family connections (they were related to the Roosevelts—close enough to call Eleanor Roosevelt “Cousin Eleanor”). Both brothers got their first jobs through nepotism. After Joe graduated from Harvard, the family got together (without his knowledge) and decided he would be a journalist. A call from Grandmother to her close friend Helen Reid, whose family owned the New York *Herald Tribune*—the official voice of moderately progressive Eastern establishment Republicanism—assured Joe’s placement. The city editor, Stanley Walker, thought Joe looked like “a perfect example of Republican inbreeding.” Of course, Walker had no say in Alsop’s hiring. Stewart began his writing career in 1936 at the Doubleday publishing house (where uncle Theodore Roosevelt Jr., was a vice-president).

Joseph moved to Washington, D.C. in 1935 to cover the Senate. After less than a year in Washington, Joseph was writing regularly for the *Saturday Evening Post*—a publication at the peak of its popularity—spending holidays at the White House, and mingling with Chief Justice Charles Evans Hughes at cocktail parties. While it is true that the brothers were born lucky, they made good use of their opportunities. Joseph Alsop, in particular, had a reputation for his outspoken opinions, and was known one of the most interesting conversationalists in Washington D.C. society.

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31 Merry, *Taking On The World*, 44.
As they moved into a position to influence the public debate, the Alsops were nothing if not consistent. Indeed, sometimes it seemed as though their every keystroke proved the influence of the lessons learned from the World Wars, and they were capable of hurling vitriol at any public official they determined to be bungling or incompetent. Their “Matter of Fact” column began, quite literally, with the presidency of Harry Truman on the last day of 1945. In his memoirs, Joseph Aslop called that first column, “a nondescript and embarrassingly dismissive assessment of Harry Truman….” In their columns after the war, the Alsop brothers urged toughness in the face of Soviet aggression, and they hardly let up for the next few decades. Even during the McCarthy era when the brothers worried that Joe’s homosexuality would be exposed (certainly, his foppishly outrageous behavior raised a few eyebrows throughout his career), they did not back away from their cold war liberalism. They preached readiness throughout the 1950s. During the Vietnam War era, the brothers staunchly supported American policies in Southeast Asia. Stewart seemed more flexible on the matter (as he was more reasonable than Joe in almost all matters), but Joe supported the war until its conclusion.

The rise of opinion journalism began in the 1930s with popular commentators such as Walter Winchell (twenty million listeners weekly) and Lowell Thomas using radio to reach mass audiences, but during the New Deal years, the most elite journalists became pundits. They moved in the same Georgetown circles as the political elites in  

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33 In his memoirs, Joseph Alsop wrote that Lippmann had only managed to avoid repetition by changing his mind so often.
34 Joseph Alsop, *I’ve Seen the Best of It*, 264.
35 Stewart came out against the war after the North Vietnamese launched the so-called Tet offensive in early 1968.
Washington D.C.— a lively social set that included elected officials along with the most powerful intimates of the President in the executive branch. The influence ran both ways. The columnists wanted inside access. The politicians wanted the opinions and influence of the columnists. The personality of Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal rippled through the social circles of the politicians and newsmen.

The pundits considered Franklin Roosevelt their equal, and were certainly not awed by the man. Walter Lippmann did not take Roosevelt seriously at first, but over the years he grew comfortable with Roosevelt’s leadership. In a 1932 column Lippmann made one of the most famous early assessments of Roosevelt, calling him “an amiable man with many philanthropic impulses, but he is not the dangerous enemy of anything.” Lippmann characterized Roosevelt as a political and intellectual lightweight who was, “too eager to please….” Perhaps the most famous line from Lippmann’s column is also the most illustrative of Lippmann’s and Roosevelt’s relative statures. Lippmann wrote of Roosevelt: “He is a very pleasant man who, without any important qualifications for the office, would very much like to be president.” The needs of the country during the Depression and Roosevelt’s leadership brought a dramatic reversal of Lippmann’s opinion. After considering the national and international situation, Lippmann visited Roosevelt at the presidential retreat in Warm Springs, Georgia in January 1933. His

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message for Roosevelt was both stark and familiar: “The situation is critical, Franklin. You may have no alternative but to assume dictatorial power.”37

Franklin Roosevelt had created an atmosphere where the pundits felt comfortable giving politicians advice, and some of it changed the course of history. Towards the end of the Roosevelt administration, James Reston, along with Lippmann, encouraged and helped launch the internationalist wing of the Republican Party via Senator Arthur Vandenberg. Arthur Krock, rightly or wrongly, believed he had a hand in the nomination of William O. Douglas to the Supreme Court.38 When Roosevelt died, the pundits expected to retain their influence.

They were a socially incestuous lot. The Alsops held famous dinner parties where Joe could hold court for hours, mocking those politicians or thinkers who dared to oppose him. All except Drew Pearson were members of Washington’s Metropolitan Club. Pearson still lunched daily with undersecretaries, Roosevelt intimates, and opponents alike. James Reston moved easily among both the Republican and Democratic leadership. Roosevelt intimate Harry Hopkins counted Walter Lippmann as a friend.39

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38 One such typical meeting took place at the home of Edmund Pavenstadt, a member of the Securities and Exchange Commission. William O. Douglas had just announced his retirement from the SEC to teach at Yale because, as he told Krock: “The only way you could lose your job would be to rape the wife of the President of Yale University. But even then it would probably have to be on the campus at high noon.” Douglas had not yet heard of Louis Brandeis’s retirement. Krock asked for Douglas’s permission to talk to Attorney General Frank Murphy and suggest that Douglas replace Brandeis. Krock telephoned Murphy who submitted Douglas’s name. Krock concluded: “Of course, there were a number of other names submitted, probably two or three by Murphy himself. But eventually Douglas was appointed to Brandeis’s seat on the Supreme Court.” Arthur Krock, *Memoirs: Sixty Years on the Firing Line*, (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1968), 176-177.

Arthur Krock had participated in “bull sessions” with New Deal insiders in the first days of the Roosevelt administration.

Krock’s relationship with Franklin Roosevelt was typical. Even though these informal sessions took place in private homes (usually of administration figures), the meetings could often have serious political consequences. Even after Krock fell out of favor with Roosevelt (he criticized the President’s “habit… to assume and solicit autocratic powers”[^40]) Roosevelt felt he had to take Krock seriously, or at least answer his criticisms.[^41] Krock understood that Franklin Roosevelt encouraged even the lower-echelon members of his administration to have social relationships with reporters. If a particular reporter was out of favor with the administration, he might find himself cut off from important news sources.[^42]

Sometimes the arrangements were more formal. Just before the war, Joe Alsop joined the Century Club, a group of eastern (mostly Republicans—but Franklin Roosevelt had been a member) establishment internationalists. The Centurions had been pushing for more aid to Britain for some time, but in 1940, Alsop passed along a message from a staffer of the British Embassy reminding FDR of Churchill’s destroyer request. The message bumped up the chain of command to Harold Ickes, who in turn took it to the President.[^43] Again, historians may quibble as to Alsop’s role in the destroyer deal, but Alsop was certainly convinced that he had played a pivotal role. It was an easy, comfortable relationship based on mutual benefits, friends, and contacts.

[^40]: Krock, Memoirs, 176-177.
With this access and influence, the pundits had a profound effect not just on how Americans interpreted the larger significance of contemporary events but also how the public (especially the interested, reading public) viewed the presidents. In their work, they acted as a kind of prism of opinion. Pundits could not control the light source, but they could change the color and direction of its product. But just as a prism has a definite size, shape, and character, so too did the pundits have their predispositions. The presidency of Franklin Roosevelt, the demands and prejudices of their profession, and the lessons of the Second World War all shaped how elite journalists would judge Harry Truman, Dwight Eisenhower, and John Kennedy.

They wanted the inspirational leadership, charm, and sophistication of a Franklin Roosevelt. Their profession demanded coverage of dramatic events, so their analysis was episodic in nature. They were at the top of a small and close-knit social circle of Washington correspondents who asked the questions that presidential administrations felt obliged to answer. Their overriding concerns were to avoid another catastrophic war while preserving what they understood to be the most important ideological victories of the Second World War. This final concern meant that pundits would insist that the United States wage the Cold War aggressively in order to prevent World War III. This pattern would hold until the death of John Kennedy in 1963, when several factors-- the Vietnam War, the rise of television journalists, Watergate-- would fundamentally alter the relationship between the executive branch and the press. The first years after the end of the Second World War were a unique time. The perceived objectivity of the
mainstream media was a product of shared experiences and values, not some kind of vast conspiracy.

Simply put, pundits wanted the President to look, act, and sound like a President; Roosevelt was their ideal. It did not take long for them to take their measure of any new administration, and they never changed their minds or their assessments after Truman’s, Eisenhower’s, or Kennedy’s first year in office. Roosevelt had led the United States through a crippling depression and the greatest war in human history with charm, wit, good humor, and panache. From the very beginning of his presidency, it was clear that Roosevelt could use the mediums of mass communication to great effect. His inaugural address was, historian Lewis Gould has written, “a milestone in the evolution of the modern presidency, one that few of his successors have matched.” His carefully scripted “fireside chat” radio broadcasts carried his resonant voice and upper crust accent into the homes of millions of Americans. In Depression and World War Roosevelt had proved himself to be a friend and patron to intellectual and commoner alike. He seemed equally at home sharing hot dogs with the king of England, throwing out the first pitch at a baseball game, or bantering with reporters at one of the 997 press conferences he gave over a twelve-year period. Roosevelt filled his administration with bright people, full of ideas on how to remake American society. He seemed to value intelligence. Finally, the Roosevelt Administration was relatively scandal-free, or at least the scandals did not reach the White House. After Roosevelt, it seemed natural to hope for another President

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45 Ibid., 86.
capable of inspiring the American people with a sense of purpose and possessing a personality that reflected the best qualities of the national character.

Beyond handling the symbolic duties of the presidency and generally putting on a good show, the pundits expected presidents to have concrete political successes. Presidents should initiate legislation and follow the process through to a successful conclusion while maintaining control and leadership of their parties. Even dealing with the overwhelming challenges of the Depression and war, Roosevelt had been a remarkably successful politician. Beyond being elected president four times, he had muscled through Congress an impressive series of reforms that had changed American society and political life forever. He had remade his own party as well as the role of the executive branch of government while handling his political opponents with verve and aplomb.

In comparing the competence and political success of subsequent presidents, the opinions of the pundits usually followed a pattern. Initially, they would be optimistic and hope that the incoming president would remedy the defects of the previous administration. Next, usually at the “hundred days” mark, the pundits would compare the record of the new administration against the successes of Franklin Roosevelt’s legislative achievements. Then, the election cycle provided an opportunity to evaluate presidential leadership. Structural or bureaucratic changes within the executive branch were apt to receive less attention than say, enacting major legislation or winning elections. Presidents were expected to maintain discipline within their own parties (even if Roosevelt had not always done this), reward friends, and punish enemies.
After the horrors of two world wars, it was simply not acceptable to proclaim all systems equal and hope for peaceful coexistence. Just as it had been for anyone who lived through it, World War II was the central event in the pundits’ lives and, as far as they were concerned, the lessons of that conflict had to be worked into the postwar world. They demanded that each president protect and promote liberal values (as defined by Franklin Roosevelt during the Second World War) at home and fight for them abroad. To that end, they expected each president to maintain strong alliances in order to check the Communist threat and root out domestic subversion while protecting civil liberties. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, they were unanimous in their condemnation of Senator Joseph McCarthy’s “witch-hunts.” They criticized Truman for not handling McCarthy effectively. They criticized Eisenhower for failing to confront McCarthy openly. Because of Kennedy’s close association with McCarthy, most of them were skeptical of the young politician at first.

Rightly or wrongly, pundits judged presidents as more effective if they managed dramatic crises rather than prevented them. Thus Truman’s initial handling of the Korean crisis met with approval, but as the war continued without a satisfactory resolution, they turned on the President. Eisenhower was criticized as “lazy” even if he was not. And pundits viewed Kennedy’s handling of the Cuban Missile Crisis as his finest moment. They did not place much emphasis on many of the issues later historians would deem important. Civil or equal rights, or any kind of social justice issue rarely made it into their columns. Of course, they did not march together lock-step, and each of them had a

46 Karabell, *The Last Campaign*, 90.
different relationship with Franklin Roosevelt. But in their adherence to these larger goals, they were remarkably uniform.

Taking their experiences and prejudices into account, the elite journalists established the reputations of the presidents in three chronological phases. They formed their *First Impressions* before the president even took office. Presidents do not fall from the sky, and as interested observers, political journalists had many opportunities to size up Truman, Eisenhower, and Kennedy well before they took office. Even before Harry Truman’s unplanned ascension to the White House, they had rough impressions of the former Senator from Missouri. His service on the Truman Committee, his Vice-Presidency, and the early days of his administration impressed upon observers Truman’s energy and blunt honesty. Certainly, Eisenhower had his share of press coverage during and after World War II, including a time in 1948 when an Eisenhower candidacy for president was a frequent topic of discussion. His “honeymoon” period with the press was made more difficult by his handling of Senator Joseph McCarthy during the campaign of 1952. The political journalists wanted Eisenhower to attack McCarthy openly, and when Eisenhower refused, they began to think that an Eisenhower victory might be necessary but not desireable. John Kennedy’s political career started inauspiciously enough, but by the end of the 1950s he was among the rising stars of the Democratic Party. Kennedy’s friendships among the members of the press corps, family connections, and aggressive support of the Cold War raised his profile considerably. He continued to impress observers during the 1960 campaign with his wit, charm, and sophistication.
The period *After the Honeymoon* determined the working conventional wisdom of Truman, Eisenhower, and Kennedy. Truman’s honeymoon period ended not long after the successful conclusion of the World War II. In short order, the pundits determined that Truman was incapable of handling the complexities of the postwar world. The midterm elections of 1946 seemed to confirm Truman’s lack of ability. After Truman’s shocking election victory in 1948, the elite journalists hardly modified their impressions of the man. Indeed the very manner in which Truman won the election confirmed many of their prejudices. Eisenhower’s honeymoon ended even before he took office, as his caution provoked their ire. Eisenhower’s methods seemed designed to be distinctly unappealing to columnists. In contrast, Kennedy’s honeymoon never ended. Even the early and high-profile failure of the U.S.-sponsored Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba did not alter the perception of Kennedy as a capable man of action.

As each president approached the end of his term, the columnists interpreted their Perceived Legacy. Truman’s 1948 election victory did not guarantee his success in the following years and the columnists (along with the American people) regarded his second term as a failure. The fall of China, the announcement that the Soviets had the atomic bomb, high profile domestic espionage cases, another tough midterm election, scandals, and the fallout of the Korean War combined to leave Truman’s presidential reputation in tatters by the end of 1952. If Truman’s second term gave the pundits much to howl over, they described the late 1950s and Eisenhower’s second term as a time of mind-numbing boredom and frustration with the President’s persistent popularity. Kennedy’s legacy, on the other hand, was frozen in its perfection. Because of his assassination, it would never
be tainted by boredom or contempt. All good things that came after could be ascribed to a beginning in the Kennedy administration. All bad things could be attributed to failing to preserve his proper legacy.

The skills of the pundits were very different from those of the politicians they criticized. American politicians win office by appealing to the broadest range of voters possible. Opinion journalists need only appeal to the interested public and the influential. To paraphrase Lyndon Johnson, it is unclear whether any of them could have been elected dog-catcher, let alone drudge through county budgets like Truman, organize the D-Day invasion like Eisenhower, or campaign like Kennedy. Their strong opinions, and calls for action— precisely the qualities that made them successful journalists— would have ruined any national political career. Yet they made the sounds that would resonate in the echo chamber of opinion, creating conventional wisdom in the process.

After the death of John Kennedy, the conventional wisdom and presidential reputation established by those elite journalists would be something historians would have to overcome, rather than rely upon. Perhaps the story of its creation will humble future opinion-makers.
Chapter 1

Missouri Mule

A gap in stature existed between the pundits and Harry Truman in 1945. Truman was found lacking. In the first days following Franklin Roosevelt’s death, columnists were quick to praise Truman’s decisiveness, humility, and teamwork, but it did not take much to turn these characterizations into a picture of Truman as blunt, incompetent, and in need of good advisors. The elite journalists wrote of Truman’s honesty and efficiency but worried that those very qualities might indicate that Truman lacked the ability to see the world in all of its complexity. Truman might be an efficient public servant, but that was the best the American people could hope for. It was one thing to appreciate Truman’s refusal to put on airs, but quite another to keep reminding readers of Truman’s humility. At first though, the opinion-makers praised Truman for the very traits that would later be turned against him.

Harry Truman simply did not possess the inspirational qualities or level of sophistication they desired, but for myriad reasons, ranging from hope to wartime unity, columnists publicly supported Truman in the closing months of the Second World War and those critical first months of peacetime. They reassured their readers that Truman would follow the pattern of honesty and decisive action that had marked his years as the junior Senator from Missouri. They supported Truman because he seemed to be the best alternative or out of a sense of patriotism and because he handled himself well as he assumed control of the government. In some ways, they even found Truman to be a refreshing change from Franklin Roosevelt.
But the columnists soon turned on the new President as his “average” qualities continued to offend their sensibilities. Truman’s uninspiring public speeches, delivered in a nasal drone, fell flat again and again, and they began to warn that it might be a mistake to expect much from the “average” man in the White House. The gap in social graces between the new First Family and the elite journalists (especially the ones who moved in the fashionable Georgetown circles) would also take its toll in time. Truman was too average, too accidental, too inept, and too much the Midwesterner to thrill a group of columnists who had known the likes of Franklin Roosevelt, and had backgrounds much closer to his. But through the end of 1945 Harry Truman’s honeymoon with the press would hold.

Roosevelt’s decision to replace Vice-President Henry Wallace on the 1944 Democratic ticket with Senator Harry Truman had given the pundits their first chance to assess the Missouri Senator’s virtues as a leader. Given their prejudices towards covering matters of foreign and defense policies, most elite journalists filled their column inches opining on the actions of first-rank administrators in the executive branch, rather than covering any particular junior Senators from the middle of America. For the most part, since the outbreak of World War II, the other branches of government were worthy of coverage only to the extent that they directly influenced foreign policy. As a result, most columnists seemed to only know two important things about Harry Truman. First, he had done a good job handling his duties on the so-called “Truman Committee” that

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had investigated wartime defense production expenditures. With his gentle but firm
criticism of Franklin Roosevelt’s administration, Truman had shown enough
independence, patriotism, and good sense to impress many pundits. But the second thing
they knew about Truman was far more important. Just as they would later lament that
Truman was no Roosevelt, at first they were very happy that Truman was not Henry
Wallace. With Roosevelt’s failing health somewhat of an open secret, Washington
observers understood the significance of the second slot on the Democratic ticket in 1944.
Walter Lippmann had no interest in seeing Henry Wallace become the next
President. His longstanding friendship with Wallace notwithstanding, Lippmann
understood that the Vice-President was not made of presidential timber. The columnist
appreciated Wallace’s integrity and sincerity, but also considered the once-and-future
Secretary of Agriculture to be potentially divisive and somewhat prone to becoming
detached from reality. Lippmann, the most senior and respected of all political
journalists, did support the Roosevelt/Truman ticket of 1944, albeit in a noticeably
unenthusiastic manner. Lippmann’s backing for the Democratic ticket in 1944 could
more accurately be called a vote against Thomas Dewey, and for a rather prickly reason.
Dewey, in a bid for the support of Americans of Polish descent, as well as in keeping
with his own anti-communist feelings, made a campaign pledge to help exiled anti-
communist Poles regain power in Warsaw. Dewey’s position, according to Lippmann,
placed some delicate negotiations taking place in Eastern Europe in jeopardy.

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response, Lippmann decided to put his lukewarm support behind what would become Truman’s first administration.\(^4\)

Joseph Alsop was even less charitable towards Wallace. In his memoirs, Alsop wrote: “the more I saw of Henry Wallace… the more I came to believe that he was a man whose judgment could never be trusted when he strayed more than six feet from a manure pile.”\(^5\) The other pundits fell between those extremes, but they all preferred that Truman take Wallace’s place in the 1944 Vice-Presidential slot. Harry Truman was not a factor in the campaign and he was hardly mentioned in columns.\(^6\) For the most part, if political journalists had any opinions of the Missourian, they did not share them with the public.

Immediately following Franklin Roosevelt’s death on April 12, 1945, the pundits anxiously praised Truman’s actions in assuming his new duties. Arthur Krock informed his readers, “President Truman entered upon the duties imposed by destiny with a modest and calm, and yet a resolute, manner. Those who were with him through the late afternoon and evening were deeply impressed with his approach to the task.” According to Krock, Truman struck just the right tone as he took the oath of office: “His face was grave but his lips were firm and his voice was strong.”\(^7\) As Truman first navigated the corridors of the executive branch, he cut a neat, trim figure in his grey, double-breasted suits; the meticulous appearance seemed to reflect the inner-man. Truman exuded the qualities of middle-class decency and efficiency. Indeed, in the minds of most observers,

\(^4\) Steel, 412-413 & 417.
\(^6\) Reston did mention that the CIO had backed Wallace but were satisfied with Truman. James Reston, “Hillman Says CIO Will Back Truman,” *New York Times*, 22 July 1944, 10.
a comparison between Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman would leave Truman’s infirm predecessor with the advantage. But in one sense, Roosevelt could not compete with Truman. Even though Roosevelt was only two years older than Truman, his frailty contrasted with Truman’s health and energy. It was not exactly high praise, but it was an important and immediate change.

As the first assessments of Truman made their way to the opinion pages of the nation’s newspapers, an image of Truman began to take shape. Lippmann cautiously endorsed Truman as the best man “available” and later wrote that he had chosen that word “carefully and deliberately.”

He made sure to remind his readers that it was Roosevelt who had chosen Truman. Maybe Truman could succeed where Roosevelt had failed and “consolidate the positions which Roosevelt had reached only with his spearheads.” Unlike Wallace, Truman had been tested and had proven he could unite men. Drew Pearson wrote that Truman’s service on the Truman committee was a good indication of his potential Presidential performance. Truman was good at teamwork, and he did not let problems “drift.” He knew when to delegate authority and how to lead men of ability: “Truman is likely to adopt the policy of letting every man handle his own burdens and if things slip, getting a new man.”

Truman was the humble Midwesterner in an Associated Press story that opened with the admonition: “Never forget that President Harry S. Truman is from Missouri.”

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Journalists in general emphasized Truman’s humility in taking office. Pearson recounted the story of when Truman had visited the Senate and told his former colleagues “I feel just as if someone had hit me over the head with a 16 pound mallet […] I don’t know what’s happened to me yet.” He felt guilty that he had tied up traffic on the way to The Hill. According to Pearson, Senate Majority Leader Alben Barkley had an easy relationship with Truman and told the new commander-in-chief: “That’s just what happens to a country boy when he gets in your spot.” The Senators agreed that “the Presidency hadn’t spoiled Harry and they didn’t think it would.”

Pearson’s column entitled, “It’s Different Without Roosevelt,” reminded his readers why he loved writing about the recently fallen President: “It was easy to write about him when he was living. He was vivid, colorful copy.” Washington without Roosevelt seemed “empty.” Even if F.D.R. had not actually been in the capital much that winter, “people always felt that he was here, that he had his hands on things.” By contrast, Pearson described Truman’s unpretentious humility. Truman had loved his job as the junior Senator from Missouri. The new President had not wanted to be the Vice-President. Pearson predicted that Truman might be known in history “as the man who didn’t want to be President.” Worse, perhaps, than Truman’s lack of potential greatness was that when he assumed the job the Missourian was “emotionally disturbed, reluctant, [and] totally unprepared.” Pearson had no way of intimating Truman’s emotional state; the two had had little personal contact, and they were certainly not friends. It was more

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13 Drew Pearson, “It’s Different Without Roosevelt,” Washington Post, 15 April 1945, 5B.
likely that Pearson had simply taken the accounts of others and puffed up the rhetoric for
dramatic effect. Only one of the elite journalists could claim to know much about
Truman.

Truman’s fellow Midwesterner, Marquis Childs, had followed the new
President’s career since the early days. He knew Truman’s strengths and described
Truman’s chance to “meet his test as a man of courage and stature.” He took a swipe at
Truman’s past association with the Pendergast machine when he argued in his column
that few Americans in this hour of maximum need would be “inclined to stigmatize Harry
Truman for his political past.” In fact, most Americans knew nothing of Truman’s
association with Pendergast, but Childs would remind (or rather, inform) them of it.
Childs found Truman’s strengths in his solid and simple ways. He was a man firmly in
the “American tradition—the self-made man, the boy from the farm.”

Yet Marquis Childs added to the doubts about Truman’s competence. He recalled
how Truman’s fellow Senators mistreated him when he first arrived in Washington in
1935. Some Senators “openly sneered” at Truman as the protégé of Missouri political
boss Tom Pendergast. It was to Truman’s credit that he did not hold grudges as he made
friends and gained prestige in the Senate through “hard work and his friendly,
unassuming manner.” Childs was optimistic that Truman could avoid the corrupting
influence of power and “try to steer a clear course.” A few weeks later, Childs recalled
the appeal of Roosevelt’s “daring” and the way in which “he laughed at mishaps [and]
was not afraid to try new schemes.” When he took over, Truman found himself with an
administration that was “topheavy with easterners in high administrative posts.” If

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Truman wished to have any hope of controlling his own administration, he would have to impress this group immediately. Roosevelt could have strong-willed, imposing characters around him “because he himself was so strong and challenging a figure.” Truman’s background (“deep in the soil of Missouri, jumping off place for Lewis and Clark”) could be an asset if he was willing to move boldly and bring talented westerners into his administration. But the President needed to be careful, lest he find himself in over his head.17

Arthur Krock made sure his readers understood the gravity of the challenges facing Truman as he took charge. Franklin Roosevelt had left the nation on the threshold of a successful conclusion to the war in Europe. The fight with Japan might be long and tough, but the prospects for ultimate success seemed bright. Truman’s more “distant and difficult goals” would be tricky. He had to secure a meaningful and honorable peace, create an institution capable of maintaining the peace, and manage the American economy to prevent further economic crises. Krock called these tasks “monumental” and noted that mankind had never come close to realizing those ambitious goals in the past. Further, Truman was an “outsider in world affairs, where the late President was the leading figure.” Daunting as the problems of ending a world war and remaking the world might have been, Krock recognized Truman’s assets: “He is able. He has his head on his shoulders and his feet on the ground and he is as honest as the day is long.” Given Truman’s tenure in the Senate, he might have a better relationship with Congress than his predecessor. With any luck, Truman’s humility might create an atmosphere of

cooperation, as “Mr. Truman thinks much less of his capabilities than do those who know him best…”18

Happily, Truman’s first appearance before the American people was a triumph. On Monday April 16, 1945, Truman addressed a joint session of Congress, and the American people first heard his stiff, choppy, Missouri twang over the airwaves. Truman’s radio voice lacked the ringing inspirational quality of Roosevelt’s, but Truman managed to deliver the reassurance the American people so desperately needed. He promised to continue Roosevelt’s policies and, more specifically, he told his fellow Americans and Allies that he would pursue the war to a successful conclusion.

Drew Pearson credited Truman’s success to staff work done by J. Leonard Reinsch, who had been radio director for Governor James Cox of Ohio, F.D.R.’s presidential running mate in 1920. According to Pearson, Cox loaned Reinsch to the Democratic National Committee during the 1944 campaign as an expert in communicating over the radio. At Cox’s urging, Truman worked on his speaking technique after the 1944 election with Reinsch working with Truman daily. Reinsch had Truman’s speech to Congress typed up with only one paragraph per page, forcing Truman to slow his delivery. Pearson credited Truman for listening to this “political wiseapple.” If things continued in this manner, Pearson told his readers, then perhaps Truman could manage the presidency after all.19 That is, if Truman continued to rely on

19 Drew Pearson, “The Washington Merry-Go-Round,” Washington Post, 20 April 1945, 6B. Reinsch had heard a speech Truman had given in Philadelphia in 1944 and recognized that Truman had a habit of speeding through his speeches. When Reinsch questioned Truman about the pace of his delivery, Truman told him, “Well, I didn’t think it was very interesting and I wanted to get it over with.” Reinsch wanted Truman to slow his delivery and do a better job of emphasizing his main points, “and make a better radio presentation than is normally the case with someone with the midwestern twang, or a Missouri
the advice of good staffers, he might manage to make it through. Any excellent staff work would have to be done by someone other than Reinsch, though. Truman fired the “wiseapple” after the Pearson column—and the column might have been the cause.  

At his first presidential press conference the next day, Truman again impressed observers. The contrast with F.D.R. during his last days could not have been clearer. Beyond radiating health, Truman was as sharp and decisive as Roosevelt had been charmingly and systematically elusive in all of his dealings with the press. Arthur Krock agreed. Both the public and the press approved of Truman’s delivery of his first speech. Truman’s assurances of his intentions to follow F.D.R.’s path meant that the new President would not “turn conservative” even if his thinking on both social and economic issues was more “conventional” than Roosevelt’s. Krock also worried that too many stories about Truman’s “humility” had made it to foreign shores. Whatever the cause, Krock called the effects of Truman’s press conference “electric” and gave Truman a “high score.” The praise continued: “In one brief session he showed that he is neither afraid of his job nor of the hazards that lie in extempore questioning from the correspondents. And he showed that he intends everyone to know that the President of
the United States is just that.”22 Perhaps the new regime would bring a new freshness to
the relations between the press and the executive branch.23

This optimism about Truman’s “freshness” and vigor would hold for a while.
After all, in contrast to Roosevelt, the new President was an early riser and a fast walker
who quickly became known for getting to work before anyone else in the executive
branch. Whereas Roosevelt had been willing to put off such drudgeries of office as
signing letters, Truman tackled the tasks. He tripled Roosevelt’s appointment schedule
and pumped the hands of visitors with gusto.24 At the end of Truman’s first week in
office, Krock praised Truman’s “firmness, vigor, promptness of decision, confidence in
dealing with difficult problems that are new to him,” bipartisanship and stewardship of
Franklin Roosevelt’s legacy. Krock argued that the President was shaking off his label of
“humility.” Krock accused his fellow journalists of using that “descriptive noun… to
death.”25 The New York Times columnist continued to support Truman in those early
days, giving the new administration credit for his agreeable, yet firm manner. The hope
around the capital was that Truman, by his “personality and methods,” might be able to
avoid the “more distasteful and destructive forms” of partisan bickering.26

Marquis Childs’ first-week-assessment also praised Truman’s decisiveness along
with the choice of Charles Ross as press secretary. In a discussion over the trusteeship of

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23 Franklin D. Mitchell, Harry S. Truman and the News Media: Contentious Relations, Belated
24 Ferrell, Harry S. Truman: A Life (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1994),
171-180.
E3.
10. Krock knew Truman’s Senate record about as well as any Washington observer, save Marquis Childs.
Between 1935 and 1945 Krock mentioned Truman in thirty-five articles.
islands taken in the Pacific, Truman listened to all sides before making his decision.\textsuperscript{27} Childs described how Truman had handled the meeting: “‘This is the decision,’ said the President incisively, ‘and it is so ordered.’ There was no equivocation. In other conferences he has used the same incisive phrase—‘it is so ordered’—to make clear that the controversy is at an end and the policy determined.” Childs also praised Truman’s humility and avoidance of keeping a “palace guard.” According to Childs, by the end of the Roosevelt Administration cabinet members received directives from the White House without knowing if the orders had come from the President. If Truman could continue to refine, streamline, and clarify lines of decision-making and delegation, he would be an improvement over Roosevelt. If he continued to appoint capable men such as Charlie Ross, the delegation should not be a problem. “He seems determined to have responsible men, and then give them the responsibility.” In praising Charles Ross—who had replaced Reinsch—Childs described the incoming Press Secretary as a man of “the highest integrity” whose “ability and judgment have been fairly established” over the years. Childs predicted that Ross’ lifelong friendship with Truman would add prestige to his position. He was also impressed that Ross had taken the job out of a sense of duty. It reflected well upon both Truman and Ross. “This is the type of appointment—free of any personal self-interest—that can strengthen Truman in his approach to what is an overwhelming task. If it is a precedent, then it is a happy one.”\textsuperscript{28}

\textsuperscript{27} The position as described by Childs: “We would, at San Francisco, be perfectly willing to discuss the form the trusteeship would take but, as a Government we would be unwilling at this time to discuss the substance of the plan—that is, what specific territories should be administered by trustees.” Marquis Childs, “Truman’s Decisiveness,” \textit{Washington Post}, 23 April 1945, 8.

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid.
It those first, early days, though, Krock was describing the consensus when he wrote that Truman handled his press duties well, even in comparison with his predecessor. Roosevelt’s press conferences had been “interesting events, and often dynamic and sensational.” Truman’s methods were different, but perhaps they could be just as effective. Krock even found some of Truman’s methods to be “superior” to those of Roosevelt. Truman always had real news for the reporters. He was businesslike, and demonstrated “independent, clear and fluid thinking….” But the early impression of Truman as the simple man from the middle of America would not shake, and Krock would not miss a chance to return to the theme. “Such is Mr. Truman’s press conference technique, which really isn’t technique at all, being simply Mr. Truman of Independence, Mo.”

And another problem began to emerge. The first press conferences were not always unqualified successes, and the President’s statements sometimes required later, written clarification. Willing to wait for the Truman’s learning curve, Krock was still willing to write that on balance, the President had handled the press (“one of the most difficult undertakings of a President…”) with an “an almost perfect score.”

Just as the allied armies prepared to seal their victory in Europe, Childs offered up his three-week assessment of Truman. The President had been proceeding in organizing the White House quietly, focusing public attention instead on formation of the United Nations in San Francisco. Truman realized the importance of the San Francisco meetings, but Childs pointed out that Truman would be well served to avoid interfering in them. The columnist hinted that such things might be better left to the professional diplomats. Truman should not risk credit or blame for the outcome of the conference.

Further, Truman thought that the success of the conference depended in large part on the behavior of the Russians. “In the plain language of his Missouri background, he says that if you make a bargain, then it’s up to you to live up to it.” Truman’s White House was turning into something very different from Roosevelt’s. In contrast to Roosevelt, when Truman received callers he actually listened to them. Childs gave Truman credit for honesty, but not subtlety.

Truman’s schedule and pace of receiving callers impressed Childs, but the columnist alluded to something that would be a problem in the near future. Truman’s pace for receiving visitors was fine. He saw between fifteen and twenty visitors each day, with each visit limited to a strict schedule. Childs did note that “at no point in his career would that have been possible for F.D.R.” But a more careful examination of whom the President chose to see revealed that Truman spent most of his time with two groups of people: “old friends and Missouri cronies” and “experts of one sort or another.” Childs did not belabor the point or condemn Truman for visiting with friends, but stories about Truman’s “Missouri cronies” would show up thereafter. For the time being, Childs could praise Truman’s “capacity for hard work” and how he was “adjusting himself to the great burden of the Presidency.”

After Truman announced the Japanese surrender on August 14, 1945, the goodwill of the press slowly eroded. It did not happen overnight, and each pundit had his own breaking point, but break they did. Arthur Krock continued to support Truman’s

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31 Marquis Childs, “Truman As President,” *Washington Post*, 3 May 1945, 10. During these first months of the Truman administration, the pundits wrote thousands of words on the United Nations conference in San Francisco, but they hardly mentioned Truman in doing so. The happenings at the conference were almost universally credited to and associated with Franklin Roosevelt. The elite political journalists, when they did mention Truman, would write that he was correct in leaving Roosevelt’s men to their business and following F.D.R.’s policies.
administration and hoped his first four months in office were a good indication of what was to come. Some journalists had yet to focus on Truman. The Alsops would not publish their first “Matter of Fact” column until the end of the year. Reston was more concerned with covering the new United Nations, but when he did write about Truman, he was cautiously optimistic. The domestic problems were large and “vexing,” but Truman had demonstrated some effectiveness in dealing with the legislature. Granted, the successes had come in foreign policy, “conceived primarily by the Roosevelt Administration,” and come “in the so-called ‘honeymoon’ period when all the courtesies and traditions of the Legislature were working to the advantage of an old member.”

Privately, Childs would always consider Truman to be the United States Senator who had been placed in office by Missouri political boss Tom Pendergast. Childs and his newspaper, the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, had dug into Pendergast’s dealings, and the Post-Dispatch had editorially opposed Truman in both of his senate races. “Truman never repudiated his origins. He never turned his back on Pendergast nor did he forgive those, of whom I was one, who had helped bring about the boss’s downfall and prison sentence.”

Krock was willing to take up the slack, though. The “old Kentucky Gentleman,” as Reston called him, informed his readers of how Truman seemed to be able to work with Congress and make good policy decisions. When he did write critically of government policies or actions, he was quick to point out that most of what Truman had done was the result of work by the Roosevelt administration, and most of it had been in

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foreign affairs. Krock was anxious for Truman to describe a coherent domestic policy, but pleased that Truman seemed inclined to avoid the “intellectual adventures” that had marked the New Deal years. Less than two weeks after the end of the Pacific war, Krock predicted that Truman’s “honeymoon” period had ended. But the honeymoon had not ended for Krock, who continued to support Truman into early September 1945, believing that the President occupied a middle position between moderates and the more extreme New Dealers in the administration.34

But even Krock, the most pro-administration pundit, began to write columns critical of Truman, after he had a chance to think more about the legislative proposals in Truman’s September 8 message to Congress. It began to look as if Truman had absorbed a bit too much New Deal wisdom. Krock wrote that Truman’s message had convinced Congress “that Mr. Truman has thrown in his lot with the spenders, the anti-economizers, the New Dealers, the organized labor pressure squads and the social economists of whom Henry A. Wallace is the appointed spokesman.” Instead of stating his own opposition to the New Deal, Krock’s columns argued that if Truman continued to lean left, it would be tough to rally and unify the highly factionalized Democratic Party. Truman’s leadership had been both “essential” and “absent” in the process of moving into a prosperous postwar period. “But there was no such leadership in the message which has elated the New Dealers, the spenders and the Henry Wallace school of political philosophers.” Truman would not answer the question as to whether his program belonged on the “right” or the “left” side of the political spectrum, but Krock thought he had his answer: “If it is

‘leftist’ to call for more spending, more paternalism and new ways of centralization—which Congress and many outside think it is—then the President’s direction and position are plain.” Krock concluded that Truman’s version of “the ‘middle of the road’ was way off to one side.”

If Truman lost Krock’s support when he went “off to one side,” he could not count on support from those liberal intellectuals who had achieved so much prominence as a class during Franklin Roosevelt’s administration. Truman wanted their support and incorporated many of their beliefs into his programs. After all, Truman had, in Krock’s words, “thrown his lot in with the New Dealers.” Truman had followed F.D.R.’s program. If the liberals had looked at Truman’s voting and committee record in the Senate, they would have found him to be a reliable New Dealer in both foreign and domestic affairs. They were also encouraged by Truman’s performance on his committee investigating defense spending. Truman had stood up to the military and big business alike. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, liberals knew that Truman was F.D.R.’s own chosen successor. They reasoned that F.D.R. must have known what he was doing when he bumped Henry Wallace from the second spot on the Democratic ticket. But an alliance between liberal intellectuals and Truman was simply not in the cards.

Truman did manage to hold on to the support of the American people through the end of the year, and in September Krock believed it to be a product of Americans identifying with Truman. Truman had thus far conducted himself “in a simple, tolerant manner that seems very straightforward to the American people and a refreshing contrast

to the exciting and aggressive tempo and color produced by his predecessor.” Truman seemed to be avoiding the worst excesses of William Jennings Bryan’s brand of Midwestern populism and had shaken loose his association with the Pendergast political machine in Missouri. He also thought Truman might be the inheritor of some Calvin Coolidge-type luck. Coolidge’s homey image “was a strong source of popularity he enjoyed which was long undisturbed by critical analysis of his official person.” Truman was in an even better position than Coolidge had been, though. “The Missouri Valley, Independence and Grandview [where his grandmother lived] are nearer the sentimental ideal of the majority; and the President, by the choice of his ancestors, is the beneficiary.”

After Truman had been in office for six months, Krock tried to summarize the strengths and weakness of the administration. Truman seemed to be a good administrator, with the ability to delegate authority and make decisions, but there were two emerging problems with Truman’s leadership. First, Krock believed Truman had shown a “lack of assertiveness” in the great questions of the day. Krock blamed this lack of leadership on Truman’s optimism and desire to be reelected. According to Krock, Truman believed problems would solve themselves and it would be disadvantageous to take positions that might hurt him among core constituencies. Second, although Truman was maintaining public support, his popularity would shrink “as acute domestic issues knock at his door without getting an answer….”

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Truman’s honeymoon with the American public would hold for a little while longer, but the problems of domestic politics were bound to catch up with him as the legislative and executive branches used the complexities of the postwar world to jockey for political advantage. It seemed that Truman had failed at the critical postwar task of rallying his party to the middle ground. Perhaps it was an inevitable consequence of taking sides on the many issues before him, but Truman could not direct the political whirlwind to come and the pundits criticized the lack of leadership.

Krock’s end-of-the-year assessment of Truman’s “Score in Congress” gave Congress the edge. Congress had blocked and emasculated Truman’s employment bill and universal military training initiative. They were stalling the process of unifying the armed forces under a single cabinet post. There were successes, to be sure—including support for the United Nations and Bretton Woods agreement—but Krock pointed out that most of Truman’s successes had originated in the Franklin Roosevelt Administration, “whereas all the zeros and reduced digits in the score are mostly on plays originated by Mr. Truman.” Truman had not stood up to the “pressure groups.” “At the end of his first session of Congress as President, therefore, Mr. Truman has established no mastery over Congress, an influence which (though it exists) is sporadic and unpredictable and a partnership which is often definitely junior.” The problems of the postwar would have fallen on Roosevelt, had he lived, but Truman faced the added problem that his was the “case of an undramatic President succeeding a most dramatic one.”

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James Reston called on the Truman administration to begin to deal with the complex problems of the world with positive policy initiatives. The complexity of the issues ("whether the Dardanelles, the Baltic States or the veto power in the Security Council") demanded that the administration stop improvising solutions that would lead to an entanglement "in a maze of details and losing sight of the objective." Reston asked the administration to "define its policy in greater detail or at least explain its approach to the problem of peace-making so that it is understood by the people whose support is essential." Truman had a historic opportunity for world leadership and a duty to succeed at his task. "But it would help if, as a starter, we would stop longing for an age that is gone and accept willingly and prepare diligently...."\(^40\)

The Alsops believed that Truman did neither. In the first "Matter of Fact" column produced for the Herald Tribune syndicate by the Alsop brothers on December 31, 1945, they described Truman as a man who had the neat simplicity of the "average man," but perhaps some of the limitations of the average man as well:

In 1941, the White House was a place of power, whose occupant’s every word was conned [scrutinized] for hidden meanings and deeper implications touching the national future. In 1945, the White House has become the home of an average man in a neat gray suit, who answers questions briskly and is chiefly marked off from his fellows by such habits as folding his handkerchief into four perfectly symmetrical points.

The questions they raised became commonplace, and their assumptions became conventional wisdom. Truman was an “average” man. Was the government now too complex for the average man to manage? It seemed clear to the Alsops that Truman was “honest, well-intentioned, full of average virtues, but shrewd rather than brilliant and

hopeful rather than far-sighted….” They hoped that such a man would realize he needed “a strong staff if he is to solve complex problems.” To that end, they hoped Truman would not surround himself with too many of his cronies. The Alsops told their readers not to be too shocked when, as “an average man, dealing with vast problems, with minimum assistance, [Truman] should sometimes seem less than sure in his touch.” Such an average man would be likely to be “crushed down by complex responsibilities” and “groan that he never wanted the job….” As the Alsops saw it, Truman’s presidency had already passed through two phases, and was now entering a third. The first phase was a “delusive honeymoon” where Truman could do no wrong in the eyes of the press. In the second phase, Truman had “tried to ease a whole New Deal program through Congress by the simple expedient of being amiable to reactionary legislators.” In the third phase, “the President has faced the facts,” or at least “a good many of them,” and it was unknown whether Truman would rise to the occasion. As Joseph Alsop later wrote in his memoirs: “At that time, I could not see how a seemingly ineffectual and largely unknown politician from Missouri could measure up to a leader such as Franklin Roosevelt.”

The Alsops were not alone in their worries about Truman. While most of the New Dealers remained in Washington after Franklin Roosevelt’s death, Truman himself was not a part of their social circle. His wife, Bess, never enjoyed the hobnobbing or small talk of the Georgetown parlor set. Both as a Junior Senator and as Vice-President, Truman was a homebody. While certainly a friendly enough fellow, he was never known for his dazzling cocktail patter or biting wit. One could only imagine how Truman would

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have handled himself at a dinner party hosted by Joseph Alsop. Years later Alsop recalled how some of Truman’s subordinates who were holdovers from the Franklin Roosevelt administration treated Truman: “At parties around Washington where some members of the higher levels of the Truman administration were present, it was not uncommon to hear patronizing remarks of the same indirect but rather snobbish kind Stew and I had made in our first column.”

An examination of Alsop’s legendary dinner parties provides the single best illustration of the distance between the worlds of Harry Truman and that of the pundits. The brothers’ biographer, Robert Merry described those days:

In the first four months of 1946 he [Joseph Alsop] gave twenty-one dinner parties that brought to his table European diplomats, Supreme Court justices, leading Senators and journalists…” such as “Supreme Court justices Frankfurter and William O. Douglas; Senators Leverett Saltonstall, Arthur Vandenberg, and Henry Cabot Lodge; journalists Arthur Krock, Walter Lippmann, and Phil Graham; and close friends Chip Bohlen, Richard Bissell, and Ben Cohen.

Together, the Alsop brothers organized a “Sunday Night Supper.” It was a weekly potluck at the homes of the homes of Washington elites (the servants had Sunday night off). As exclusive as those dinner parties were, they were less stodgy than the practices of Old Washington society. In earlier times, one needed to be born into status and power. Compared to that system, the Alsops’ world was much more democratic. Instead of status based on birth, the Alsops valued power and influence. They accepted a relative meritocracy, based on one’s participation in governing the United States in an era of global power. Not all of the members lived in Georgetown, but Dean Acheson, Felix

42 Joseph Alsop, I’ve Seen the Best of It, 268.
43 Merry, Taking On The World, 155.
44 Ibid, 156.
Frankfurter, Walter Lippmann, and Phil and Katherine Graham (of the *Washington Post*) did, along with countless other leaders from the intelligence and foreign services. The journalists and politicians were in the thick of it together.

The conversations at such meetings were inevitably informal and the informality did not end on the weekends. The Alsop Brothers (Joe in particular) were known for their occasional rough handling of politicians. During an interview with Harold Stassen, Joe told him, “Harold, would you cut out all this bullshit?” If they had opinions, they felt comfortable sharing them with the politicians, giving political advice (sometimes welcomed, sometimes ignored) to the top figures in government. Joe Alsop wrote to General Dwight Eisenhower, then Chief of staff of the army. He wrote to his old friend James Byrnes after Byrnes was named Secretary of State, urging him to cultivate influential reporters in order to improve his public image.

Their shared values made for easy and encouraging conversation between pundits, liberal intellectuals, and politicians alike. The members of this social circle were all anti-communist liberals (in the broadest sense) and committed internationalists. They opposed and attacked the influence of Communists in the labor movement as well as in Henry Wallace’s Progressive Party. The Alsop brothers even attended the Washington organizational meeting of the Americans for Democratic Action, although neither brother maintained much of a connection with the group. Although both liberals, Lippmann, and James Reston of the *New York Times* had worked hard to cultivate and encourage the

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45 Ibid.
46 Ibid., 157.
47 Alsop wrote that made the suggestion “only because I feel affection and admiration for you.” Alsop was worried about a growing “unsympathetic attitude” toward him. Ibid.
48 Ibid., 158.
internationalist wing of the Republican Party, especially Michigan Senator Arthur Vandenberg.⁴⁹ Lippmann’s columns encouraged the bipartisanship in foreign policy that Truman so desperately desired. Childs, even if he had flirted with socialism in an earlier book (Sweden: The Middle Way), was certainly no Red.

And what did Truman think of these fellows? Truman looked at the press with some prejudices tethered to his experiences back in Missouri, where he had a hostile relationship with both the Kansas City Star and the St. Louis Post-Dispatch. The Missouri papers had attacked his character and his association with Boss Pendergast. They were against him and they were all in it together, because, he thought, the media conspiracy was a family affair. The Chicago Tribune, the Washington Times-Herald, and the New York Daily News had family ties. As Vice-President, Truman took abuse from columnist Westbrook Pegler, a vitriolic conservative who commented on politics, and accused Truman of “some petty white graft” for putting Bess on his payroll.⁵⁰ Truman could afford to ignore Pegler. Certainly, other journalists did, and even though Pegler’s column was widely syndicated and had a devoted following, Pegler’s sermons never seemed to go beyond the ears of the choir. Unlike Pearson, who occasionally broke stories, Pegler played too fast and loose with his facts to have any lasting influence.⁵¹ In addition, Pegler’s gossip was not seen as proper fodder for someone of Walter

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⁵¹ The scholarship on Pegler is thin—perhaps rightfully so—but he has been the subject of two biographies: Finis Farr, *Fair Enough: the Life of Westbrook Pegler* (New Rochelle, New York: Arlington House Publishers, 1975) and Oliver Pilat, *Pegler: Angry Man of the Press* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963). Pilat’s Pegler is the more useful book. The first few lines say it all: “Here was a writer who reached instinctively for an opponent’s throat. His urge to humiliate and kill, felt through the filter of newsprint, made him the nation’s outstanding controversialist in the twentieth century.” Ibid., 1. To his credit, as a sportswriter, Pegler had been out front in calling for racial integration in baseball.
Lippmann’s stature. The Alsops preferred to get their own stories. Reston never dealt in domestic gossip, denouncing that kind of journalism throughout his career. But when Truman’s blood was up he lumped all of the “paid columnists” together into one hateful mass.

Truman’s opinion of the press changed little after ascending to the presidency. He did not trust reporters. Every now and again Truman’s native populism would bubble to the surface and he would let anyone within earshot know what he thought about journalists in general, and pundits in particular. They were opinionated and beholden to conservative editors and owners. When they disagreed with him, Truman called reporters the “sabotage press” and believed that they were enemies of democracy (read- his legislative programs). For the most part, Truman liked working reporters and press corps, but he hated most of the syndicated columnists, whom he never failed to refer to as the “guttersnipe columnists” or “paid columnists.” Of course, the publishers who chose the guttersnipes were usually Republicans.

The Washington Post was little better than the papers with Republican owners and he called the Scripps-Howard Washington News the “snotty little News.” He hated the “gossip columns” of Drew Pearson and called the Alsop brothers “The Sop Sisters” and “the All-slops.” The Alsops did make some attempts to be supportive, but in the

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52 McCullough, Truman, 819.
53 Ferrell, Harry S. Truman: A Life, 221.
54 Robert H. Ferrell, Off the Record: The Private Papers of Harry S. Truman, (New York: Penguin Books, 1980), 40-41. It is unclear whether the “Sop Sisters” comment was an allusion to Joe Alsop’s homosexuality. Joe’s sexuality was an “open secret.” The brothers’ biographer makes it clear that anyone who knew Joe suspected it. When Joe admitted his homosexuality to philosopher Isaiah Berlin, he responded: “Oh, Joe, everybody knows that. Nobody cares.” At the very least, Truman’s comment would have made sense to anyone who knew of Joe’s dandyish behavior. See Merry, Taking On The World, 360-365.
55 Ferrell, Harry S. Truman: A Life, 222.
constant effort to be interesting, they were critical. Truman believed Lippmann had an “essentially Republican” outlook. As President, Truman did not invite Lippmann to the White House and the few letters between them were stiff and formal.\(^{56}\)

Truman believed that opinion journalists fell in to one of two categories. On one hand Truman despised the “gutter columnists,” such as Westbrook Pegler, Walter Winchell, and Drew Pearson. The “ivory tower” columnists (the Alsops, Lippmann, Krock) got under Truman’s skin for their creative interpretations of Truman’s positions, and he occasionally “blew off steam” by writing angry letters to Lippmann and Krock. In one written exposition on pundits, Truman described just how he felt:

> The men who write columns for the classified press sell their writing ability just as... lose [sic] ladies sell their bodies to the madam of a bawdy house. They write columns on policy in domestic affairs and on foreign affairs from the rumor source and as long as the “madam”—the publisher will pay them for this sort of thing that’s what they want. In many cases the publisher only wants talent to present his distorted view point. Hearst, Pulitzer, Scripps-Howard, Gannett, Bertie McCormick and the Patterson chain are shining examples. Many a great and talented scribbler has sold his soul to these purveyors of ‘Character Assassination.’ The old Moslem assassins [sic] of Mesopotamia have a much better chance of a considered judgment in the end than have these paid mental whores of the controllers [sic] of our so called “free press.” This so-called “free press” is about as free as Stalin’s press. The only difference is that Stalin frankly controlled his and the publisher and owners of our press are always yapping about the Constitution and suppressing a free press.\(^{57}\)

Truman held the pundits in low esteem, but if he had lacked nothing more than their level of sophistication, they, despite all their prejudices, would have rallied to support his presidency. The opinion journalists had no interest in watching Presidential

\(^{56}\) Steel, *Walter Lippmann and the American Century*, 457.

administrations fail, stumble, or struggle. It was Truman’s lack of sophistication, combined with his utter failure to inspire the most elite journalists as a champion of their beliefs, that gave the pundits their explanation for his failure. The decline in Truman’s public approval ratings in the fall and winter of 1945-46 only confirmed for the pundits that the “average man” needed more than good intentions to manage the complexities of the presidency. It would not be long before the pundits began to challenge Truman’s basic competency.
Chapter 2

Incompetence, Political Failures, and the Great Upset Victory

The portrait is not thrilling, but there is much of comfort and reassurance in it, and much to admire. Here is to be seen no flaming leadership, little of what could be called scholarship and no more that is profound. But it is very good and human and courageous. Common sense shines out of it, and political experience, the lack of which has been the downfall of Presidents.1

--Arthur Krock

By the end of 1945, the pundits believed they understood Harry Truman. Drew Pearson, when inclined to praise Truman, applauded the president’s decisive style, administrative skill, and honesty.2 At the New York Times, James Reston worried about the diplomatic skills of the president he called “as blunt as a punch in the nose,”3 while Arthur Krock noted Truman’s tendency to “shoot from the hip” at press conferences.4 In early 1946, a consensus grew among the pundits that Truman’s style would not translate into competent leadership or political success. Rightly or wrongly, the pundits believed that Truman continued to bungle the transition from war to peace while public opinion pollsters reported that the American people concurred. If Truman had somehow missed the messages of the pundits and the pollsters, the results of the 1946 midterm elections confirmed the public’s discontent with Truman’s leadership. As the 1948 election season approached, the pundits declared Truman to be both incompetent and a political failure. Truman was left to decide how to revive his political fortunes in time for a reelection bid.

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At the very least, it was clear that Truman had to deal with the growing Soviet threat. Belligerent Soviet actions required some kind of response from the American government and the American people demanded it.\(^5\) The public and the pundits (along with many Republicans) approved of the administration actions codified in the Truman Doctrine and Marshall Plan, but some missteps led to skepticism from the opinion journalists as to whether the President was the right man to implement those policies. They took Truman’s handling of Secretary of Commerce Henry Wallace’s firing as an indicator that the president had still not fully grown into his job, while they credited talented aides for policy successes. Luckily for Truman, the election of 1948 would not turn on how much credit the pundits gave him for his Cold War policies. Instead, Truman’s stunning election victory in November 1948 left the pundits scrambling to explain how they could have been so wrong.

But praising Truman’s determination was not the same as accepting that Truman was more than simply a savvy, plucky, politician who understood his audience. Faint praise can be more damning than a criticism. After all, H.L. Mencken credited William Jennings Bryan with a voice that “had the trick of inflaming half-wits,” but it was not the prelude to a compliment.\(^6\) Whatever their individual explanations for Truman’s success, subtlety and sophistication never entered the equation. The pundits were willing to finish 1948 with a helping of crow.


Once Truman had his bearings, he surveyed Roosevelt’s administrative organization and he was not happy with what he saw. Some parts of the White House bureaucracy hardly seemed to function. His previous administrative experience made him inclined to tidy up the lines of decision-making, and such changes fit with his desire to begin his term cautiously. Any improvements in the bureaucracy would have the double benefit of blunting some of the charges of New Deal critics, since Roosevelt’s organization left much to be desired. Truman thought many of Roosevelt’s appointees inept or scheming. In one unsent letter, he described his cabinet as “an impossible group of incompetents, prima donnas, and disloyal men more interested in themselves than in the public welfare.”

In another unsent letter, Truman privately commented that Treasury secretary Henry Morgenthau, Jr., was a “nut” and a “blockhead” who did not “know shit from apple butter.”

Truman tried to keep the best of Roosevelt’s people and surround himself with people he liked and respected while some of the Roosevelt holdovers held on to their positions through the first year or so. Clinton Anderson replaced Claude Wickard as the Secretary of Agriculture. The hero of the progressive wing of the Democratic Party, Henry Wallace, stayed on as Secretary of Commerce for the first year. Harold Ickes remained Secretary of the Interior until early 1946. Tom Clark replaced Attorney General Francis Biddle. Lewis Schwellenbach replaced Labor Secretary Frances Perkins. Robert Hannegan took over the Postmaster Generalship from Frank Walker. Truman named James Byrnes as the replacement for outgoing Secretary of State Edward

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Stettinius. The “Blockhead” Henry Morgenthau left the Treasury Department in order to make room for Truman friend Frederick Vinson (whom Truman would later name Chief Justice of the Supreme Court). Robert Patterson replaced Henry Stimson as Secretary of War.

For the most part, the pundits responded with a collective yawn. Arthur Krock supported Truman’s first cabinet changes and reorganization of the executive branch. Krock informed his readers that it was time for Truman to have his “own men” in place and remove some of the “weaknesses and waste out of government. Unlike Roosevelt’s attempt at reorganization, which the veteran newsman saw as little more than a power-grab, Truman was actually trying to “move in the direction of a tighter, less expensive and more efficient Government.” After a few months, Krock saw little evidence of progress. Even under Truman, government officials seemed just as overwhelmed as they had been before. Even as the government expanded, officials found themselves with too little time to concentrate on larger issues. The other pundits were similarly underwhelmed and happy to focus their attention elsewhere.

While the appointments and departures of bureaucrats had little resonance with the pundits or the public, the issues surrounding the contradictory demands of the demobilization of the armed forces seemed a better indicator of Truman’s ability to manage the peace, and few people were pleased with Truman’s leadership. The pundits agreed that the needs of the postwar world were great, but generally, the American people

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were unwilling to make the same kinds of sacrifices in peacetime that had brought them victory in war.

After Truman announced that he had reviewed and approved the demobilization procedures of the Navy and War departments, Arthur Krock criticized Truman and predicted more criticism to come. Before Truman had made his statement supporting the demobilization procedures, constituents had complained to their Congressmen and directed their anger at the military. Henceforth, Krock predicted that every story of “incompetence, favoritism, confusion, delay and instability of policy” would reflect poorly on Truman’s leadership. With the shift in the perception of responsibility, Representatives and Senators could make “charges without any attempt to check their accuracy because of the certainty that the effort is a popular one among their constituents.” All complaints would be directed at Truman. By his actions, Truman had done little more than give Congress a license to be critical and hostile, with incentives to continue in that manner. Krock understood that Truman had to take action, and offered no alternative to Truman’s ultimate decision, but Krock was more concerned with the political fallout of a poorly articulated policy in an increasingly charged political environment. Krock was now sure that any spirit of wartime unity had faded.11

Truman’s decisions may have been courageous or correct, but they were bad politics.

Krock also criticized Truman for failing to provide steady leadership in solving the problems of prices, wages, inflation, and the budget. Truman had relied on ad hoc solutions to the postwar economic concerns and these problems were compounded by Truman’s inability to unite his own party. Krock “strongly asserted” that Truman had not

thought through the implications of his actions. Instead of reevaluating the problems with price controls, Krock asserted that Truman had simply continued wartime practices. Actually, Truman had removed wage controls while keeping price controls in place to please labor. Krock complained that the incoherent wage policy resulted in “a continuing upward race between wages on the one hand and prices on the other, which must be another temporary condition if acute inflation is not to follow.” His budget avoided dealing with long term costs of social spending while his policy on defense deployment shifted daily. In every instance, Truman had not been able to exercise any kind of leadership over his party or forge a consensus to solve these difficult problems. Truman’s “improvised schemes” would only put off dealing with issues until they reappeared again under “much more inflamed conditions.” Krock accused Truman of holding a political philosophy of “We’ll get through today somehow and take a chance on tomorrow.” When he looked for the causes of Truman’s inability to provide steady leadership, Krock saw “his political and economic heritage, the backlash of war, the division of his party…. But explanation is a palliative, not a cure.”

In his column published three days later, Krock again argued that Truman should pay more attention to the growing rifts in the Democratic Party. The interest groups

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12 Arthur Krock, “Need of Firm Policies Confronts President,” *New York Times*, 13 January 1946, E3. Krock’s next column continued the theme. He cited an unnamed “intimate and veteran observer of national affairs” who noted, “I have never seen such grave matters so hurriedly handled, without any reference to results in our body politic, though one of these is contually lessening confidence in our Government and its institutions, particularly in those who are supposed to guard and protect them.” Krock added: “All national affairs are being dealt with by an executive prescription in which politics and expediency are combined almost equally and in which fundamental, long-range solvents are missing.” Arthur Krock, “Grave Matters So Hurriedly Handled,” *New York Times*, 17 January 1946, 19.
within his party, particularly the split between northern and southern Democrats, proved Truman’s inability to be an effective party leader. Krock recalled statements by two southern Senators who had publicly attacked Truman. Senator Walter George (D-GA) said of Truman, “If this [leadership] is all that Harry Truman has to offer, God help the Democratic party in 1946 and 1948.” Senator James Eastland (D-MS) charged that Truman was not “competent to handle the job he holds today.” The northern liberals and New Dealers were only slightly less dissatisfied. The war had kept the factions together, but with each passing month, the fissures came to the fore.\footnote{13}{Arthur Krock, “Democrats’ Rift Perils Party’s Whole Future,” \textit{New York Times}, 20 January 1946, 65.}

All was not lost, however, and Krock believed Truman could rally. By the middle of February, Krock compared Truman to a “boxer who, because of inattention to training rules and underestimation of his opponent in the ring, has taken a series of blows that made him groggy, but who is recovering from the shock.” Truman could turn his political fortunes around if he could remind Americans that he inherited the problems in the American economy, learn from his mistakes, and prevent any more defections from the New Deal wing of the Democratic Party. Krock conceded that this thinking contained “a high content of wishfulness,” but Truman’s “winning personality and a sporting attitude” might carry the day.\footnote{14}{Arthur Krock, “Truman Able To Rally Despite Hard Setbacks,” \textit{New York Times}, 17 February 1946, 69.} Truman’s choice of J.A. Krug to replace Harold Ickes as Secretary of the Interior was encouraging to Krock: Krug was not one of Truman’s “cronies,” and he was not from Missouri.\footnote{15}{Arthur Krock, “Krug a Career Man,” \textit{New York Times}, 27 February 1946, 4.}
Meanwhile, in Moscow, Josef Stalin announced that he was increasing military production in order to prepare “against any eventuality.” The Soviet Union decided to rearm in preparation for a war with the West sometime in the 1950s, when, Stalin predicted, the United States would be in another depression. The liberal Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas called it the “Declaration of World War III.” Walter Lippmann warned that with the militarization of the Soviet Union “the United States was left with no choice but to do the same.” In late February George Kennan sent his soon-to-be famous “Long Telegram” from the American embassy in Moscow to the State Department. This widely circulated (within the Executive Branch) document warned that the Soviets were hostile, bent on expanding their empire, and could not be accommodated. As the Long Telegram made its way through the administration, Michigan Senator Arthur Vandenberg spoke on the Senate floor, arguing for a harder line against the Soviets as the price of continued bipartisanship in foreign policy. The next day, Secretary of State James Byrnes responded with a “get tough” speech of his own.

Reston still worried that Truman’s foreign policy was adrift. Byrnes’ speech to the Overseas Press Club seemed to hint at the beginnings of a foreign policy shift. Reston thought the Byrnes speech moved the Truman administration towards a more active role in the United Nations, “a sterner line” against political propaganda between states, and a “firmer and more courageous foreign policy in general.” He reported that the consensus among Washington observers was that the speech had preceded the policy rather than the other way around—hinting at the lack of faith among the press corps. “If

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16 Hamby, Man of the People, 346.
17 McCullough, Truman, 486.
this indicates that Washington is a trifle cynical about speeches as a guide to the Administration’s foreign policy,” Reston wrote, “the fault may be found in the record.”

On March 5, Churchill’s “Iron Curtain” speech at Westminster College in Fulton Missouri called for an Anglo-American alliance to halt Soviet aggression. That night, Walter Lippmann and his wife, Helen, attended a dinner at the Georgetown home of Undersecretary of State Dean Acheson. The other dinner guests included the State Department’s specialist on the Soviets, Charles Bohlen, and Secretary of Commerce Henry Wallace. Bohlen and Acheson supported Churchill’s statement; Wallace disagreed, while Lippmann, although quiet, indicated he leaned toward the Wallace position. Churchill’s rhetoric made it difficult to deal with the Soviets on practical matters and seemed to tie America to supporting British imperial possessions and traditional spheres of influence. Lippmann warned the British in his column: “The line of British imperial interests and the line of American vital interests are not to be regarded as identical.” He supported Western unity and the obligations thereof, but the many “necessary, desirable, and inherently constructive things” had to be done as part of an alliance that was not “avowedly anti-Soviet.” Following the Acheson-Bohlen (and presumably Truman) line would weaken the United Nations and perhaps lead to war. In private, he predicted that the United States would be involved in a preventive war “within the next five years” and called the speech an “almost catastrophic blunder.”

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New York Times, and the Wall Street Journal backed Churchill, while Truman was publicly cautious and privately pleased.20

Reston’s columns argued that the policy following the speeches needed to be bipartisan, internationalist, with practical solutions to the problem of United States-Soviet relations. He tired of politicians on Capitol Hill who agreed that America should take a “tough line” with the Soviets but would not face the hard choices that such a decision would bring. What were the real international commitments? Should the United States continue to demobilize its armed forces? Reston credited Brynes with giving “the chief critics of his foreign policy the kind of leadership they have been requesting.” He looked forward to cooperation between Byrnes and Vandenberg in forging a foreign policy for the United States that would meet Soviet challenges. The tendency to “play politics with foreign policy issues” had been “arrested by the seriousness of the issues now facing the country.” If the days of foreign policy “drift” had ended, Brynes and Vandenberg had work to do. Reston did not mention Truman’s leadership, beyond indicating that it was a good sign that Truman invited Republican foreign policy expert John Foster Dulles to the White House for consultation.21

The challenges seemed to be mounting, with the stakes higher than ever before, while even the positive characterizations of Truman asserted that Truman had not grown in office. The Soviets stirred abroad while Truman could not even control his own party. Arthur Krock assessed Truman’s leadership as that of a man who “acts just like himself” but the time had passed when Truman could get away with doing so. The New Dealers

20 Hamby, Man of the People, 347-348.
complained of Truman’s moderate tone and asserted that if Franklin Roosevelt were still in office, he would attack the Republicans more vigorously and frequently. Krock’s retort was that Truman had been following the Roosevelt program to the letter. Instead, the so-called progressive wing of the Democratic Party wanted Truman to copy Roosevelt’s “tactics and methods,” and Krock found that attempt futile. Truman was no actor, and Krock doubted the wisdom of any attempt to make Truman act like Franklin Roosevelt. If Democrats were unhappy with Truman now, they should have measured their support of the Democratic ticket in 1944 more carefully.

Maybe being Harry S. Truman at all times and in all situations may prove to be an unsuccessful political and administrative formula in this critical period of history. Perhaps the Democratic Party might regain strength and unity more quickly and more surely if the President were someone else or behaved like someone else. But it should now be clear even to those who would recast him that this is no more possible than to remake him into another person. Therefore it would appear to be the better part of wisdom if his Democratic critics would give up the attempt and try to capitalize the many excellent points that are his own.22

Krock described Truman’s other “excellent points” in an extended article on Truman’s first year in office. Truman was humble but had never “wallowed in the ‘humility’ that was widely attributed to him when he took office.” He was not “pious in speech,” but Krock nevertheless deemed him religious and worldly, partisan and patriotic. While most of the column was favorable, Krock did admit, “History will in time write its estimate of Harry S. Truman, and even now—before he has been President a year—it is being offered a depreciating estimate of his capacity to lead and to understand.” If Truman’s good qualities were not sufficient, perhaps he had been born at the wrong time. Krock found Truman interesting and his personality compelling. The

President did tell Krock what he thought of opinion journalists (enjoyed them, but they
did not meet his journalistic standards). His intelligence took the form of common sense,
and, “intellectuals, noting his reading, will not call him one of them.”
Many intellectuals did support Henry Wallace, though, and the division within the Truman
administration over how to conduct of U.S.-Soviet relations came to a head in the
summer of 1946.

The events surrounding the firing of Secretary of Commerce Henry Wallace
seemed to confirm many of the worst suspicions of the pundits and the American people.
Harry Truman, the Missouri mule and man of the people, was not up to his job. The
liberal wing of the Democratic Party considered Wallace the keeper of the New Deal
flame. Truman had tried to treat Wallace with kid gloves. Wallace lost no opportunity to
offer Truman unsolicited advice, especially regarding the Soviet Union, and all of it was
bad. The President did his best to ignore Wallace and ride out the midterm elections, but
on September 12, Wallace was to give a foreign policy address to left-liberal groups
gathered at Madison Square Garden in New York. He went to Truman on September 10
in order to discuss the content of his speech with Truman. The President, busy with other
matters, did not devote enough attention to its content. Wallace put out an advance copy
of his speech, and when reporters asked Truman if he agreed with Wallace’s address, he
declared that he agreed with the whole speech and that it was “exactly in line” with
administration policy. He didn’t and it wasn’t.

The pundits pounced on Truman’s statement. He was too blunt. He had made a
snap judgment without thinking, then followed it up with thoughtless remarks to the

24 Hamby, Man of the People, 355-358.
press. Reston wrote that Truman was the only person in Washington who believed Wallace’s speech agreed with administration policy. Byrnes, in Paris, was livid. Arthur Krock went so far as to list six parts of Wallace’s speech which directly contradicted administration policy. The Communist Party paper, the Daily Worker, found Wallace to be hostile to the Soviets, but it was probably the only one.

When Wallace showed Truman the speech, he had omitted sections of the speech critical of the Soviets and worse, had implicitly endorsed Soviet domination of Eastern Europe. Truman tried to recover, claiming that he had only endorsed Wallace’s right to give the speech. Byrnes insisted that Wallace stay out of foreign policy. James Reston wrote, “official Washington is not so worried about last week’s free-speech celebration by President Truman and Secretary of Commerce Henry A. Wallace. What worries them is the Monday-morning hang-over….” The rift had weakened the United States abroad, politicized foreign policy, and further divided the factions in Congress. Krock predicted Truman would back Byrnes and force Wallace out. On September 19, Truman asked for Wallace’s resignation. The episode was a fiasco.

Decades later, historian David McCullough summarized how the episode hurt Truman’s reputation: “To the press and an increasing proportion of the country, he seemed bewildered and

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equivocating, incapable of a clear or positive policy toward the Russians.\textsuperscript{30} Reston’s column after Wallace’s exit summed up much of what others were thinking:

As a result of this sequence of events and the President’s part in them, Mr. Truman has lost prestige at a critical time before the national elections, and while he is free to conduct a unified Cabinet in the foreign field, his direction is subject to the reservation that, like Woodrow Wilson, he may lose control of the lower House and be defeated himself at the next Presidential election.\textsuperscript{31}

In response to Soviet actions and the events surrounding the Wallace resignation, Truman asked Clark Clifford, who then delegated the job to George Elsey, to prepare a report spelling out all of the times the Soviets had broken their promises. Truman got the account on September 24, and it detailed actions and intentions of the Soviets. Arthur Krock thought the extended memo was important enough to reprint it, in its entirety, as an appendix in his memoirs.\textsuperscript{32}

Certainly, following the Wallace position on Soviet relations would have been political suicide, even if the certain factions of the Democratic Party had not yet settled their policy disputes. It is difficult to overstate the anti-communist feelings of the

\textsuperscript{30} McCullough, \textit{Truman}, 490.
\textsuperscript{32} Hamby, \textit{Man of the People}, 353-354. Arthur Krock, \textit{Memoirs}, 417-482. In his own memoirs, Clark Clifford described how the paper got into Krock’s memoirs. “The report might have remained undiscovered indefinitely. But twenty years later, in 1966, Arthur Krock, the former Washington Bureau Chief of \textit{The New York Times}, approached me. In the course of gathering material for his memoirs, he had interviewed former President Truman, who told him of the existence of a highly classified report that had been important in the evolution of Administration policy toward the Soviet Union. Krock, who had scored a huge journalistic coup in 1947 by revealing that George Kennan was the author of the “X” article, wanted to tell the story of “Clifford’s secret report” in his memoirs, and asked me if I had a copy that I might show him. As it happened, I had kept a copy of the draft from which the final report had been printed, and since it was no longer sensitive, I showed it to him on what I thought was a background basis. But when Krock’s memoirs appeared in 1968, the entire 26,000-word report was printed as a sixty-three page appendix. To this day, it is the only complete version of the report that has been printed; the normally thorough and excellent official series, \textit{Foreign Relations of the United States}, does not contain it, because it never entered the filing systems of either the State Department or the White House.” Clark Clifford, \textit{Counsel to the President}, 124. In retrospect, both Clifford’s assessment of the influence of his report and Krock’s reaction to the report itself seem a bit overblown.
American people in the second half of the 1940s, and if Truman wanted any kind of political success, he would have to demonstrate his leadership more effectively. According to the Gallup poll, by the summer of 1946 a mere sixteen percent of Americans believed that the government should “do nothing” about Communism. Of the Americans who wanted to do something about Communists in America, the largest percentage (thirty-six percent) believed that the Communists should be killed or imprisoned. Another sixteen percent wanted the Communists to be made “inactive.” Seven percent favored careful surveillance. In September 1946 just over one third of Americans approved of his leadership.33

Joe Alsop agreed. He entitled a column, “Must War Come?” His answer was not reassuring. War was unlikely until the Soviets had nuclear weapons, but they would continue to provoke crises “to test our strength and firmness” in the form of “underground and indirect aggression.” Once the Soviet Union had atomic weapons, he predicted, “the military advantage will all be on the Soviet side. This is something that is vitally important to grasp.” The United States had to resist Soviet aggression and try to come up with some way of dealing with the Soviet threat, perhaps through some system of international cooperation and disarmament. It seemed as if the United States would soon be facing an hour of maximum danger. “If Soviet policy is already expansionist when Soviet military power is inferior, what will Soviet policy become when Soviet power passes that of the West? It is a grim question.”34 Truman would eventually have answers to those grim questions, and his poll numbers would rise again, but in the fall of

1946, Truman’s biggest political problem was that he could not seem to get Democrats elected to Congress.

In addition to the confusion arising from the Wallace firing, domestic political concerns had been taking a toll on Truman in the summer and fall of 1946. Arthur Krock described the frustration of price controls, inflation, black markets, and seemingly contradictory administration policy. “The public effect of the situation created by these and many other factors in our national life has been as damaging to morals as to economy….”

Krock’s column of June 22 predicted a Republican takeover of the House of Representatives. While Truman involved himself in intra-party struggles, Krock praised his candor for admitting his activities. The columnist warned of Truman’s political risk of staking his political capital on high-profile races such as a hotly contested Senatorial primary in Montana and a House race in Truman’s home state of Missouri. By the end of July Krock reported that Republicans were already confident in their ability to take control of the House, hurting Truman’s probable run for the presidency in his own right in 1948.

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Truman’s inability to make peace with Congress and legislate effectively surprised Krock. Truman had been unable to work out his differences with Congress on the matter of price controls, and the resulting mess was hurting Americans squarely in the pocketbook by the summer of 1946, with prices rising 6 percent in July alone.40 When Truman attacked Congress, he was, after all, attacking a body that he had been long and happily associated with a mere fifteen months into his administration.41 “Mr. Truman has engaged deliberately in his war with Congress and his party majority there.” The fighting could not help Truman’s political chances in November. Krock reminded readers, “our political tradition is that in such circumstances, the President, as party leader and Chief of State, is held accountable.”42 After the Wallace debacle, Krock remarked that many Washington observers considered Truman’s handling of foreign policy to be an iffy proposition.43 Truman’s political fortunes had “been made more difficult by a series of personal blunders.”

These impacts appear to have made the President far less surefooted than he used to be. He has been making spur-of-the-moment statements on important matters that have returned to plague and injure him. And lately it has seemed that Mr. Truman has not learned by experience to look before he leaps into waters which, as a professional politician, he would be expected first to test for heat and depth.44

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44 Krock predicted yet again that the Democrats would lose the House. International relations with the Soviets and problems with the British in Palestine loomed large on the horizon. Atomic energy, inflation, price controls, the Wallace controversy, and a recent press conference question on the budget had all contributed to this impression. See also, Arthur Krock, “If Congress, or the House, Goes Republican,” *New York Times*, 17 October 1946, 21.
By the midterm elections, each of the pundits could fire off criticisms from any number of directions. Reston attacked Truman’s administrative ability, charging that Truman had fired all of Roosevelt’s “idea boys” and hired mediocrities “chosen more for their loyalty than their ability.”

Pearson alleged that Truman had failed to prevent collaboration between German and American industrialists, thereby allowing the Export-Import Bank to loan money to companies who had “flirtations with the Nazis.” The best praise for Truman that Krock could muster was the limp assessment that the President’s most recent press conference “gave no cause for alarm.”

The Alsops reported that the Republicans were confident of victory in both the midterm elections of 1946 and the presidential election of 1948. George Gallup’s polls confirmed what Truman already knew. Politically, he was in trouble.

Marquis Childs predicted that the “unkindest blow” in the midterm elections would come from the “folks back home” in Truman’s native Missouri, as voters rejected Truman’s choices in critical House races. Truman’s inability to campaign effectively for his party made Childs nostalgic for the leadership of President Roosevelt. “Today the Roosevelt magnet is sadly lacking.” Truman had failed to inspire Democrats or charm voters. Childs compared Truman’s flat, nasal, drone with Roosevelt’s sonorous tone and concluded: “The voice played over the radio is not good enough.” Worse, when

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Truman’s repudiation came, Childs thought it would reflect badly upon the New Deal.⁵⁰ Childs recalled how just over a decade earlier, political boss Tom Pendergast had sent his “friend and protégé, Harry S. Truman, to the Senate of the United States. It was nearly as simple as that.” Truman’s selection by that man and machine had consequences far beyond what anyone in Missouri could have imagined and demonstrated “the casual indifference with which we approach politics here in America.” Truman’s presidency was the “end product of the politics of our indifference, our cynicism, and our greed.…” Taking those factors into account, Truman had been “a better man that we deserve. He is more honest, more conscientious, more hard-working than [we had] any right to expect.”⁵¹

On the eve of the election, Walter Lippmann unleashed criticisms of Truman on a whole host of issues, but focused on foreign affairs. He did not trust Truman to speak out on foreign policy, and he wondered why, on matters “touching the good name and the vital interest of the country,” the President “had to be so rude and casual.” Lippmann accused Truman of giving “a skeptical and cynical world the occasion for saying that we have a double standard for morals.” Short-term thinking and ad hoc solutions would only lead to “exasperating” difficulties with other nations. Such problems were nothing more than “a failure in Washington to think clearly and to think straight.” Truman could not even perform his constitutional duties as the head of the armed forces and chief diplomat because “at unpredictable moments under pressure or personal whim—he intervenes casually in some difficult question.…” Because of Truman’s ineptitude, foreign policy fell into the hands of Secretary Byrnes. But according to Lippmann, Byrnes had

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organized himself and the State Department in such a way that made it impossible to think about American foreign policy as a whole. Under Byrnes and Truman, the State Department operated more as a loose confederation of tribal chieftains, leaving the State Department unable to “really make or administer the whole foreign policy of the United States.” He continued:

“The conduct of affairs is disorganized because the President, whose duty it is to shape foreign policy as a whole, cannot do this, and because Mr. Byrnes, who ought to be doing it in his place, is never in Washington long enough to work out general policy with his colleagues. Thus there is no general policy, no conception of the relationship of one issue to another, and the elementary idea that a nation’s interests must be treated as a whole is dismissed as too silly and impracticable to be considered seriously.”

The Republicans swept Congress with majorities of fifty-seven in the House and six in the Senate, and the pundits heaped insult onto injury. The Alsop brothers suggested that Truman should find some mechanism to formally share foreign policy decision-making with the Republicans who controlled Congress. Perhaps, they argued, the best course of action would be if Truman could appoint a Republican as Secretary of State and resign. They doubted the President would take their suggestion but would “prefer the weaker expedient favored by his equally unhappy predecessor, Herbert Hoover” and confer with opposition party on major problems. “This would certainly get nowhere. Indeed the worst kind of mess can hardly be avoided by any means whatever.”

Lippmann concluded that Truman’s setbacks spelled the end of the heady

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days of the New Deal. “The decay of the Democratic Administration, which began at least eighteen months ago, is far advanced.”

Childs wrote about Truman as if he was no longer setting the agenda in Washington. He gently warned the Republicans to exercise restraint and keep their extremists in check as they took over the machinery of government. “The immediate danger is that the little men with little minds who have waited for this opportunity will take over.” While Truman had made some missteps, Childs advised the Republicans not to let revenge get the best of them, lest they damage their political hopes for 1948. “One thing certainly is true. The opportunity for positive leadership was never greater.”

Reston suggested that Senator Arthur H. Vandenberg of Michigan and Senator Robert A. Taft of Ohio fill the vacuum and become “the key figures in the determination of American foreign policy.” Truman would presumably take a back seat to these men.

In case Americans had any difficulty finding the biggest loser in the midterms, Arthur Krock called Truman “the worst beaten of all his party yesterday.” Upon further reflection Krock found what he thought was the “single cause” that was “fundamental” to Truman’s setback and, like Lippmann, found it in Truman’s inability to control the remnants of the old New Deal coalition as Roosevelt had done. Krock believed that under Truman’s leadership, the public had come to resent the factions within the Democratic Party that had dominated decision-making since the beginning of Franklin Roosevelt’s administration. Truman had encouraged, by legislation and executive action,

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the same union labor, pressure groups, and radicals (including Communists); without Roosevelt at the helm, the American people grew tired of these factions pulling the government in different directions, and they showed it at the polls.58

Drew Pearson offered Truman a snide solution to the problem of divided government, complete with a dig at the President’s intelligence. First came the obligatory statement on the complexity of the world: “Even were President Truman the most brilliant leader in the world—which he certainly doesn’t pretend to be—he couldn’t solve a lot of these postwar problems.” Perhaps, Pearson suggested, Truman should bring able Republicans into the executive branch. For good measure, he added the dire prediction that failure to follow his advice could have a “paralyzing effect” on the American government and lead to disaster.59

Childs also had little optimism for the next few years, but he brought some measure of sanity to the discussion when he did not support the idea of Truman stepping down. Childs wrote that he understood the impulses behind the drive to convince Truman to resign his office, but the process of having Truman pick his Republican successor would bring too many complications. The resulting situation was hardly ideal, however. Childs imagined 1946-48 would resemble the dark days of 1931-32 as “Herbert Hoover writhed in agony during those two tragic years.”60 He described Truman’s first press conference after the Republican victory as having a “dream-like quality,” that it “was solemn, a little like a wake.” The President’s voice was thin and scratchy, though full of “earnest sentiment” so “typical of the man, of his character and

his temperament.” To Childs, it seemed as though Truman was willing to accept the inevitable “constitutional crisis” of the next two years, or at least ignore it for the time being. “Unhappily in the White House, trouble—of every kind—runs you down and sits on your chest.” The press conference was conspicuously humorless, and Childs informed his readers that one could almost feel the executive branch ceding power to Congress. If Truman were to be a “prisoner in office for another two years, he would be a good prisoner.” It seemed as though Truman had done what the Republicans could never do while Roosevelt still occupied the White House: kill the spirit of reform. “It had happened after 14 years, after all the high excitement, the laughter, the coming and going, the drama, the tragedy. A new order had come in.”

To Childs, another part of Roosevelt’s legacy had fallen victim to Truman’s incompetence.

Lippmann continued to suggest creative ways for Truman to remove himself from office. Perhaps Truman could resign from office and Congress could authorize a special election. If the United States did not want to “muddle through” the next few years, Americans needed to have a more flexible view of the Constitution. Lippmann warned his readers that they could not count on the goodwill of Republicans to get the nation through the next critical years. The opposition party might be tempted to make “a public spectacle of Mr. Truman’s helplessness.” Some of the “best of the Republicans will not wish to treat him as a political prisoner, trussed up and caged for torture,” but this was too dangerous a course. “Mr. Truman’s problem is the unusual weakness of his position. He has not only lost control of Congress but he is only in name the leader of his party. His personal weakness is an obstacle to cooperation for joint action.”

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In order to overcome his “helpless position,” Truman should announce that he would not seek election in 1948. The Republicans, in turn, would not see Truman as a target to be destroyed. He could then reorganize the Cabinet with a healthy dose of Republicans—at the very least Truman should appoint a Republican Secretary of the Treasury to manage government finances—in order to give them a greater stake in the success of the administration. If Truman wanted to be truly bold—as bold as the situation required—he should arrange for his resignation and replacement. Lippmann tried to soften the blow by offering some soothing words on the honor of resignation:

Mr. Truman will make a serious mistake if he treats the idea of resigning as a personal affront and a reflection on his courage.” “Mr. Truman may find he is doomed to preside over an impotent Government for two years. He should not, therefore, dismiss from his mind the remedy which his great predecessors contemplated.

It is a poor conception of the public service which makes it a moral duty for a man to cling to an office, or to be a prisoner in it, if he cannot exercise its functions. The right to resign is one of the cherished privileges of a free man; the willingness to resign, when principle and the public interest are served, is always present in the public-spirited and the self-respecting. They look upon resigning, not as cowardice and quitting and a personal disaster, but as the ultimate guaranty of their useful influence and of their personal dignity.63

Lippmann opened 1947 with similar attacks on the Truman administration. He coyly referred to “Mr. Truman’s—shall we say—modesty” and his failure to give American foreign policy any direction. Lippmann’s criticisms spanned the globe, as he saw disorganized policy towards disarmament, atomic energy, relations with Japan, Southeast Asia and the Philippines, South America, Spain, the Middle East, Germany,

Russia, and the United Nations. “If only we could consider our foreign relations as a whole,” Lippmann pleaded, “it would save us no end of embarrassment and confusion.”

Marquis Childs thought Truman’s State of the Union message of 1947 to be a rather sad exercise. The message had a “dry, academic sound. He was saying to the powerful opposition in the other branch of the Government, ‘I’ll be good if you’ll be good.’ Behind the earnest, uninspired phraseology was a wistful hope.” But it was destined to come to nothing “ because his recommendations are doomed to be ignored.” Truman’s proposals were more general than those of 1946, because that message had been a failure. As Childs looked back on the year that had passed, he reminded his readers that “with minor, piecemeal exceptions,” Truman had only scored two legislative victories: his full-employment bill, enacted in “watered down form,” and another law providing for civilian control for atomic energy that had widespread popular support and the backing of southern Democrats and moderate Republicans. The record was made all the worse with the realization that Truman’s party held majorities in both houses of Congress.

The Republican victory ended a fraud and deception. We can see now very clearly that the responsibility in the next two years will be a Republican responsibility. In the words of the prayer book, for those things left undone and for those things that ought not to have been done, the blame will rest on the GOP. Likewise the credit for constructive steps will go to the party in power in the Legislature. We have a Republican Government. That is the real meaning of the President’s message. That is the state of the Union today and it may be that history will show that Mr. Truman was right to recognize the reality.

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There were occasional bright spots. Truman’s selection of General George C. Marshall to replace James Byrnes as Secretary of State met with universal praise. Lippmann wrote: “With Marshall at the State Department, with Eisenhower the Chief of Staff, the country can now feel confident that its policy and its power will be in balance.” Finally Truman had appointed men who understood the value of long-term strategic planning in order to maintain the proper balance of power. 66 Childs was pleased that unlike Byrnes (or Truman), Marshall had never let friendships interfere with his ability to administer effectively. “Marshall’s method is to make use of the men who seem to have the knowledge and capacity; that is if they measure up to the general’s strict standards. And he has a remarkable capacity for sizing up human beings.” 67 The Alsops thought Marshall to be the “best qualified successor to Byrnes that he could have found.” They hoped Marshall would be able to impose order and routine to the chaos Truman and Byrnes had made of the State Department, bringing his “immense abilities fully to bear on the staggering task he has assumed.” 68

Likewise, Drew Pearson thought that Marshall was an improvement over Byrnes. Pearson believed Truman was always “a little uncomfortable” around Byrnes because of the Secretary of State’s tendency to work as a “one-man team.” Not to put too fine a point on the matter, Pearson’s blunt assessment was that with Byrnes at the State Department, Truman “had almost nothing to say about foreign policy.” Pearson also made the same criticism of Byrnes that Reston, Lippmann, and the Alsops had made of Truman. “Jimmie had the habit of playing diplomacy by ear. A master musician, he

didn’t worry about accompanists, seldom sent the White House reports from Paris or London, didn’t always tell the President about his plans.” The situation would be much better under Marshall, since Truman’s respect for Marshall was unmatched and the General had always been respectful of Truman. “Instead of ignoring Truman, as did some Cabinet members, Marshall went out of his way to sell him on all military plans.” Truman and Marshall were “warm friends.” Finally, Marshall’s experiences in war had left him anxious to avoid another.

Truman’s approval ratings recovered as Truman reacted to the new Cold War realities, but this was slow in coming and the public support was fleeting. With the announcement of the Truman Doctrine on March 12, 1947, Truman’s public support rose to sixty percent. As the public became aware of continuing Soviet actions in Europe, they supported a strong response. A Communist insurgency threatened a weak Greek government. The Soviets were pressuring Turkey to share control of the Dardanelles and the Bosporus. When Britain announced that they could no longer afford to aid those countries, Truman requested $400 million in military and economic assistance for Greece and Turkey and announced that the United States would “support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures.”

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69 Drew Pearson, “The Washington Merry-Go-Round,” *Washington Post*, 10 January 1947, 5B. Pearson had called on Byrnes from time to time and considered him a good source. Byrnes had told Truman that at the Potsdam conference the President had “made a speech [to Stalin] as if he were lecturing a schoolroom.” Byrnes thought that the President’s aide, Harry Vaughan, brought out the worst in Truman, encouraging his outburst by saying: “That’s the way, chief. You certainly gave it to him. That was great. Give it to him some more.” Byrnes told Pearson that “Truman beamed. He loved it.” Pearson, *Diaries*, 26.


72 The phrase “Truman Doctrine” was not a part of the original speech, but it came into common usage within days of the policy announcement.
Most journalists recognized that the Truman Doctrine was a historic shift in American foreign policy. Reston compared it to the Monroe Doctrine. Congress approved. Truman branded the dissenters as “crackpots.” Indeed, it seemed as though Robert Taft, Henry Wallace, Joseph Davies, Claude Pepper, Bernard Baruch, and Joseph P. Kennedy were the only political figures willing to break with the administration on the issue. Critics from the Left howled at each other, but could not stop the program. Critics from the Right criticized the bill, then voted for it.

James Reston backed the Truman Doctrine enthusiastically and used his columns to argue for American involvement abroad to oppose Soviet aggression, but his support was for the policy, not the President. Reston believed that the Soviets would continue to expand anywhere they did not meet resistance. He mocked the idea that the United States could avoid its proper role in the world: “We do not have to oppose them. We can let them fill the vacuums in Greece and Turkey. We can abandon the Near and Middle East to a contest between a retreating Britain and an advancing communism. This will not require any appropriations now.” He recognized the temptation to abandon the world to its own devices. Joseph P. Kennedy argued that Communists should be allowed to take Europe, if they could, and the United States could wait for “the peoples of these areas” to “get tired of them and throw them out.” Reston was not pleased with the odds of such a scenario, and he did not like the idea of America preserving its freedom “by bartering the freedom of others.” Further, America could not afford the loss of markets as the Soviets monopolized trade in their empire.

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73 For good measure, Truman lumped most of that group in with “the actors and artists in immoral Greenwich Village.” Hamby, *Man of the People*, 393.
74 Ibid.
... even if the question were debated in terms of dollars alone (which would be skipping a lot of pretty important things), it is questionable which is the more expensive system: facing up to the tremendously expensive and admittedly dangerous business of blocking Communist expansion and helping rebuild a community of free democratic states, or postponing the decision and following the equally dangerous assumption that the Soviet Union will be indifferent or inefficient about establishing a Communist world system.\(^75\)

Of course, Reston worried that Truman would somehow muck it up. The goals were clear enough. Truman wanted to build a non-Communist Europe able to contain Soviet expansion and contribute to the world economy, but Reston worried that Truman’s past tendencies would come back to haunt him. Truman needed congressional support, but he failed to consult the Republican majority. He needed world support, but he failed to work with the United Nations. Reston worried that Truman undermined bipartisan foreign policy with little regard to the consequences. “This is a fact of some importance to the future of this Administration’s continental plan, for while Mr. Marshall has finally exposed its bones, only the Congress, including the Republican majority, can give it life.”\(^76\)

Krock had some questions about the limit and scope of the Truman Doctrine, but they were fair and Krock was generally supportive. America was supposed to support free peoples, but what, he asked was meant by “support” and who counted as “free peoples?” How much would the program cost? How will we measure success? What


makes us think we will succeed? But Krock gave Truman credit for the doctrine bearing his name, “despite what seems to be a growing impression, spreading even to Moscow, that Mr. Truman merely adopted the view of counselors….” Krock’s sources told him that it was Truman who had substituted the word “must” for the word “should” in a critical sentence: “I believe that it must be the policy of the United States to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressure.” He also detected a rise in Truman’s political stock as legislators who claimed to dislike the Truman Doctrine agreed to support the bill. Krock warned Truman of the dangers of the fickle public, though, as “the country is full of discontent, disillusion and anxiety; of anger because the United States could not lay down the burdens of world leadership with victory in the war. In such an atmosphere continual fluctuation in popular approval of politicians is the only constant.”

Walter Lippmann was skeptical. For someone who had constantly berated the Truman administration for a lacking a coherent strategy for dealing with the Soviets, Lippmann was singularly unhappy once he was presented with one. He backed the aid to Greece, but the Truman Doctrine itself was a problem: “A vague global policy which sounds like the tocsin of an ideological crusade, has no limits.” Would this policy apply everywhere? It sounded like the kind of policy that could easily spin out of control. In his column, Lippmann wrote, “the ‘Truman doctrine,’ which was superimposed unnecessarily and most unwisely upon the concrete problem of supporting Greece and

80 Lippmann quoted in McCullough, Truman, 549.
Turkey, has got us into a position which the Russians can exploit in Hungary, in Italy, perhaps later in France.” He mocked the “great big hot words” that he felt could not be backed by effective action. In sum, the United States would have been better off with no policy at all if the alternative was a vague, expansive, unenforceable doctrine that would inevitably result in “setback to our diplomacy and our prestige.” “Doctrines, slogans, and attitudes” were no substitute for the massive political and economic aid needed to make up for Truman’s previous inactivity.81

Subsequent Lippmann columns continued to argue along these same lines. Truman was going too far, extending aid to too many places without assessing America’s real strategic needs:

We are too far out front in too many places. We are taking on ourselves too many problems. We are making too many quick decisions. We are accepting too many moral commitments. We are striking too many attitudes.

If America truly wanted to be a world leader for the cause of peace in the world, Truman needed to let other nations share in the responsibility and decision-making. “For otherwise we may find that Uncle Sam is the head of the parade and that everybody is out of step but uncle.”82 Lippmann’s concerns about the Truman doctrine even strained his longstanding friendship with Under Secretary of State Dean Acheson. When Acheson accused Lippmann of undermining American foreign policy at a dinner party in April, tempers flared. Both men yelled at one another, faces red with anger, jabbing each other in the chest occasionally for emphasis. They eventually retreated from one another, still simmering with anger. Lippmann awoke the next morning with a terrible nicotine

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headache. He had sucked down so many cigarettes during the course of the argument that he had made himself physically ill. Lippmann never fully warmed to the Truman doctrine, but he did give up smoking.\textsuperscript{83}

The other pundits took a less nuanced and more supportive positions. Stewart Alsop was content to support the Truman Doctrine if it forced the American people and their government “to see through to the end of what they have now started.”\textsuperscript{84} With conditions, they all backed the logic and rationale for the Cold War. Any bitterness or wrangling would arise from honest disagreements about the most effective way to win, not out of any doubts about the righteousness of the cause.

When George Marshall announced the plan for European Recovery at Harvard’s commencement in June 1947, the pundits, the public, and the factions within the Democratic Party had to choose sides yet again. Dean Acheson had leaked the plan to James Reston a few weeks before its official announcement, and the story ran on the front page.\textsuperscript{85} Soviet rejection of the plan further isolated the far left wing of the Democratic Party. Americans for Democratic Action, the anti-communist liberal Democrats, supported Truman, as did the internationalist Republicans such as Senator Vandenberg. Public opinion polls indicated that the “Marshall Plan” was actually more popular than the President.

Truman’s role in selling the Marshall Plan indicated which figures in the administration had maintained a cache of support among the American people. When asked, Truman would comment, but the plan was easier to sell to Republicans and the

\textsuperscript{83} Steel, 439-440.
\textsuperscript{84} Stewart Alsop, \textit{The Reporter’s Trade}, 117. From a column originally published 16 May 1947.
\textsuperscript{85} Stacks, \textit{Scotty}, 102-103.
American people without his name. It was fine with him. To their credit, journalists were willing to credit Truman with growing into the job. Just before the announcement of the Truman Doctrine, Joe Alsop wrote of Truman in a letter to a friend: “He no longer moans to every visitor that he doesn’t want the job and never did.”86 Even Walter Lippmann supported the Marshall Plan. It was narrower and more specific than the Truman Doctrine. The aid plan was not explicitly anti-Soviet either, and it showed a proper respect for the independence of the individual nations of Europe. Lippmann would have preferred that both the United States and the Soviet Union leave Europe, but that was not going to happen.87

Congress approved the Marshall Plan by overwhelming majorities in both houses of Congress in April 1948, even as the actions of the Soviets proved its wisdom. In February, the Soviets had concluded their proxy conquest of Eastern Europe when Communists took power in Czechoslovakia. Other European nations clamored for mutual defense treaties. Anti-communists won crucial elections in Italy; the Marshall Plan might have made the critical difference. Arthur Krock later called it “the central gem in the cluster of great and fruitful decisions made by President Truman.”88 In the eyes of the political journalists, it was Truman’s greatest single achievement.

Their criticisms of other aspects of Truman’s performance did not go away, however. James Reston worried that Truman’s inconsistent performances in press conferences made it difficult for other countries to understand America’s foreign policy. He remembered when Franklin Roosevelt’s press conferences had served “as a means of

87 Ferrell, Harry S. Truman: A Life, 256.
88 McCullough, Truman, 583.
removing doubts at home and abroad about foreign policy questions” instead of Truman’s
tendency to contribute to misconceptions. Roosevelt had looked at press conferences as
an opportunity to make himself understood and score political points (much to his
opponents chagrin), but Reston thought Truman viewed his meetings with journalists as a
“difficult chore.” Truman’s continued difficulties in explaining policy in press
conferences hurt American foreign policy. “For after all… the real ‘Voice of America,’
in the minds of people abroad is not a radio station but the President of the United
States.”89 If the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan required any kind of delicate,
public diplomacy, the world could not count on Harry Truman to perform it.

Krock agreed. Truman was still “simple and direct,” but he continued to make
“the same mistakes and has not yet learned how to bluff them out so that onlookers may
get the impression he doesn’t think they were mistakes at all.” Worse, his alibis were
half-hearted or awkward. “His hearers get the feeling he would prefer to say, ‘that was
dumb of me and I should have known better.’” The President still struggled with difficult
subjects, especially those requiring explanations of abstract concepts in specialized
jargon, such as economics. Even when reading prepared statements, “he still seems to
find them rather tough going.” Of course, in private, Truman was still “candid and
human,” and extended “sound and true” virtues of “courtesy and gestures of friendship.”
High office had not changed Truman, who still enjoyed a good joke and most people—
including political opponents. Krock found Truman held few grudges (exceptions made
for those who had encouraged him to resign after the 1946 election) but occasionally
extended loyalty to people who did not quite deserve it. During good times, Truman’s

December 1947, 11.
“faults and virtues, joined to Mr. Truman’s pleasant personality, form a combination that is popular with the average citizen and the average politician.”

The year 1948 would hold other challenges for Truman, and as he did in so many other cases, Walter Lippmann summarized the conventional wisdom on the matter. In Truman’s case, this was particularly unfortunate, since Lippmann still held Truman to be something of a public embarrassment. Instead of praising Truman’s decisiveness, Lippmann had concluded that the president was merely covering up his insecurities with false bravado. Outside of bipartisan foreign affairs, Truman seemed to founder.

Many of Lippmann’s specific criticisms were unfair, and had been for years. But columnists are not held accountable for their opinions beyond their readers’ willingness or ability to insist on accuracy. Lippmann and many others continued to feel that Truman had not grown into the job. When Lippmann looked at the presidential candidates, Truman seemed to be the least substantial of the bunch. Truman himself seems to have doubted whether he was the best man for the job in 1948. In 1945, Truman had offered to help Eisenhower win the Presidency in 1948, if he wanted it. In the fall of 1947, he offered to run as Eisenhower’s vice president. Eisenhower rejected both offers, and sometime in early to mid-1948 Truman resolved to fight it out.

It is an understatement to say that Harry Truman faced an uphill battle to win the presidency in his own right. In 1948, most polls indicated that only about one-third of Americans approved of his performance in office. Joseph and Stewart Alsop predicted that if

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91 Ibid., 525.
92 Steel, 455.
“Truman is nominated, he will be forced to wage the loneliest campaign in history.”93 His come-from-behind victory in the November election stands as one of the biggest shocks in American political history, and a large part of Truman’s reputation is based on the story.

The President’s domestic policy proposals established his New Deal credentials, but he needed to connect with the voters on a more personal level. He developed his new speaking style on the campaign trail, and it continued to take on a harder edge. As the campaign gained momentum, partisans would yell for Truman to “Give ‘em Hell!” Truman became a remarkably able stump speaker and his crowds seemed to grow more enthusiastic with each stop. But such tactics were singularly unimpressive to pundits expecting a certain level of decorum from the President.

Truman really did give his opponents “hell.” At its lowest point, Truman’s rhetoric fell somewhere between the genteel Red-baiting of Richard Nixon’s worst moments and the character assassinations of Joseph McCarthy. Later commentators forgot the calculation and forgave the demagoguery. The shock of the victory and the orgy of crow-eating that followed seemed more memorable. Later chroniclers might have shied away from condemning Truman’s campaign rhetoric out of political sympathy. Contemporary pundits were more cowed by the wrong-headedness of their predictions.

Every election season opens with confusion and optimism as the parties settle on candidates. The 1948 campaign season was no different. Some southern Democrats bolted the Party to support the “Dixiecrat” candidate, South Carolina Governor J. Strom Thurmond. Henry Wallace challenged Truman from the left as the Progressive Party candidate. Two of Franklin

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Roosevelt’s sons, Elliott and Franklin Jr., tried to draft General Eisenhower to run for the Democratic nomination. Some liberals backed Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas. It began to look as if Truman’s Republican challenger, Thomas Dewey, was a sure-fire winner.

Joseph and Stewart Alsop later characterized their attitude toward Truman during this period as “patronizing,” but they believed that the way the President had chosen to campaign undignified. “He was campaigning for re-election as a county Sheriff in the Ozarks might campaign.” They believed Truman and his advisors were sincere when they claimed to have “convinced themselves, as threatened politicians so often can, that the victory of their opponents will inevitably usher in a total triumph of reaction and perhaps of Fascism.” Truman was “fighting for re-election on a sort of no-holds-barred system, without any of those claims to the grand style which he used to try to make.”

Lippmann was characteristically disappointed with his choices in the presidential races. According to Lippmann biographer Ronald Steel, the senior pundit surveyed Republican politics in 1948 and found “a coy Eisenhower95, an inflexible Taft, a grinning Stassen, a smug Dewey, and a pompous Vandenberg.” He chose to back the pompous Vandenberg, even though he considered Vandenberg to be “a vain and vacuous windbag.” Like most commentators, Lippmann never believed that Truman would win. With all the missteps and rhetorical slips, along with his perception that Truman lacked the strategic vision for high office, Lippmann had long ago concluded long ago that Truman did “not know how to be president…does not know how to conduct foreign relations or how to be Commander-in-Chief.” After it became clear that Dewey would be the Republican nominee, Lippmann worked behind the scenes for him, drafting

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95 Lippmann liked Eisenhower, but the General still refused to run.
a foreign policy speech for him and maintaining a close relationship with Dewey aide McGeorge Bundy.\footnote{Ibid.}

His hostility to Truman had its limits though, and with his advice came a certain degree of responsibility. On one occasion, Lippmann wrote John Foster Dulles, Dewey’s foreign policy adviser, to complain about Dewey’s charges of a “sell-out at Yalta” by nameless “traitors.” He told Dulles that Dewey should be running against Truman, not the ghost of FDR, and at any rate, the charges out of the Dewey camp were “a perversion of historical truth.”\footnote{Ibid., 456.}

Truman did better among the rank and file members of the press. The President had his reservations about reporters, but as the campaign pushed on, a certain sense of camaraderie developed between Truman and the press on his train. The same reporters who had questioned his ability to govern in the spring found that they supported him by the November election. They did not think he would win, but many of them voted for him, and this support gave Truman another edge over Dewey. Some publishers, notably Colonel Robert McCormick of the conservative \textit{Chicago Tribune}, remained openly hostile to Truman throughout the campaign (and after), but Truman’s good relationship with the working press meant that as a candidate, the President would still have favorable press coverage.

Most of the big columnists were already on record. They had influenced millions of their readers and driven Truman’s early poll numbers down.\footnote{Karabell, \textit{The Last Campaign: How Harry Truman Won the 1948 Election}, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000), 92-93. Karabell understood that: “It was difficult then and it is impossible in hindsight to gauge the effect of the columnists and the journalists on public opinion. We do not know if person X, leaning toward Truman, woke up one day, read Lippmann, and then decided to vote for Dewey. […] But we can surmise that the tone of the coverage influenced the public climate and, in the spring of 1948, the public climate as measured by polls showed Truman plummeting.” Ibid., 93.} But Truman outmaneuvered both his critics and his political opponents. His victory did not fall from the sky. It was the result of hard
work and shrewd political calculations. He attacked his opponents with reckless abandon and
played to the fears and prejudices of his audiences. Each of the challengers allowed Truman to
hold the center in a different way. He could attack Wallace for accepting help from
Communists. Thurmond was a reactionary. Dewey belonged to the party of Hoover. Truman’s
campaign strategy was not for the faint of heart, but it worked, and it played to his strengths.

Truman could come out fighting. He loved small-town America, and the campaign trail
gave him a chance to express that love. People ate up his campaign rhetoric of “democracy”
versus the “special interests.” His speeches took on elements of a Jacksonian civics lesson: “You
are the government. Practical politics is government. Government starts from the grass roots.”
“I think the government belongs to you and me as private citizens.” William Jennings Bryan
would have been proud of his disciple. Truman told his audiences: “I’m calling this trip a
crusade. It’s a crusade of the people against the special interests, and if you back me up we’re
going to win….” Some in his audiences might have found such pronouncements delusional, but
they enjoyed it.

Crude as his style was, Truman still understood how to fire up crowds. He offered a
plain-spoken alternative to his audiences: “The basic issue of this campaign is as simple as can
be: it’s the special interests against the people.” He knew when to push and when to pull. “In
1946, you know, two-thirds of you stayed home and didn’t vote. You wanted a change. Well,
you got it. You got the change. You got just exactly what you deserved.” The problems of the
past year and a half had their origin in the Republican Congress, and it was time to send a
message. “Now use your judgment. Keep the people in control of the government…. It was
patriotic to keep the big money men out of power, but it was also simple self-interest. “I not
only want you to vote for me but I want you to vote for yourselves, and if you vote for yourselves, you’ll vote for the Democratic ticket…”\textsuperscript{100}

Truman gave that Congress all the abuse it could shoulder and then some. Truman told audiences that the initials \textit{GOP} stood for “Gluttons of Privilege.” In response to Dewey’s aloof campaign style, Truman sometimes substituted the acronym “Grand Old Platitudes.” He ran against the memory of Herbert Hoover, warning that Republicans wanted “two families in every garage.” In one folksy homily after another, Truman warned of the different kinds of doom Republican leadership would bring upon good and decent Americans:

\begin{quote}
You remember the Hoover cart… the remains of the old tin lizzie being pulled by a mule, because you couldn’t afford to buy a new car, you couldn’t afford to buy gas for the old one. You remember. First you had the Hoovercrats, and then you had the Hoover carts. One always follows the other. Bear that in mind now, carefully. By the way, I asked the Department of Agriculture at Washington about the Hoover cart. They said it is the only automobile in the world that eats oats.\textsuperscript{101}
\end{quote}

In reality, the Republican controlled Eightieth Congress was not all that bad, nor was it the most partisan in all of American history. The Republicans did not back anything smacking of the New Deal, but this was hardly unexpected. The Democrat-controlled congresses were hardly more progressive on domestic issues than the Republicans. Further, the Republicans had been remarkably supportive in foreign affairs. They backed both the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan. Many Republicans had backed the Armed Forces Unification Act that created the new Department of Defense. They supported the Selective Service Act. These were not insignificant pieces of legislation. Later, when Truman was in a more charitable mood, he admitted privately that the Eightieth Congress had not been all that bad.\textsuperscript{102}

\begin{flushright}\textsuperscript{100} McCullough, \textit{Truman}, 662-663. \\
\textsuperscript{101} Ferrell, \textit{Harry S. Truman: A Life}, 275-276. \\
\textsuperscript{102} Ibid.\end{flushright}
Truman’s rhetoric reached its most fevered pitch at a campaign stop in Chicago on October 25th. He was speaking to a raucous crowd of 23,000. Their response moved Truman and he did not disappoint them. He began by reminding his audience of the contributions of the late Franklin Roosevelt. Roosevelt had led America through the Depression and the World War. Roosevelt had seen the threat that the Nazis posed to the American way of life. Americans now faced a new threat, and it did not come from Communism at home or from foreign powers abroad.

Truman told his audience that the biggest threat to the long term peace and security of the United States came from the Republican Party. “The real danger to our democracy does not come… from those extremes. It comes mainly from the powerful reactionary forces which are silently undermining our democratic institutions….“ He continued: “If the antidemocratic forces in this country continue to work unchecked, this Nation could awake in a few years from now to find that the Bill of Rights had become a scrap of paper.” If his audience had missed his point, he now made it clear. The forces were “working through the Republican Party….” The Republicans wanted inflation and economic chaos so that they could concentrate wealth and power in the hands of few wealthy plutocrats with plans to turn America into a fascist state.

Truman outlined how they would do it:

“When a few men get control of the economy of a nation, they find a front man to run the country for them. Before Hitler came to power, control over the German economy had passed into the hands of a small group of rich manufacturers, bankers and landowners. These men decided that Germany had to have a tough, ruthless dictator who would play their game and crush the strong German labor unions. So they put money and influence behind Adolf Hitler. We know the rest of the story. We also know that in Italy, in the 1920s, powerful Italian businessmen backed Mussolini, and that in the 1930s, Japanese financiers helped Tojo’s military clique take over Japan.”
The Republicans were trying to set things up in the United States. The “great corporations have been expanding their power steadily….” The Republicans in Congress had been selling out the American people. “The lobbies which work for big business found that they could get what their bosses wanted from the Republican leaders of the 80th Congress.” He detailed their abuses and concluded: “That’s what the Republican candidate calls delivering for the future. Is that the kind of future you want?” It was quite a performance.

Some of the motivation was genuine. Truman believed in his legislative programs and decisions. He was motivated by a love of democracy. As the crowd cheered him on, perhaps some part of Truman believed that his opponents were enemies of democracy. Certainly many mainstream liberals in 1948 held similar opinions. The central ideas, if not the emotion, had some element of calculation as well. Truman’s speech could inspire some of fascism’s recent victims, such as Eastern-European Catholics and Jews, to support the Democratic ticket. Certainly it did not hurt to remind these core Democratic constituencies which party had led them out of the darkness of the last war. Was it so much to ask that they show up on election day? Thurmond and Wallace had used similar rhetoric, but they did not have the responsibilities of statesmanship. Truman had compared Dewey to Hitler and the Republican Party to Fascists, all engaged in an elaborate conspiracy to destroy America. He had gone beyond the traditional rhetoric of populism. Truman was beyond advocating for the American working classes. Truman had taken off the gloves and crossed every line. Republicans would never forget it. During Truman’s second term they would have their revenge, but as the campaign continued, so did Truman’s charges.104

104 Ibid., 248.
Arthur Krock made a tactical critique of Truman’s strategy. He worried about the divisions that Truman created with such campaign rhetoric. Truman’s tactic of blaming Congress “for everything which, on the one hand, he disapproves and, on the other, he thinks many people disapprove” ignored the many Republicans who had supported the Administration and who deeply resented the attacks. Further, Krock reported that many Democrats, “whom the administration politicians have been trying to ‘harmonize’ for the purposes of Philadelphia, are being more successfully ‘deharmonized’ by the President.”

Beyond these long-term considerations, Krock thought Truman’s antics would be the final, humiliating, prelude to his own defeat. Truman would go into his party’s convention as an unwanted nominee and perceived sure-loser who had offended “large and influential Democratic organizations.” The “die-hards” in the party had demonstrated their desperation in their attempt to recruit General Eisenhower as a replacement for Truman, which had only resulted in dimming Democratic chances further. Krock doubted that these groups were motivated by their idealism. They returned to the fold:

“because they live by patronage and power. But it is unlikely that they regret the harm they have done to the prestige of the President of the United States. It is only the damage they have inflicted on Mr. Truman as the party candidate that disturbs them because, if he loses, they lose also.”

But Truman had settled on a tone and strategy that was “hard and arduous and bitter in so far as Truman can make it so.” For the most part, Truman’s strategy “pivoted on attacking the Republican Party as the vassal of a selfish moneyed interest.…”

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James Reston’s critique was more personal. He lamented: “As President, he is supposed to be the symbol of dignity, yet he has elevated the wisecrack into a policy.” Truman was not waging the campaign like the incumbent, and Reston hardly recognized the humble man who had asked reporters to pray for him when Franklin Roosevelt died. Now there was nothing humble about Truman, who was “confidently scolding everybody in sight; the Republicans, the newspapers, the pollsters, and even the non-voting Democrats.” Reston thought that perhaps Truman’s political aides might have simply figured they had nothing to lose and decided to let Truman be Truman in front of the world. Or, Reston guessed, they placed a tremendous faith on the Roosevelt legacy to win another election.\(^{109}\)

Marquis Childs concurred with Reston even as he mocked Truman for “making foolish gibes about riding Congress with a pair of spurs that someone presented to him.” If Truman wanted to find a reason for legislative deadlock, Childs believed he should look in the mirror. According to Childs, the members of the much-maligned Congress would sometimes go for months without seeing the President. Even Democrats complained of Presidential indifference. “Often they learned of impending decisions from Republicans.” Congress then became indifferent to the President, and the indifference turned to “almost hostility.”\(^{110}\)

The Alsops returned to their favorite Truman theme and reported that even the President’s “oldest and closest friends” believed Truman to be “overburdened by the responsibilities of the Presidency.” They explained that the President had hated his tasks at first,


but now he was clinging to his office out of desperation. That the campaign had merely brought out the essence of the President— that “he is ‘being Truman now in the sense that he is fighting for re-election on a sort of no-holds barred system” meant that he no longer had to attempt any level of respectability. They feared that Truman’s behavior would lead to “an all-out political free-for-all in the United States.”

Truman’s behavior appalled Walter Lippmann. Of course, Lippmann could not be bothered to follow report from the campaign trail. He remained in his Washington home, bemoaning Truman’s efforts to “talk his way to victory.” Lippmann was hardly an objective observer. He was an informal and clandestine foreign policy guru for Dewey. Lippmann thought Truman spent far too much time campaigning. The world needed a full-time leader, and Truman had been away from his duties for sixteen days, at one stretch. The government’s ability to function without Truman demonstrated the President’s uselessness. His contempt was palpable.

Truman’s later campaign stops were hardly less inflammatory, but Dewey continued to hold his tongue. In Boston, Truman told the Irish that the Communists supported the Republicans. In New York, more than a million people cheered Truman on at various venues, including a packed and enthusiastic rally at Madison Square Garden. Dewey would aggressively charge the Democrats with bad policy. He even went so far as to write a response to Truman’s Chicago comments, but he scrapped it. The Republican challenger did not think anything would be gained by a reply to Truman’s charges. Almost every political commentator considered Truman’s defeat in the November election to be a foregone conclusion.

112 Ibid., 682.
113 Karabell, The Last Campaign, 249.
Reporters struggled to reconcile what they saw with their eyes (large, favorable crowds) with what they knew to be Truman’s impending doom. Richard Strout, writing for the *New Republic*, explained: “There is an agreeable warmheartedness and simplicity about Truman that is genuine.” But Strout dismissed the crowd reaction as a bad gauge of public opinion. “Nevertheless, reporters keep pinching themselves at the size of the crowds and their cordial response.”\(^{114}\) *Time* magazine compared Truman’s success to that of “vaudeville act.” They simply wanted to see a president, especially an entertaining one.\(^{115}\) The reporters following Dewey had a different problem altogether. They felt their man was a sure-winner, and the experience of following the governor bored them to tears. Joseph Alsop called Dewey “over-rehearsed” and “chilling.”\(^{116}\)

The pundits lined up to predict Truman’s defeat. *Newsweek* polled fifty of the most influential newspapermen, including Lippmann, Krock, and Reston, and the vote was unanimous. Dewey would win in a walk.\(^{117}\) Truman saw the *Newsweek* report and told his aide, Clark Clifford, “Don’t worry about that poll, Clark. I know every one of those fifty fellows, and not one of them has enough sense to pound sand into a rathole.”\(^{118}\) *The New York Times* added up their predictions and concluded that Dewey would take the election with 345 electoral votes. *The Wall Street Journal* described what the Dewey government would do upon assuming office. The major newsweeklies predicted a Dewey victory. *Life* magazine referred to Dewey as “the next president.” Lippmann outlined the challenges Dewey would face. The Alsop Brothers wondered if Truman should resign after the election in order to avoid a long, lame-duck period.

\(^{114}\) McCullough, *Truman*, 664.
\(^{115}\) Ibid., 682.
\(^{116}\) Ibid., 674.
\(^{118}\) Harry Truman, quoted in Clark Clifford, *Counsel to the President*, 235.
before Dewey could take office.\textsuperscript{119} When Clark Clifford told Arthur Krock that a Truman victory was possible, Krock laughed at him.\textsuperscript{120} George Gallup had long since given up on a Truman comeback and stopped polling.

Krock explained Truman’s impending political doom in his column as a result of the President’s own incompetence, the divisions within the Democratic Party, the difficulties of the postwar transition, and the feeling among the American people that the government needed to change hands. But Krock made an allowance for a possible Truman victory as well: “On the other hand, if the event shows that Mr. Truman has surmounted the heavy odds against him he did not create and also those of his own creation, he will take rank as the miracle man in the history of American politics…”\textsuperscript{121} Truman won.

It made Truman’s victory that much sweeter, and the pundits had to scramble to explain how they could have been so wrong. Lippmann was the most stubborn. He explained Truman’s win as the last hurrah of Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal, an assessment later historians would find compelling, but he would not credit Truman personally.\textsuperscript{122} George Gallup had not opposed Truman out of any ideological concerns. He was personally conservative, but his only beliefs seemed to be tied to the efficacy of polling.\textsuperscript{123} When his results proved incorrect, he wanted another poll “to find out just what happened.”\textsuperscript{124} The Roper organization found that Americans believed Dewey “simply was not a very likeable as a person.” He had a “lack of a clear stand on a number of issues.” Truman, by contrast, did have clear stands on the issues, but

\textsuperscript{119} McCullough, \textit{Truman}, 703-704.
\textsuperscript{120} Clifford, \textit{Counsel to the President}, 236.
\textsuperscript{122} McCullough, \textit{Truman}, 715.
\textsuperscript{123} Karabell, \textit{The Last Campaign}, 93.
\textsuperscript{124} Ibid., 255.
it was the hot demagoguery that made the difference.\textsuperscript{125} That was the margin of victory and what motivated the undecided voters to get to the polls on Election Day.

Krock’s column after the election soft-pedaled the more unsavory aspects of Truman’s campaign and concentrated on explaining the victory, and the shock of it all. All of the “trained observers” and politicians from both parties had been wrong— and Truman was right. The President had also waged his campaign surrounded by only a very few “devoted persons” who believed he could win. Krock’s take on Truman’s campaign rhetoric went:

The President assailed the Republicans as a party, and their majority in the Eightieth Congress in terms of unusual harshness, and he spoke scornfully of his opponent’s unwillingness to debate with him on specific charges. But only once did Mr. Truman indulge in personalities of a disagreeable character, and that was when he said that there was always a “front man” for groups in an evil conspiracy against the people and, by using Hitler and the Fuehrer’s original backers for his comparison, deliberately left the inference that this history was repeating itself with Mr. Dewey.\textsuperscript{126}

Upon further reflection, Krock’s interpretation softened yet again. Truman had not won because he managed to scare the right constituent groups. “The more one looks back on the circumstances of his nomination and the course of his campaign, the more Mr. Truman is established as a master politician and analyst of the people of the United States.”\textsuperscript{127} He had been able to connect with the average American in a way that Dewey never could. The President had won a “truly national victory for himself and for his party on the issues as he expounded them to the people.”\textsuperscript{128}

Reston thought that the columnists needed to get down to the important business of understanding how the punditry could have been so wrong about Truman. “For that failure is almost as spectacular as the President’s victory, and the quicker we admit it the better off we’ll be.” He concluded that reporters had focused too much attention on “the antics of Messrs. Wallace and Thurmond” and forgotten the awesome and awe-inspiring power of the Roosevelt legacy. “Consequently we were wrong, not only on the election, but, what’s worse, on the whole political direction of our time.” Now that Truman had his victory, Reston believed it to be time to deal with some of the problems that had piled up while the President campaigned. “While he has been off ‘giving the Republicans hell,’ the kids at home have been swinging on the chandeliers, the dishes have been piling up in the sink, and the neighbors have been chucking brickbats on the front porch.”

The reaction with the greater influence on Truman’s reputation was the assertion that Truman had won because of his plucky courage. Drew Pearson followed this line. The election was an affirmation of democracy over punditry, and the pundits who had been sympathetic to Truman’s programs now admired their executive advocate. The American people knew they loved the New Deal, and no pollster could convince them otherwise. Richard Strout, writing in *The New Republic*, called it “a glowing and wonderful sense that the American people […] had picked the rather unlikely but courageous figure of Truman to carry on its banner.” It was a message waiting for its willing audience. New Deal partisans had their populist champion,

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131 McCullough, *Truman*, 715.
132 Ibid.
a commoner who managed to hold the center, farm interests, and the working class in a winning coalition.

Much of the mainstream press reacted with amusement. The failure of so many meant that the blame could not be directed. Who besides Truman himself could criticize the press when everyone seemed to have guessed wrong? The Alsop brothers responded with their characteristic good humor. Their election day column had actually announced Dewey’s cabinet. The brothers offered to eat crow, asking only that theirs be fricasseed.133 The editors of Life magazine admitted to supporting Dewey but blamed their problems of prediction on a cycle of boredom and simple snobbery. The issues and candidates bored the pundits. This boredom convinced the pollsters to give up their work. The polls made the reporters lazy. Reporters underestimated Truman because of his backwardness. Life magazine wished Truman well.134

In the wake of the election, Truman had some time to actually enjoy being the president. His approval rating held steady for a few months. His poll numbers surged after the election. In January of 1949, Truman’s approval rating was higher than it had been since November of 1945. Almost 70 percent of Americans supported Truman. He looked like the smartest man in America.

As 1949 opened the Washington Post predicted that the “Truman Miracle” represented the “biggest single shift in legislative direction since Franklin Roosevelt faced the Seventy-third Congress in 1933.” Truman would not have as wide a majority as Roosevelt did in ’33, but it would be manageable. Truman’s program was “more New Deal than Mr. Roosevelt’s original.” The new Congress would cooperate more than “the dying Eightieth Congress.” Many of the Democrats who won in 1948 were “mighty

surprised” to be there, and owed their victories to the “Truman Miracle.” Many of the conservatives in both parties were “still awed at the ‘miracle’ and just a trifle scared.” The Dixicrats were so “anxious to get back into their party’s good graces” that they would be “willing to compromise on anything short of civil rights. Some are even talking compromise on that.” The Post predicted that the honeymoon would last “longer than you think.” It was a “New Deal Resurrection.”

Arthur Krock at the New York Times sounded a similar theme and wrote that Truman was in a good position to get his legislative program through Congress.

Publicly, Drew Pearson recounted how “Mr. Republican,” Senator Robert Taft of Ohio sent the President a warm note of congratulations. Truman winked at his audience and said: “You know, I don’t think that fellow wanted Dewey to win, after all.”

Privately, he groused at Truman’s behavior during the inaugural:

His swearing-in lacked dignity and good taste. He was twenty minutes late appearing on the rostrum, then stood and smirked while waiting for various stage props to be brought in. […] In a way, his swearing-in ceremony was like Truman’s administration in the past and a portent of what it will be in the future—nice, mediocre, and bungling. Roosevelt, despite the fact that he couldn’t walk, appeared with great dignity, took the oath of office, gave his speech, and left. There were not waits, no false moves, no bad timing.

George Gallup reported that Truman’s efforts to paint Republicans as “serving the interests of business owners and professional people” had been successful. Stewart Alsop sounded the only sour note. Truman was still Truman, after all, and still prone to

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135 Robert C. Albright, “’Truman Miracle’ Will Make Its Mark on the 81st,” Washington Post, 2 January, 1949, 1B.
137 Drew Pearson, “Truman Doubts Taft is Weeping,” Washington Post, 2 January 1949, 5B.
138 Drew Pearson, Diaries, 13.
139 George Gallup, “Democratic Tide Running Strong,” Washington Post, 2 January 1949, 5B.
make impulsive remarks regarding foreign affairs. If George Marshall was planning to leave his post as Secretary of State and Truman intended to “play a decisive role in shaping American policy,” he should be very careful. After all, foreign policy “is very serious business, in which there is no room for impulsive remarks, especially remarks based on a complete misunderstanding of the real sources of Soviet conduct.”

In spite of Truman’s great victory, he would face a more hostile and desperate Republican Party and a punditry convinced that Truman won on the strength of Roosevelt’s coattails and some shuck-and-jive hucksterism. Truman had managed to pull his administration out of the political graveyard and stun politicos, but he would have to answer for his conduct on the campaign trail. Truman had his victory, but he had won it dirty. For pundits, Truman had confirmed most of what they thought they already knew—Truman was still the Missouri mule—but the President’s strategy had simply worked better than anyone imagined. Few elite journalists examined their hardened opinions of Truman beyond some initial head-scratching. The Republicans were in no mood to be accommodating. They had not won a presidential election for two decades. During the next four years, the gloves would come off and no holds would be barred. If Truman did master the inevitable crises to come, he would have a tough term.

\[140\] Stewart Alsop, “Did Truman Read Too Hastily?,” *Washington Post*, 2 January 1949, 5B. Alsop repeated the charge that as long as Marshall was there “Truman’s role in the making of foreign policy has been with few exceptions confined to an almost automatic approval of what his Secretary of State was doing.” Stewart Alsop, *Washington Post*, 10 January 1949, 7.
Chapter 3

Exit Limping

I am still inclined to think that Harry Truman is an overrated President, although he had more guts, more sheer, naked guts, than any leader the United States has had during this century, barring, perhaps, Theodore Roosevelt. However, Truman often was a dreadful picker of people; and when he was liberated from the ghosts of the past by being reelected in 1948, he became a dreadful picker of policies, as he showed during the first part of his second administration.¹

--Joseph Alsop

Harry Truman’s public approval rating approached the seventy percent mark in January of 1949. His stunning election victory seemed to remind everyone about what they liked about Harry Truman. Yet, turmoil filled Truman’s second term, and Truman’s approval ratings suffered as new crises appeared and Truman did not appear up to the job. Truman’s reputation suffered as pundits battered his record. With each setback, political journalists and opinion-makers had to explain Truman’s failures and unpopularity, and they returned to familiar themes. Just as his new term began, they denounced Truman’s 1949 State of the Union address as unrealistic. Old charges of cronyism reappeared as petty corruption uncovered in 1949 again demonstrated Truman to be too loyal to his friends, as did the Hiss case as it unfolded in 1949-50. The charges of Truman’s political enemies began to stick. When the Republicans announced their strategy for the elections of 1950, it was almost too easy. They could attack Truman for corruption, ineptitude,

¹ Joseph Alsop, I’ve Seen the Best of It: Memoirs, 267. For example, Alsop called Louis Johnson, Truman’s choice to succeed James Forrestal as Secretary of Defense, “a practiced liar, without a scruple I was able to discover.” Alsop believed Johnson was using his position to launch himself into the presidency. Ibid., 301-303. In the introduction to The Reporter’s Trade, the Alsops describe how they “were on friendly terms with …Johnson when he became Secretary of Defense—to the extent, at least, one can be on friendly terms with a man one neither likes nor trusts.” The Alsops ended their friendship with Johnson, “since the price of staying friends with him was failing to report what he was doing to the defense of the United States.” Joseph and Stewart Alsop, The Reporter’s Trade, 14.
and for being soft on Communism. Although the pundits, to a man, condemned McCarthy, the charges still stung. After the outbreak of the Korean War, the public and the pundits backed Truman’s tough stand but soon became disillusioned with the President’s wartime leadership as the war settled into a stalemate. After MacArthur forced Truman to remove him for insubordination, the public actually sided with rebellious general. The pundits ultimately sided with Truman, but blamed the President for his incompetence in letting the matter get as far as it did. As the 1952 election season approached and Eisenhower appeared to be a viable option, many Americans, including the opinion-makers, were tired of Truman. For most of Truman’s last two years in office, less than one-third of Americans approved of his performance. The pundits and the public alike were happy to see Truman leave in 1953.

The honeymoon period after Truman’s election victory ended in the wake of the 1949 State of the Union message. In some cases, it took the pundits a few days to digest the meaning and content of Truman’s call for a broad range of reforms. The President asked for full employment legislation, a higher minimum wage, programs to help struggling farmers, an extension of Social Security, national health insurance, federal aid to education, more federal housing programs, and various antidiscrimination programs. He was asking for everything he had previously suggested and more.

Stewart Alsop claimed to be shocked by the content of Truman’s annual message. Taken with the election results, he concluded that the United States had “taken a sudden, wholly unanticipated, and decisive turn to the left,” and Alsop was not happy about it. Even Roosevelt, Alsop argued, had not gone so far to advance a blueprint for social

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democracy that would lead inevitably to the social welfare state. To Alsop, it looked as though Truman had stretched the logic of the New Deal to crude absurdity. “The basic premise behind every word the President spoke was simply that in every field affecting the public welfare, from health and housing and prices to the production of steel, the state must assume the ultimate responsibility.” Alsop warned his readers that under Truman America would get “at least a watered-down version of the ‘social welfare state.’”[^3] If Americans had expected a practically minded Missourian to rein in the excesses of the New Deal, they would be disappointed by Truman’s agenda.

But Alsop was not just concerned about Truman’s direction in domestic policy. He remained convinced that Truman had never fully grasped the realities of the Cold War. When Dean Acheson took over the post of Secretary of State for the retiring George Marshall, Alsop was relieved. He had liked Marshall, but he was worried that Truman would appoint someone unequal to the task. Acheson, though, fit the bill. Alsop praised Acheson’s “deep and hard-earned understanding of the real nature of the conflict between the Soviet Union and the western world.” It was good to have so trustworthy an advisor close to an impetuous Truman. “The President occasionally seems tempted to believe that he can resolve the conflict by pulling a rabbit out of his hat.”[^4] Incapable of thinking in terms of complex, long-range planning, Truman needed to allow able aides to make and execute policy.

The other columnists were similarly pleased with Truman’s selection of Acheson. Drew Pearson admired Acheson’s political skill but predicted that he might face some

trouble because of his friendship with accused spy Alger Hiss.\textsuperscript{5} Pearson took great care to remind his readers: “No one who knows Acheson […] would even remotely suspect him of any toleration of or connection with subversive influences.”\textsuperscript{6} James Reston worried about the difficulties Acheson would face when reorganizing the State Department, but did not think Acheson’s relationship with Hiss would prevent his confirmation.\textsuperscript{7}

Arthur Krock praised Acheson’s “courage” and repeated Senator Vandenberg’s compliment of his “rugged character.” Acheson was not without flaws, of course, and Krock wrote that many of Acheson’s good qualities were mixed blessings. Krock noted that Acheson could be “scornful and intolerant toward those who disagree with him or whose minds are inferior to his powerful and clear one.” He would often doubt the motives of his opponents while insisting on the purity of his own. Further, he was prone to candor, perhaps not in the crude manner of his Commander-in-Chief, but with occasionally equally self-destructive results.\textsuperscript{8} Later, Krock shrewdly revised his estimate of Acheson, noting that Acheson had always deferred to Truman on the larger issues. In return for this respect, Acheson received a “free hand” in the “formalization and unhampered conduct of foreign policy.”\textsuperscript{9}

Lippmann was also optimistic about Acheson’s selection, but he lamented the loss of George Marshall. He was convinced that Marshall’s ability to conduct bipartisan

\textsuperscript{5} Pearson was not exactly correct on this point. Acheson was closer with Alger’s brother Donald.
foreign policy was both unique and destined to be short-lived. Because Americans held Marshall in such high regard, he was “not directly accountable to the President.” The situation was a temporary, indispensable, but artificial expedient. The normally contentious politics of foreign policy would return to normal because of the divisive nature of the 1948 election. If the President wished to maintain the level of bipartisanship Marshall had achieved, Truman and Acheson would have to work with men of goodwill on the other side of the aisle. Lippman’s suggestion that Truman should consult Republicans “Vandenberg, Taft, Lodge, and Dulles” or other “men whose public spirit is beyond argument” indicated just how little faith Lippmann had in Truman. If Truman could put his own partisanship aside, Lippmann suggested, the loss of Marshall need not have dire consequences. Lippmann overestimated Republicans’ willingness to overlook Truman’s tactics in the election campaign.

During his confirmation hearing, Acheson told the Senators that he remained friends with Alger Hiss. It was a big enough story to make the front pages, but as Reston predicted, it did not kill his nomination. The Senate Foreign Relations Committee approved his nomination unanimously after he denounced Communism as an “evil and a danger.” Nevertheless, the stage was in the process of being set. The names Alger Hiss and Dean Acheson began to appear too often in the same news stories.

While the public linking of the names of Acheson and Hiss did not bode well, Arthur Krock’s description of the real and authentic Harry Truman—the man who had

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12 Ferdinand Kuhn, Jr., “Acheson Gets Unanimous Approval of Senate Unit,” Washington Post, 15 January 1949, 1A.
been revealed by the election victory—also indicated trouble might be ahead. Americans loved Truman’s fighting spirit, but they also wanted the fighter to be a winner.\textsuperscript{13} Truman was more confident because of his election victory, and although his character had not changed, there was more of it. Truman’s new confidence in his personality presented to the public a side of the President “which his friends knew well already and those who voted for him, if they all did not, should have known.” Truman felt more comfortable being himself. If Americans were shocked, or thought Truman had changed, they had nobody but themselves to blame. Krock clearly believed Truman had learned the wrong lessons in his recent election victory, and he listed them:

1. He is right and all opponents are wrong, spiritually and factually; 2. He can beat any politician or set of politicians at their common trade; 3. He is boss and intends to assert it; 4. The American majority and most men and women of good-will support him down to the item; 5. If his friends are criticized with or without good basis it is a virtue to make a blanket defense of them and keep them in the places to which they are assigned.\textsuperscript{14}

Krock warned that taken together, such traits could lead to disaster. If Truman continued on this path, America would soon find itself led under a “fixed policy” of “government by crony.” Any journalist or politician who dared to challenge or criticize cronyism would meet with the tactics Truman had used so effectively against Dewey and the Republicans in 1948.\textsuperscript{15} Krock’s public criticism of Truman soon went beyond charges of cronyism. His columns increasingly argued that Truman’s Fair Deal was too grandiose,

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
politically unfeasible (due to the conservatism of the President’s own party), too expensive, and too divisive.\textsuperscript{16}

Through the summer of 1949, Truman’s problems continued to mount. A recession and charges of petty corruption hurt the administration. The Hiss case continued to play out on the front pages of the newspapers. Most of the corruption charges centered around Truman’s military aide, Harry Vaughan, and were more smoke than fire. As historian Alonzo Hamby has described the charges: “No one thought that Vaughan was evil or deeply corrupt; he seemed merely morally obtuse, insensitive, and a bit stupid.”\textsuperscript{17} The accusations that Alger Hiss had spied for the Soviet Union convinced still more Americans that the Communist threat was real.

The pundits reacted with various levels of disgust to each of these crises. Drew Pearson accurately predicted that the recession would not get much worse,\textsuperscript{18} but attacked Vaughan throughout 1949.\textsuperscript{19} Joseph Alsop remained unimpressed with Truman’s leadership and took Truman’s incompetence as a given when he made statements such as: “President Truman being what he is, our future now depends upon the management of our affairs by Secretary of State Dean G. Acheson and Secretary of Defense Louis Johnson.”\textsuperscript{20} Arthur Krock wrote of a “settled distrust of the words and methods of the Administration” as the cause of “the growing disposition of Congress to deny or fundamentally revise programs submitted by the President. Members of both parties were suspicious of the Administration. This mistrust of Truman had manifested itself in

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{17} Hamby, \textit{Man of the People}, 501.
\item \textsuperscript{18} Drew Pearson, “5 Depression Shock-Absorbers,” \textit{Washington Post}, 19 June 1949, 5B.
\item \textsuperscript{19} Hamby, \textit{Man of the People}, 502.
\item \textsuperscript{20} Joseph Alsop, “President Truman’s New Pilots,” \textit{Washington Post}, 26 June 1949, 5B.
\end{itemize}
both foreign and domestic affairs, and had been simmering for some time. When
challenged, Truman’s response to domestic subversion seemed inadequate when he
denounced the espionage “hysteria” and suggested that reporters should look into the
situation surrounding the Alien and Sedition Acts in the 1790s.  

Krock described how these petty scandals could hurt Truman politically, even if
Truman himself remained innocent of any charges. First, the pressure was not
necessarily coming only from Congress, which, Krock noted, was hardly a “bower of
purity and good taste.” Instead, Krock claimed that the alleged misdeeds of Truman’s
military aide and close friend Harry Vaughan had offended enough citizens to provoke a
steady stream of constituent mail. Truman’s defense of Vaughan weakened the President
as Congressional denunciations proved a good way for political opportunists (or even
good politicians) to score political points with disgusted voters. Realizing that the
President’s domestic program had stalled with little hope of further movement, Krock’s
assessment of Truman’s political situation in the fall of 1949 was that Truman had been
“checked but not beaten.” Indeed the polling data bore out this assumption as the
majority of Americans approved of Truman’s handling of his job through October of
1949, but his support was slipping fast.

The rest of the year brought further shocks, with each event hurting Truman’s
reputation. The United States detected atmospheric indications that the Soviet Union had

24 Truman’s approval rating was just over fifty percent in September of 1949. By January of 1950,
his approval rating hovered around forty-five percent, and sank another ten percentage points in the spring
detonated a nuclear device. The news became public in September 1949; the next month was the last time Truman’s approval rating would ever rise over fifty percent.\textsuperscript{25} While the Soviets made technical strides, Communism made geopolitical gains. The last series of victories of the Chinese Communists over the Chinese nationalists at the end of 1949 seemed to leave Truman stunned. James Reston at the \textit{New York Times} found the country divided and the administration unwilling to lead.\textsuperscript{26} At the end of the year, Reston reported that the Truman Administration was still unsure about its China policy.\textsuperscript{27} The Alsops were apoplectic after the Soviet nuclear tests in September of 1949, calling the Truman administration’s strategic assumptions before the announcement of the Soviet bomb “moronic nonsense.”\textsuperscript{28} In his memoirs, Joseph Alsop conceded that the columns of that era had been “too shrill,” even if all of official Washington shared their horror.\textsuperscript{29}

James Reston described the mood among interested observers as “good riddance” to the year 1949. “It was an expensive, tumultuous year, and everybody [including Truman] was] calling this evening for a ‘new start’ in 1950.” Unfortunately, Reston was not optimistic for 1950. The problems of the previous year did not evaporate with the turning of a calendar page. Reston described Washington officialdom as “weary of well-doing, worried about expenses, baffled by the magnitude and complexities of Oriental

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\item \textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 399.
\item \textsuperscript{27} James Reston, “Truman’s Top Aides Divided On What to Do About China,” \textit{New York Times}, 30 December 1949, 6.
\item \textsuperscript{28} Joseph and Stewart Alsop, \textit{The Reporter’s Trade}, 134.
\item \textsuperscript{29} Joseph Alsop, \textit{I’ve Seen the Best of It}, 302.
\end{itemize}
problems, and bored with the Russians.” The mood called for some kind of a fresh start, but reality only presented decision-makers with the same set of stale facts.\textsuperscript{30}

The rest of the winter was hardly better. A jury convicted Hiss of perjury in January 1950. Sensing that enemies of the Administration would use the conviction to attack Acheson-- whom they still respected-- the Alsop brothers continued to support the Secretary of State as a man of character. When reporters questioned Acheson about Hiss, Acheson offered up a bible verse about forgiveness. The Alsops stepped in to explain Acheson’s biblical reference along with his statement that he would “not turn his back on Alger Hiss.” Acheson, they wrote, should have spoken more plainly, but he showed his character when “he neither bowed to expediency, nor catered to emotions of the moment.” Of course, while defending Hiss, the brothers took a few swipes at the rest of the Truman administration. After all, Acheson was “the ablest and most disinterested member of the President’s official family.” Acheson might be wrong on Hiss, but that should not distract from the quality of his service to the nation. “There are plenty of other targets of attack in the Truman Administration…. Where Acheson is a lonely first-rater, second- and third-raters are thicker in the present Government than commuters in a subway rush.”\textsuperscript{31} Reston likewise defended Acheson, and the embattled Secretary of State thanked him for the favor.\textsuperscript{32} Krock attributed much of the noise surrounding the Hiss case to partisan politics.\textsuperscript{33}

\textsuperscript{32} Stacks, 103.
Drew Pearson tried to figure out, publicly, whether the “mess in Washington” had any conspiratorial overtones. With Hiss and Acheson firmly associated in the public mind, Drew Pearson took the opportunity to explore both men’s connection with Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter. Pearson noted that he had “no reason to love” Frankfurter, who (he claimed) had “berated” him twice in private discussions and “demanded that he be jailed for criticizing certain Supreme Court moves.” Pearson found that the list of people Frankfurter had placed in government was a mixed bag, certainly not grounds for a proper conspiracy.34 While his findings did not directly implicate Truman, his assertions about the tone in Washington reflected poorly on the Chief Executive.

Reston wrote an extended assessment of Acheson’s first year as Secretary of State. It was a favorable appraisal, which painfully contrasted Acheson’s stylish image with that of Truman. He praised Acheson’s ability to “get out of trouble with more style than any citizen in the republic…. It was quite an act of skill to survive the “loss” of China and the Hiss ordeal. “He is an intellectual artist.” Reston praised his “grace,” “zing,” and “polish.” If sometimes Acheson got into trouble by “forgetting to put a bridle on his tongue,” he more than made up for it with hard work, experience, and intellect. “It could have been a better year, but it might easily have been worse.” Reston worried that the big issues, such as the response to the Soviet atomic program, would be left to Truman.35

34 Drew Pearson, “Frankfurter’s Men Make a Mighty List,” Washington Post, 2 February 1950, 15B.
Lippmann continued to berate Truman for failing to come up with a comprehensive strategy to face the Soviets. Truman’s announcement of his decision to build “a so-called hydrogen or superbomb” hit the front pages of the national newspapers on February 1, 1950, and lawmakers fell in line as the cost assessments rolled in. But Lippmann worried that the hydrogen bomb program would only distract from the real issue. The problem with all of the discussion surrounding the hydrogen bomb was “that it masks the gravity of the situation which results from the fact that the Soviet Union broke the atomic monopoly last year.” A hydrogen bomb was no answer. Neither Truman nor congressional leaders had dealt with the problem fully, “and no amount of talk about the extra destructiveness of the hydrogen bomb is a substitute for that reexamination of our global diplomacy and strategy which is now imperative.”

Lippmann outlined the problems, but offered no solutions as he pleaded for new thinking on the subject. He was concerned about the grave situation and worried that public opinion would be “frozen in the ideas that events have made obsolete.” In subsequent columns, Lippmann continued his pleas for a more comprehensive strategy, warning: “No offer of money, no protestations of our good faith, no beating of our breasts about the horrors of the hell-bomb, will be a substitute for a deep effort of mind to think out fresh proposals based on the actual fact that now there are two atomic powers in the world, and no longer only one.”

Truman and Acheson had been working on a more comprehensive strategy for managing the Cold War. In January 1950, the State Department’s Policy Planning Staff,

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36 Alfred Friendly, “Red success with A-Blast Seen as Cause Of Decision” and “Bomb’s Cost Is Seen Well Within Means,” Washington Post, 1 February 1950, 1A.
under the direction of Paul Nitze, began work on what would eventually become known as NSC-68 (National Security Council Document #68). The document called for a long-term political, economic, and military commitment to fight Communism around the world by balancing atomic, conventional, and unconventional (including propaganda) warfare. NSC-68 called for large increases in defense spending, which, along with the Korean War, would take defense spending from $13.5 billion in 1950 to $50 billion in 1952. The politics of national security matters, though, would still break for the Republicans.

Arthur Krock predicted that the Republicans would be granted their wishes in the 1950 midterm elections: Communism would be the central issue in the upcoming campaign and the Democrats would suffer. The public was now associating the “advanced group of ‘liberals’” in the Democratic Party with Communists and fellow-travelers, and he thought it was Truman’s fault. Historical analogies about the Alien and Sedition Acts were not going to satisfy the public. The President needed some kind of victory and could not afford any more scandals. If a jury acquitted Hiss, that would count. Truman’s advisors crossed their fingers and hoped the President would not antagonize the public further. Krock did not count Truman and the Democrats out, but they needed some good news. They did not get it.

In the midst of this fear and uncertainty, on February 4, 1950, American newspapers announced that the British had arrested Klaus Fuchs, a German-born atomic scientist who had worked on the Manhattan project, for giving nuclear secrets to the Soviets. Krock immediately saw the political advantage given to administration critics.

Given the recent Hiss conviction (of perjury on January 22 for lying about his involvement with the Communist Party) and Acheson’s comments on Hiss, the arrest of Fuchs “was certain to stir partisan political groups in their search for offensive and defensive equipment for the Congressional campaign of 1950.” Truman had not made any further comments on Hiss and had stopped saying that the hunt for Communists was nothing more than “hysteria,” but it was uncertain if these prudent efforts at restraint were too little, too late. At first, the Republicans were just hoping Truman was wrong; now they were “beginning to be certain of it.”

After Truman’s exceptionally rough year, Republicans did not need much coaxing to arrive at their campaign strategy for the 1950 elections. They announced their theme on February 7: “liberty against Socialism.” They charged Democrats had a “soft attitude” on Communism. If mainstream Republicans had been simply making wild, unsubstantiated charges with little support from the influential pundits, Truman’s reputation might have still suffered. After all, Communist aggression around the world, the arrest of Fuchs, and the conviction of Hiss all seemed to indicate that Truman needed a better strategy to win the Cold War. But Truman had to face political commentators as critical of him as the political opposition.

The columns of the Alsop brothers continued to feed the perception that Truman was not aggressive enough in the Cold War, sounding the alarm that the Soviets’ timetable for aggressive action in Europe had entered a “new phase.” They warned that the Soviets were beginning to pick off “exposed salients” even as they kept their goal of “attacking the main positions.” They compared Stalin’s actions to those of Hitler on the

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eve of World War II. Soviet bluster had concealed their efforts. The Western alliance had been able to hold the Soviets in check as long as it held a nuclear monopoly, air superiority, and a stronger industrial base. Those days had passed. Now the Soviets had the “glowing new self-confidence from their revolutionary readjustment of the world power balance.” The Alsops predicted trouble in Indo-China and hoped the Truman administration was up to the task. They were not optimistic, and they blamed Truman specifically and directly.41

Two days after the Republicans announced their campaign strategy, on February 9, 1950 Senator Joseph McCarthy gave a speech in Wheeling, West Virginia, alleging Communist infiltration of the American government. The story of the speech took a while to percolate through the news filters. While McCarthy attacked domestic subversion, the pundits continued to press for action, or a plan at least, to deal with the Soviets. Walter Lippmann snidely referred to “Mr. T.,” and wrote that he hoped Truman did not think that merely building a hydrogen bomb did not constitute a sufficient answer to the Soviet challenge. Truman did not have to just “make the bomb;” he had “to think about it also.”42

The Alsops heaped abuse on Truman’s Secretary of Defense Louis Johnson, charging him with lying about the state of America’s national defense. Truman and Johnson had reduced military spending for fiscal year 1951. In the words of Alsop biographer Robert Merry: “The Alsops declared war on the Truman defense policies and set out to prove that the country was in peril.”43 Along with many other pundits, the

Alsops had long been worried about cuts in defense spending, but after deciding that U.S.-Soviet relations had entered a new phase, Alsopian furor reached epic proportions. Johnson claimed defense spending had been cut “without any reduction in preparedness” and security was better with less expense. The Alsops refused to believe it. They concluded that Johnson must be either “too hopelessly incompetent to recognize a cut in ‘combat capabilities’ when he makes it, or he stands convicted of untruth in detail, as charged.” They continued their assault on Johnson in their columns in the days that followed, charging that Johnson’s statements were “open invitations to defeat in future war.” The announcement of a thirty-year alliance between the Soviet Union and Communist China did little to ratchet down the rhetoric of the Alsop brothers. If America continued on its current path, its allies would “feel deserted by us” and “the Western confederation will most probably crumble under Soviet menaces, whenever Soviet rearmament is complete. In that event, we shall experience the equivalent of a gigantic defeat in war, without, perhaps, a shot being fired.” When our allies fell, we would face two alternatives. We could either surrender or turn the “continent into one vast, bristling, wholly militarized, permanently altered armed camp.” And it would all be the fault of Louis Johnson.

In this critical period, Truman granted Arthur Krock an exclusive, extensive and friendly interview. Krock portrayed Truman as “a serene President” with “undiminished confidence in the triumph of humanity’s better nature and the progress of his own efforts

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46 Lippmann was less concerned with the threat posed by the alliance between China and the Soviet Union. He was more critical of the “Chiang Republicans” who had forced Red China into the Soviet camp. Walter Lippmann, “The Moscow Agreements With China,” Washington Post, 20 February 1950, 9.
to achieve abiding peace.” His optimism projected “a luminous and simple quality” which could not be deterred. Thoughts of an imminent war with the Soviet Union could not get him down. He was direct, sharp, clear, and focused. The Soviets were “still suffering from a complex of fear and inferiority where we are concerned.” Krock assured his readers that Truman did not have “a drop of Marxist or Socialist blood.” Truman explained that when he spoke of the “hysteria” of the spy trials and the “red herrings” in the Hiss investigation he was attacking the “methods” of the investigators. Truman said he wanted “only loyal citizens in Government service.” Krock left impressed with Truman’s “honesty and courage.” While only history could judge “whether or not he has the greatness which the times require,” Truman was committed to “the basic system by which this great nation attained its greatness” and to maintaining peace.48

Other reporters resented Krock’s “scoop” of an exclusive interview with the President and they greeted Truman in a surly mood at the next press conference.49 The Alsop brothers were not impressed with Truman’s optimism as it was described in Krock’s interview. Truman had been optimistic before:

The fact is that President Truman came to the White House, as he himself implied in the Krock interview, totally unprepared for his heavy responsibilities as the most powerful leader of the Western World. His equipment consisted largely of an optimism which is part of his nature, a total unawareness of the real forces at work in the world, and courage.50

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Before the 1948 election, said the Alsops, Truman’s able advisors had helped him to put together a good record in foreign and defense policy; his new confidence was undeserved. In sixteen months “the loss of China, the Soviet bomb, the prospect of the hydrogen bomb, to mention only three—have sunk without trace whatever reasons there may once have been for the President’s euphoria.” The Alsops thought the answer was simple: a defense buildup. Truman’s “defense and foreign policy slowdown is visibly leading straight to disaster.” The Alsops hoped that Acheson could shake Truman out of his foggy denial and face the grim situation at hand.51 The friendship between Dean Acheson and the Alsop brothers had cooled considerably (Acheson was no longer granting interviews to them and denied them precious leaks), but they continued to respect his abilities.52

While the Alsops attacked Louis Johnson and Truman’s defense program, Drew Pearson increasingly found himself defending Truman against Senator McCarthy’s attacks. Pearson had not softened on Truman—he simply hated McCarthy. He attacked the Senator’s vague accusations: “You would have to have a card-index system these days to keep up with the accusations of certain Congressmen regarding Communists in the Federal Government.” Pearson noted it was difficult to pin McCarthy down on any particular names, but even the few (four) specific allegations he did make were bogus. Pearson worried that the average voter did not have time to keep an index and might get “confused over harum-scarum Senator Joe McCarthy’s” charges.53

51 Ibid.
As the campaign season approached in the summer of 1950, Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were arrested for spying, but they were not the only ones. Senator McCarthy’s charges were making the front pages regularly. Joseph Alsop warned his readers that the Kremlin had decided 1950 was the critical year of mobilization. The Soviets accelerated production of both atomic bombs and strategic bombers. They were building airfields in eastern Europe and new interceptor aircraft, along with a new air defense system. The Red Army was building its conventional forces with divisions from its satellite nations that would be ready to go by 1953. If the United States neglected these warnings, the Soviets would terrorize the world. “The Western world, feckless, unarmed, divided and demoralized, will then gradually or rapidly collapse into ruin.”

A few days later he continued along those same lines: “We have perhaps three or four years to enjoy ourselves…. ” Rest assured however, that Armageddon was near, since the Soviets would guarantee that, “our world, the free world of the West, will… come to an end.”

Reston tried to be optimistic, or at least he tried to explain the optimism within the Truman administration that led the President to claim that the world situation was better in 1950 than it had been in 1946. Of course, in 1946 Communists had neither seized control of China nor announced possession of nuclear weapons. Reston explained: “Mr. Truman, however, did not say the situation was good. He merely said it was better than early 1946—when the situation was particularly bad.” Of course, the Truman administration had done much to make the world safer since 1946. The Marshall Plan,

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the organization of NATO, and progress in Greece and Turkey were all achievements of the first order. Such words offered only cold comfort to the beleaguered administration that would face its next great challenge very soon.

On June 25, 1950, North Korean forces invaded South Korea. Walter Lippmann wondered how the North could plan and execute its attack without Truman receiving any kind of advance warning. He called for military aid for the South Koreans but noted that military action could do little more than “restore the stalemate of that partitioned country.” Anything more would bring Soviet intervention, and the United States did not want to fight a wider war with the Soviets on the Asian mainland. “If a world war broke out, the American garrisons on those distant beachheads would be lost, or they would have to be supported by an immense operation, exorbitantly expensive in American men and in American ships, which could have no decisive effect on the outcome of the war.”

Some warnings had been around for years. The war had started badly, was probably Truman’s fault, and could not end with any kind of satisfying outcome.

The Alsops had been concerned with Korea for some time, and when war came they considered themselves vindicated. In August 1948, the Alsop brothers had published a column predicting that the United States would leave the American zone of the Korean peninsula, with the effect of “throw[ing] all of Korea into the expanding Soviet Empire.” According to the Alsops, the Truman administration had decided that Korea “was not worth holding.” The American attempts to build up the government of Syngman Rhee were nothing more than “mere gestures, which one suspects are primarily designed to save face.” They warned that the abandonment of Korea would have “an

immediate, disastrous psychological and political effect on all the forces of resistance to
Communist expansion throughout Asia.” They were particularly worried about China.
Their concluding paragraph summed up their criticism of Truman’s Asian policy:

The main objection to the Korea decision is simply that the issue of, whether palsy is our only possible Asiatic policy, is going to bulk large in the coming political campaign. The Republicans, who are so obviously likely to win, at least want to try to do something about Asia. Perhaps they may fail. Perhaps the evacuation of Korea might even be included in a constructive program. But it seems outrageous to take this crucial decision now, in the prevailing atmosphere of dank defeatism, when such decisions are likely to prejudice any future attempt to turn the tide in Asia.58

Truman’s handling of the Cold War would prove to be the undoing of his second term. The pundits explained to their readers all of the ways in which Harry Truman was unwilling or unable to wage the Cold War effectively.

When Truman announced that the goal of the American forces was to drive the North Koreans back to the border, the columnists were generally supportive. Lippmann praised Truman for meeting the challenge “without flinching and fumbling,” as he had expected of him. Truman had exercised real leadership, but Lippmann predicted that difficult days lay ahead.59 Pearson hinted that it was actually MacArthur who had dropped the ball.60 The Alsops supported Truman and wrote that the President had acted in order to convince the Soviets that America “means what it says.” If the United States showed sufficient force, the Soviets might “call off its puppets.” The brothers believed Truman was on a good tack now, but the fighting might prove unpredictable and victory

60 Drew Pearson, “Diplomats Beat Army on Korea,” Washington Post, 29 June 1950, 13B.
was critical. They warned that if South Korea fell, the American commitment to Asia would be “shown to be worthless.” Worse, American failure “would have been initiated by American appeasement.…”

Looking back on the start of the Korean war years later, Joseph Alsop wrote of his reaction to those dramatic days:

When the news did come, Stew and I felt vindicated on a basic level, for we had hammered so long at the evils of Louis Johnson, the need for a strong defense and the danger of a war coming from this state of military disarray, that our professional reputations had begun to be impugned.

The Korean War confirmed their worst worries, but they were pleased that their guesses had proved correct.

For once, Truman seemed to be up to the task. The Alsops reported that Truman’s advisors were performing “well and faithfully” while Truman contributed a “blend of plain guts and homely common sense.” If the President’s qualities were some kind of reflection of the American people, then “Truman seemed to sum up the good things in America.”

Truman’s decisive action in Korea was roundly praised by all of the most influential papers and politicians. In a letter to Bess, Truman wrote: “For a wonder, there’s not a mean remark in them—even the Sops, Pearson and old Mark Sullivan [another columnist] are friendly. Then the Post Dispatch and the Globe-Democrat had friendly editorials. I am sure I am slipping.” The public stood with him as well. In a Roper poll in August 1950, seventy-three percent of Americans agreed with

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62 Joseph Alsop, I’ve Seen the Best of It, 308.
63 Joseph and Stewart Alsop, quoted in McCullough, 781.
64 McCullough, Truman, 781-782.
Truman’s decision to send troops to Korea, even if his job approval rating in the Gallup polls stayed below the fifty percent mark.66

Truman’s trademark stubbornness had some good uses after all. Krock described one dramatic meeting when Truman had told everyone within earshot that he would not “let the United States and its President be pushed around. And he would not let the United Nations be pushed around.” Some elements within the administration had been divided, but Truman’s resolute leadership had “unified Congress and the country.” The President’s leadership was “historic, not only for its promptness and courage, but for the unity it produced out of division.” Krock predicted that Truman’s stand would be admired and studied by “chroniclers…still hundreds of years unborn.” Especially remarkable, given the rancor of the previous years, was Truman’s ability to get the government to “move with unusual smoothness and efficiency.”67

Lippmann assessed the Korean situation and concluded that the larger war with Communism would be tougher than anyone could imagine. He believed that America could not hope to win a war with the Communist nations by manpower or industrial production. In addition, the Korean War had complicated matters by making it impossible to try to divide the Soviets and the Chinese. It was a dark scenario. We had been “denied the use of diplomacy to lighten our burden,” and “the military burden which we must carry is at its maximum.” America had to keep the Soviets out of the war at any cost. Keeping Communist revolutions in Asia under control might be “the grand piano

66 Sternsher, Popular Images of American Presidents, 402.
which broke the camel’s back.”68 Writing to Joseph Alsop in July 1950, Lippmann took stock of the situation in Korea and his faith in the Truman administration and concluded that he was “rather gloomy about the quality of the men in charge of our destiny.”69

While Joseph Alsop flew to Korea in August 1950 to survey the situation firsthand, Stewart warned readers that the Soviets might press their current military advantage worldwide. The only thing keeping them from such adventures was the threat of nuclear war. Where the United States was firmly committed, the Soviets would realize that action was not worth the risk. The danger came from places such as Burma, Iran, Yugoslavia, or Finland, where American commitment was vague and the United States invited attack.70 The Alsops had little faith that Truman could manage the series of crises that the Soviets saw fit to create.

Reston supported Truman, and concerned himself with detailing the President’s difficult situation. Truman’s problem, as Reston put it, was to avoid appeasement without taking on a military liability that would make American forces a tempting target worldwide. Reston did not think the Soviets wanted a wider war, but “Mr. Stalin is the firebug and Mr. Truman is the fireman.” Stalin had the luxury of creating problems while Truman had to find ways to solve them. Reston argued that the President had no other choice. In the worst case, American forces might be forced into an evacuation like that of the British during the Second World War. But if one had to be judged by historical analogy, “Munich was certainly far worse than Dunkerque.”71

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The American public steeled itself for the worst. A Gallup poll found that Americans would favor the use of atomic weapons in a world war by a five-to-one margin. They were prepared for a tough war, but they soon became disillusioned with Truman’s way of fighting it. They disliked the concept of “limited” war. In the summer and fall of 1950 wide majorities (67-70%) of Americans thought the war would be over in less than a year. As the war dragged on, Truman’s approval ratings continued to sink. It would get worse.

On April 11, 1951, Truman fired war hero General Douglas MacArthur. The outspoken general had let it be known that he favored waging an all-out war against China and using Chinese nationalist troops on Formosa against the Communist Chinese forces on the mainland. Rumors had been swirling around MacArthur for a few days before the actual announcement, with most reporters expecting some kind of strong rebuke rather than outright dismissal. Again, the pundits weighed in that Truman had done the right thing, but done it poorly.

Drew Pearson recalled how Truman had “blown hot and cold” with MacArthur. Truman praised MacArthur when it was in his political interest to do so, yet he also seemed on the verge of firing him. “The truth is that the Administration has a bear by the tail and doesn’t know how to let go.” MacArthur was a political opponent who maintained his own publicity representative in the opposition party and had its vocal support. Pearson argued in his column that Truman had avoided firing MacArthur so that

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the popular general could not come home and attack the administration.\footnote{Drew Pearson, “Truman-MacArthur Rivalry Cited,” 10 April 1951, 13B.} In his diary, Pearson wrote that this was yet another miscalculation on Truman’s part. “Of course, MacArthur’s greatest asset is Harry Truman.” When MacArthur came home he received a hero’s welcome. Pearson thought Truman should have fired MacArthur during the worst days of the Korean War, or at least brought him back, then fired him, in order to diffuse the enthusiasm of his return.\footnote{Drew Pearson, \textit{Diaries}, 157}

On the day the story of MacArthur’s dismissal ran on the front page, Stewart Alsop called it “at least conceivable” that Truman would fire the general. Alsop hoped that MacArthur would step down before it became necessary and worried that the firing would destabilize a sensitive situation overseas. Alsop also understood the allure of MacArthur’s position: “It is simple, positive, and understandable—the way to fight a war is to try to win it, by using all available means to defeat your enemy.” The Administration sounded “fuzzy” by contrast. But MacArthur was “unfitted by temperament to command a local war of limited objectives and indefinite duration.” Alsop worried that as the war continued, Truman would have a difficult time maintaining his “fuzzy” position in Asia, while the American people were drawn away from Moscow as “the real source of Communist power” and toward Peiping.\footnote{Stewart Alsop, “MacArthur,” \textit{Washington Post}, 11 April 1951, 11.}

Even the President’s supporters realized Truman had not handled the situation in the best way. Arthur Krock reported that in Washington circles most people thought Truman had allowed the MacArthur problem to fester for far too long. The result was a situation “where the authority of the White House was in jeopardy, and a great soldier
had to be sacrificed.” Krock understood that the general’s actions and comments had been well documented, and Truman could certainly defend himself on moral and legal grounds, but nobody emerged from the controversy unscathed.77 The conventional wisdom around Washington was that Truman had done the right thing, but badly.

The conventional wisdom inside Washington was half accepted outside Washington. In the rest of the country, MacArthur’s firing aroused a firestorm of controversy, complete with the calls from GOP Congressmen for Truman’s impeachment. Politicians talked of the Russian conspiracy that must have been behind the decision. Two thousand longshoremen in New York abandoned their jobs in protest. Protesters burned Truman in effigy. One Texas clergyman reportedly died of a heart attack as he dictated an angry telegram to the White House. State legislatures in Florida, Michigan, Illinois, and California denounced Truman. Republicans received almost 45,000 telegrams condemning Truman within two days.78

Walter Lippmann threw his considerable influence behind Truman, arguing that MacArthur had repeatedly challenged the authority of the Chiefs of Staff, the Secretary of Defense, and the President: “The President and the Secretary have done their duty. They have been faithful to their trust.” Lippmann could not understand why MacArthur had brought the reprimand upon himself. Whatever the motivation, MacArthur had forced Truman’s hand. “He did that by compelling the President to choose publicly between relieving him and submitting to him.”79

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78 McCullough, *Truman*, 843-845.
Stewart Alsop agreed with Lippmann’s assessment, but his column of support contained a series of digs at the President. Of course, Truman had to fire MacArthur: “Either President Truman or General MacArthur had to be fired—and a general cannot fire his Commander in Chief. It is really as simple as that.” But the root of the problem was that Truman was still insecure about his authority, “perhaps in part because he knows that he became President by sheer happenchance.” In Alsop’s view, Truman’s firing of MacArthur was little more than evidence of the President’s pettiness. Alsop believed Truman followed a “rigid code, deriving in part from his days as a machine politician, which demands a relationship of unquestioning political loyalty….?” Truman made the decision alone, but he was supported by Secretary of Defense Marshall and the Pentagon. The Republicans were going to use the firing to abuse Truman, of course, but the main issue would be “whether or not the main American effort, in peace or war, should be diverted from Europe to Asia.” For Alsop, this question answered itself. If we focused on Asia, we would be left with only one ally of dubious value: Chiang Kai-shek.80

Pearson’s columns focused on how the decision was made and executed, although his account contained one of Truman’s digs at the press that made Truman appear to be committing American troops to a bloody war out of a hatred for the press. Pearson quoted Truman as saying: “It’s time to show the MacArthurs, the Time-Life people and the Scripps-Howard newspapers who is running American foreign policy.” The working press followed the lead of the columnists and backed Truman’s decision by a margin of six to one, even if they thought Truman had mishandled the affair.81 Privately, an exasperated Drew Pearson confessed to his diary: “Sometimes I think that this

81 McCullough, Truman, 847.
administration is so dumb it is not worth saving. The tragic thing is that the Republicans at the moment are worse.” Through simple incompetence, Truman was destroying the world Franklin Roosevelt had worked so hard to create. “And if the things Truman stands for fall, the whole liberal era in this country collapses.”

On April 16, 1951, Stewart Alsop could report, “Harry Truman has lost all national authority.” In virtually every area, Americans were tired of Truman. Even if they liked him as a person, they did not trust his leadership. Politicians ran for cover. “Truman’s political influence is now such that politicians who habitually keep both ears to the ground are proceeding on the theory that ‘if Truman’s for it, it’s smart to be against it.’”

The firing of MacArthur aroused Reston’s wit, but he tried to be constructive. MacArthur’s firing had certainly “removed Secretary of Defense George C. Marshall’s complaint about public apathy. Two weeks ago, he was saying that the people had gone asleep, now he is afraid they have gone crazy.” Reston hoped that the move had led to a needed reexamination of strategy and war aims. Further, MacArthur had also been somewhat of a lightning rod. When allies had problems, they had blamed MacArthur, as well as Truman’s inability to control him. Now that criticism was gone, and the allies could redouble their efforts to think through a sensible strategy. Finally, the episode served as a reminder that in the American system, the civilians were in control. “In

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82 Drew Pearson, Diaries, 163.
short,” Reston concluded, “the democratic process may be hard on the nerves, but it is working in spite of all the public excitement.”84

But the Korean War and MacArthur’s firing took a terrible toll on the President. The war changed Truman, and the Alsops noticed: “The grin in which his face was formerly permanently wreathed has disappeared. So, at last, has the euphoric Presidential conviction that ‘everything’s going to be all right.’”85 James Reston placed the blame for the Korean stalemate squarely on the executive branch of government.86 Joe Alsop later described who, on the American side, had to bear the responsibility for allowing the war to happen in the first place:

One could later argue, as Stew and I often did, that the way the United States let its guard down after the war—first by the disorderly scramble to demobilize and, finally, by the disarmament program pushed through by Harry Truman’s second Secretary of Defense Louis Johnson and approved by President Truman just before the Korean War—was a key to Stalin’s deciding on aggressive postwar initiatives, from the Berlin blockade and the first incursions into Iran and Turkey in 1946 up to the Korean War.87

Domestic politics did not turn in Truman’s favor, either. On November 5, 1951, Truman asked Eisenhower to run for President as a Democrat, and the general refused. Two days later, Krock broke the story in The New York Times. Both Eisenhower and Truman denied the story, but Krock’s version of the story was correct. Krock had grown more sceptical of Truman with each passing year, and he again turned his attention to the “cronyism” in the Administration. He doubted that Truman would be willing to make

85 Joseph and Stewart Alsop, quoted in McCullough, Truman, 791.
87 Joseph Alsop, I’ve Seen the Best of It, 269.
tough personnel decisions if they involved friends or political supporters. He had misgivings about whether the Democratic party could be “made morally strong” by the next election cycle, or whether voters would reward the political party responsible for “the years of defiant inaction during which the virus was permitted to spread through the whole Government system?”

An unhappy set of events further diminished Truman’s status. On Tuesday, December 5, 1950, Truman’s childhood friend and press secretary Charlie Ross died of a heart attack. Truman broke down in front of the press when he tried to read what he had written about his old friend. That night, Truman’s daughter Margaret gave a vocal recital at Constitution Hall. The next morning, Truman opened up the *Washington Post* to a scathing review of his daughter’s performance. With the Korean conflict and the death of an old friend weighing on him, Truman fired off an angry letter to the music critic Paul Hume, the man responsible for the review. Truman’s language was vivid, including a warning that if he ever met Hume, the critic would need “a lot of beefsteak for black eyes, and perhaps a supporter below.” Tellingly, Truman then compared Hume to columnist Westbrook Pegler. It was the worst insult he could imagine. “Pegler, a gutter snipe, is a gentleman alongside you. I hope you’ll accept that statement as a worse insult than a reflection on your ancestry.”

The incident enraged many Americans. The telegrams ran two to one against him. Later, Americans could look back at the incident and admire how old “plain speaking” Harry had defended his daughter. But at the time, the American people were

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89 McCullough, *Truman*, 826-827.
not amused. Roughly one-third of Americans approved how Harry Truman was doing his job.90

The pundits had suggestions for the President as 1952 opened that suggested just how little respect they had for Truman. Pearson suggested a New Year’s resolution for Truman that implied the President had previously allowed corruption throughout his administration: “Resolved that I will apply the rule of George Washington to all my staff—namely, those bearing gifts to public officials should deposit them with the State Department until after they leave office.” Pearson wanted Eisenhower to resolve not to keep “the American people waiting any longer.”91 The Alsops started the year off right, with a warning about the spread of Communism in Indochina.92 Gallup found Eisenhower leading all candidates for President among Democrats, Republicans, and Independents. Truman’s approval ratings continued to slide, as they had for the previous year and a half, to an all-time low (twenty-three percent).93 Pearson reported that Truman’s handling of the press was causing even the rank-and-file reporters to get sick of him. Truman had made one too many jokes about the press, and they were tired of the “the bawling out they get when asking the simple questions at the White House news conferences.” Truman now seemed perpetually cranky and prone to lecture the reporters on how they should be doing their jobs.94

It was a terrible beginning to a terrible final year.

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Few people were sorry to see Truman leave office. If he were so inclined, he could have spent his last full year in office reading accounts of pundits who wished he would make way for the more competent, reasonable Eisenhower. In many ways, Eisenhower had been looking over Truman’s shoulder since 1945. Truman could not compete with Eisenhower’s legend, which had only grown with each passing year.

As Truman’s term ended, most of the pundits softened as they began to contemplate all that had happened during Truman’s eventful tenure. Truman was a disaster, of course, but he was lucky, honest, and had surrounded himself with good people at the highest level, even if he preferred the company of petty crooks. If Eisenhower were President, things could be better; but, the pundits agreed, at least Truman had made the good, big decisions. All the same, they could not wait for Truman’s term to end so that Eisenhower’s term could begin.

Pearson was the least charitable. Given Truman’s bungling leadership, Pearson was astonished that the State Department had not bungled the world situation even worse. He accused the administration of pulling “[b]oner after boner,” demonstrating time and again that Truman’s men did not have “the common sense of a railroad yardmaster.”

He could not understand how journalists such as James Reston could have any patience with Truman or his leadership, calling the always-reasonable James Reston one of Washington’s “trained seals.”

The Alsop brothers continued to promote their program of anti-communist internationalism, and while they did not want another Truman term, they had new battles to fight in 1952. The villain at the Republican convention was easy for the brothers to

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spot. They had no patience for Republicans such as Robert A. Taft, whom they believed flirted with an older brand of isolationism. The Alsops’ columns were particularly tough on Taft’s partisans during the nomination struggle between Eisenhower and Taft at the Republican convention. After all, it was Taft’s men who bought into and spread the two myths of a “sell out at Yalta” and “loss of China.”

Joseph Alsop looked forward to the Eisenhower Administration. He was happy enough that Truman had put down a good foundation for American leadership in the world, but he had never been able to exercise strong leadership because of his “tired” administration. Truman had failed simply because he was Truman. Eisenhower had more opportunities “precisely because he is Eisenhower.” He warned against undue optimism but hoped that Eisenhower’s presidency might end as had his military command—“in final triumph.”

Before this final triumph, Lippmann warned that Eisenhower was going to have to face the fact that under Truman the Cold War was going badly. He argued that the world situation was much more dire than it had been even the previous summer. The costs of waging a global war might exceed previous expectations. Even with the waste and excesses of the Truman Administration wrung from the budget, Eisenhower might have to spend more money in order “to stop the deterioration of our position abroad.” Luckily, Eisenhower could count on public support, whatever his decision, but he would need to rein in his own party. To that end, Lippmann suggested that Eisenhower should embrace his convention foe and let Taft participate in policy discussions. If he took part in the decision-making process, he would then be forced to share in the responsibility.

In addition to mismanaging his own party, Truman had failed to meet the Soviet challenge effectively because he could not remain focused. Instead, Lippmann believed American policy should focus on “key countries.” America should concentrate its efforts on the countries that contribute the most to the strength of the alliance. Truman’s foreign aid program was distributed too widely. It was too “extravagant” and “inefficient.”*99 Truman’s leadership was the negative example; it was how not to act in office.

Like Lippmann, James Reston hoped Eisenhower could succeed in the Cold War, particularly in Korea, where Truman seemed to have stumbled into a quagmire. The differences between Truman and Eisenhower were immediately apparent, with Eisenhower owning the advantage in every area. Eisenhower would be successful because “Mr. Truman is a combative, abrasive man while General Eisenhower is not.” Truman had “poisoned” the “atmosphere” with “personal feuds,” and this had “handicapped the making of objective policy.” Reston warned that Eisenhower was no intellectual, and it could come back to haunt him (as it had with Truman), but unlike Truman, Eisenhower “does not suffer from intellectual arrogance or brash hostility to anyone. These two qualities have caused a lot of misery here in the last few years.” Here was the nub of the argument. It seemed that everyone had had quite enough of Truman by the time he left office. Truman and his cronies had “helped establish in this town a whole gallery of heroes and villains, each with his own loyal supporters and opponents,

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who tend to decide public questions not by studying the facts but by choosing up
sides.”\textsuperscript{100}

Lippmann compared Eisenhower’s commitment to make government leaner to the
alleged excesses of the Truman years and concluded that: “The Truman Administration is
a bad case of fatty degeneration.”\textsuperscript{101}

Eisenhower’s election victory seemed to be a relief to most Americans, pundits
and reporters included. George Gallup’s final report on Harry Truman detailed the
President’s rough relationship with the American public. In his first month in office,
Truman’s approval rating (eighty-seven percent) was higher than Roosevelt’s highest
rating (eighty-four percent). His numbers started going down in the summer of 1946, and
by the midterm elections they had shrunk down to a thirty-two percent approval rating.
He recovered in 1947 with bold foreign policy decisions but slumped again. His
shocking electoral victory in 1948 gave him the last spike in his numbers, at almost
seventy percent. Truman’s approval ratings sank thereafter. His lowest rating came in
November 1951 (twenty-three percent). He left office in January 1953 with an approval
rating of 31 percent.\textsuperscript{102}

In his last news conference, Truman told reporters that the prospects of peace on
ever were better than they had been the year before. The reporters were skeptical and
inquired about the source of his seemingly ill-placed confidence. Truman replied coyly

\begin{footnotes}
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\item[	extsuperscript{100}] James Reston, “Korea Clash Illustrates ‘the Eisenhower Way’: President-Elect Seeks to
\item[	extsuperscript{101}] Walter Lippmann, “Morale and Discipline,” 2 December 1952, \textit{The Essential Lippmann: A
Political Philosophy for Liberal Democracy}, ed. Clinton Rossiter and James Lare, (New York: Random
\item[	extsuperscript{102}] George Gallup, “Truman had Extremes in Public Favor,” \textit{Washington Post}, 11 January 1953,
5B.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotes}
that he knew things about the Iron Curtain he could not talk about. When asked about his New Years Resolution, he told the reporters he wanted to stop swearing at newspapers.\(^{103}\)

After hearing Truman’s farewell address (in which he predicted the collapse of the U.S.S.R.) the editors of the *Washington Post* commented: “History is not likely to deal with Mr. Truman’s record as enthusiastically as he did, but future Americans, we surmise, will give him a great deal of credit for sincerity, good intentions, and courage.”\(^{104}\) Lippmann softened on Truman as well. “In the manner of his going Mr. Truman has been every inch the President, conscious of the great office and worthy of it.” Truman “had many opponents and few enemies.” He had a good temper and a good nature. His family was a credit to him. Their departure left “no bitter after-taste” as they left the White House.\(^{105}\) Lippmann’s softening had its limits though. For the past four years he had taken jab after jab at Truman in his columns and blamed everything from McCarthyism to the Korean War on Truman’s bungling. Lippmann’s send-off might have been gentle, but he was sincerely happy to see the President go.\(^{106}\)

Pearson recalled how Truman had arrived at the White House upon Franklin Roosevelt’s death as the perfect picture of nerves and humility. As he was leaving office he was “not so humble now. He’s a little more peppery, just as vigorous, and has a sublime self-assurance that history in the end will place him in his proper niche.” He remembered his early prediction that Truman would “go out of office as severely criticized as Andrew Johnson in the post-Civil War days....” Pearson admitted that he

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\(^{106}\) Steel, *Walter Lippmann and the American Century*, 480.
was no historian, but he saw no reason to modify his original prediction. He believed Truman had put too much faith in military men, such as General MacArthur. “Korea, of course, never should have been started unless victory was certain.” The potential losses were too great. Truman’s anti-communism was steady and true, but he had confused Americans with his “red herring” in which he seemed to downplay the Communist threat. Pearson tried to guess what Truman was thinking about as he headed towards Eisenhower’s swearing-in ceremony. Perhaps he mishandled the Soviets. Perhaps he should have abandoned his corrupt friends. Perhaps he should have been less partisan and written fewer angry letters. Pearson doubted that Truman would remain troubled, if he was at all. “Harry Truman… is a man of great self-confidence and few regrets.” A “humdrum” life awaited him.

The Alsops took a parting shot at the “tired policy makers” of the Truman administration who had left Eisenhower in such a difficult fix by avoiding the problems created by building the H-bomb instead of grappling with the tough realities of the Cold War.107 It was an argument they had made many times before, in many different forms, and the other political journalists had done the same.

The pundits could never get past their assessment that Truman had fumbled at critical times. Truman had made the right decisions; he was simply too inept to carry them out. The aid to Greece and Turkey, the Marshall Plan, NATO, the Korean War, and the firing of MacArthur were all correct decisions, but subsequently mishandled.

For his part, Truman worried about his successor and privately predicted doom. After the recent increases in defense spending in the past two years precipitated by NSC-

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68 and the Korean War, he warned Eisenhower not to cut the defense budget too deeply. As they had for the past few years, McCarthy’s charges continued to splash across headlines. Issues related to the Korean War dragged on. As he left the train station in Washington D.C., one Washington Post reporter called Truman a “happy bundle of human warmth, fight and pride….”

When he arrived in Missouri that same newspaper called Truman the “always irrepressible unpredictable Missourian, just another sentimental Missourian going home…. “ Truman’s reputation would sprout from these kinds of sentiments, but for the time being few regretted the direction of the train.

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Chapter 4

The Dream Boy and the Limits of Sincerity

His domestic political views were what every one wanted to hear, and his vaguely phrased denunciations of disunity, inflation, bureaucracy and excessive taxation would have been a monument of dullness in the mouth of any other living American politician. But there was an odd freshness to what Eisenhower said, simply because he so obviously earnestly believed it, although a full generation of politicians have been saying the same things in almost the same words.  

--Stewart Alsop

Eisenhower’s popularity shadowed the Truman presidency. Gallup polls indicated that Eisenhower could have beaten Truman handily in 1948. In a 1950 poll, voters favored Eisenhower over Truman in the 1952 race by two to one. By April of 1951, both Republicans and Democrats favored Eisenhower for president in 1952; by fall Eisenhower led in every section of the United States. He was beating his Democratic opponent Adlai Stevenson in trial heats before he was nominated. He was leading among young voters. He was strong in the cities. After his election, the triumph was complete. It remained to be seen what Eisenhower would do with his victory, but the elite political journalists had some concerns.

Eisenhower’s particular brand of charisma frustrated the pundits. They had high hopes for the war hero. He seemed to be the only person who could rescue the Republican Party from the isolationists and the Red-baiters— saving the two-party system in the process. To that end, in the fight for the 1952 Republican Party presidential nomination, the pundits backed Eisenhower over Taft with very few reservations. The 1952 general election was a different matter, however, as Eisenhower faced a Democratic

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candidate with a set of characteristics uniquely appealing to journalists who cover politics. Governor Adlai Stevenson of Illinois became the favorite candidate of the intellectual set. He was witty, erudite, and charming in both his private conversations and public speeches. The perceptions of the contrasts between Eisenhower and Stevenson were stark, and the view became commonplace that Stevenson was the candidate of intellectuals (the Alsops coined the term “egghead”), while Eisenhower was more than just anti-intellectual; he was anti-intellect.

After Eisenhower’s election, the pundits soon grew tired of a Washington D.C. dominated by Republicans. Eisenhower’s admonitions that “talkativeness is a good basis for firing a man” and “there is nothing so dangerous as the Washington cocktail party” seemed to have the desired effect on his staff. He remembered attending parties as a young officer and being “horrified by the arbitrary comments of upper-level officials.” He continued: “Those parties are an abomination of the devil.”2 If, like Joseph Alsop, one depended on those cocktail parties for news sources as well as recreation, it would be a long eight years. The pundits created an image of the 1950s as a decade when nothing happened.

Commentators took on the character of a government in exile. Eisenhower’s conservatism and fuddy-duddy middle-Americanism bored them to no end. They misunderstood Eisenhower’s conservatism and chosen tradition within the Republican Party. After Eisenhower had disengaged the country from the Korean War and McCarthy had been effectively removed from public life, their exasperation and misunderstanding of Eisenhower’s intentions got the better of them. Eisenhower himself soon held most of

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the elite journalists in contempt. To the pundits, Eisenhower’s continuing popularity indicated that the public could be fooled by a nice smile, soothing words, slick advertising techniques, and the reputation of a war hero.

The pundits had mused about the implications of an Eisenhower presidency well before it became a reality. In 1948, Walter Lippmann wrote to a friend that Eisenhower was “not a real figure in our public life, but a kind of dream boy embodying all the unsatisfied wishes of all the people who are discontented with things as they are.” In 1946, Arthur Krock predicted that the sixty-six-year taboo or “Grant bogey” would die before the next election cycle, and Eisenhower was the best candidate. Democrats and Republicans mentioned his name when they “surround and peer into the crystal ball.”

In 1948, when Krock speculated as to why Eisenhower refused the Democratic nomination, he mentioned some themes that would dominate early impressions of the general. Eisenhower was a good man, but politically naïve. Of course, Krock wrote, Eisenhower did not understand party politics or politicians. The general did not want to insult one of the two great American political parties by refusing the nomination outright. To do so before such an offer had been made would have been an insult that “smacked of arrogance and impertinence.” Eisenhower was human and enjoyed attention and adulation— at least up to the point where other politicians attempted to use his fame for their own self-interest—but he was more interested in staying out of politics.

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3 Steel, *Walter Lippmann and the American Century*, 481.
Truman’s last term made Eisenhower look even better. By 1952, Walter Lippmann’s public reaction to Eisenhower’s candidacy was downright enthusiastic, even if he had some private reservations. Lippmann’s most important consideration was to get a Republican internationalist into office.⁶ As in so many other areas, Lippmann’s reaction was indicative of how the other pundits would eventually view Eisenhower. Just as the pundits had judged Truman in 1945 by who he was not (Henry Wallace) and who he was (the unpretentious Midwesterner and firm New Dealer), they similarly gave Eisenhower credit for not being an isolationist like Robert Taft, a red-baiter like Joseph McCarthy, or an incompetent like Harry Truman: They praised Eisenhower’s potential as a “healer,” but it was unclear what they wanted from him once he saved the two-party system and finished the healing.

Eisenhower agreed with the pundits on some things, and was happy to wage his campaign on those terms. He too wanted to defeat the isolationist and McCarthy wings of the Republican Party and remake the party in his own image. Those very considerations had convinced him to run for office in the first place. He considered it his duty to make sure the best legacies of World War II survived. Eisenhower also shared with the pundits a common belief that the United States needed to be saved from Harry Truman’s leadership. As Eisenhower biographer Stephen Ambrose put it:

By November of 1952, Eisenhower actively disliked Harry Truman. He thought the President was guilty of extreme partisanship, poor judgment, inept leadership and management, bad taste, and undignified behavior. Worst of all, in Eisenhower’s view, Truman had diminished the prestige of the office of President of the United States.⁷

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In order to reverse these trends, Eisenhower first needed to defeat his Republican challenger, Senator Robert Taft of Ohio. Walter Lippmann used all his skill and influence to nudge his readers into the Eisenhower camp. He admitted that Taft was not a “pre-Pearl Harbor isolationist,” but the senior pundit was hardly complimentary of “Mr. Republican.” Instead, Lippmann took the position that Taft was a unilateralist (a most nefarious creature) who did not fully understand that the Cold War was shaping up as a battle of alliances. To that end, he informed his readers that Eisenhower would be better at “the high and difficult art of managing a coalition—on which our future depends—no living American has anything like his experience and his proved competence.”

Moreover, his candidacy met Lippmann’s other important criterion: Only Eisenhower could unite and heal the nation after Truman’s years of divisive incompetence.

One can see just how deeply those ideas had become conventional wisdom by the advice James Reston offered Eisenhower’s supporters in the spring of 1952. His first recommendation was the most telling: “Point out that Ike is neither Taft nor Truman. This is generally enough.” Eisenhower’s lack of political experience would not count against him in a time when politicians were unpopular. Further, he could beat Taft. If challenged on an Eisenhower position, one should remain vague. Reston expected Eisenhower to beat the prickly, intellectual, isolationist Taft and the blunt, incompetent Truman on the basis of reputation alone. If Eisenhower knew little of the complexities of governing, the American people would not hold it against him; the professional politicians held little promise for bringing about positive change. The other pundits

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followed suit as they took Eisenhower’s measure during the Republican convention and subsequent presidential campaign.

Drew Pearson had often compared Eisenhower with Franklin Roosevelt— Roosevelt being the last successful president, of course— and believed with some reservations that Eisenhower shared some traits with F.D.R. At a 1948 awards dinner (where Pearson accepted a “Father of the Year” award from Eisenhower), Pearson told Eisenhower, “In the words of the Kaw tribe in your state of Kansas, I hope you become ‘Little White Father in Big White House.’” After one talk with Eisenhower in the spring of 1951, Pearson recorded in his diary that Eisenhower had not lost any of his energy or “contagious charm,” a phrase he often used in describing the general. Even better though, Eisenhower had “something similar to what Franklin Roosevelt had— an ability to make people like him and the ability to inspire confidence.” The more Pearson reflected upon this issue though, he became convinced that “Eisenhower really has more of it than Roosevelt.” He remembered Roosevelt as a politician who would often talk his way out of difficult situations by telling humorous anecdotes. By contrast, “Eisenhower talks more about ideals and aims.” While this was an unfair characterization of Roosevelt, it demonstrated Pearson’s optimism about Eisenhower’s candidacy.

Pearson believed both had “the same contagious charm, the same ability to talk, and the same tendency toward pleasant-sounding generalities.” Eisenhower could impress people with his sincerity but lacked either the will or the ability to dominate a conversation like Roosevelt. Unlike the “conversations” with Roosevelt that were really

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10 Pilat, *Drew Pearson*, 186.
monologues, Eisenhower actually allowed him to speak. While this seemed to be an admirable quality, Pearson did worry that, unlike F.D.R., Eisenhower might be bested in the rough and tumble world of politics. Perhaps Eisenhower was too nice, too honest, too sincere, or too naïve, to play politics at the highest levels. Even after Eisenhower won the nomination, Pearson believed the general was “a political babe-in-the-woods.”

Some of Eisenhower’s Rooseveltian qualities impressed Stewart Alsop, also. After watching the candidate campaign for a few days, Alsop reported that he had “the most effective political personality to emerge on the American scene since the death of Franklin Delano Roosevelt.” But Alsop struggled to describe why Eisenhower held such sway over the crowds. Their enthusiasm was unmistakable, and he could see evidence of a “tingling expectancy” before the General arrived that turned into an “electric undercurrent” after he appeared. He could only guess that the source of Eisenhower’s “magic” was his transparent sincerity—“he really is what he seems to be, … that he really means what he says.” He reported that Eisenhower had obviously been nervous at his first press conference, but he was willing to cut him some slack in the early stages of the campaign. He described exactly how Eisenhower’s face reflected the inner thoughts of the man:

Perhaps because of this his face, which is so mobile as to be downright rubbery, assumed an extraordinary variety of expressions. At one moment, he would purse his lips and peer intently at the ceiling of the movie theater in which the conference was held, as if he found the hideous decorations there absorbing. Then he would grin ruefully, rather like a little boy found with his hand in the cookie jar. Then he would frown, with ferocious concentration. Then he would smile his famous, astonishingly infectious smile.

12 Ibid., 209.
13 Ibid., 220.
Eisenhower maintained an appealing sincerity through the most tedious of campaign activities. If he stared at the ceiling after a tough question, Alsop guessed Eisenhower was thinking: “Now how in the world will I answer that one?” If a reporter asked an unfair question, Eisenhower would respond with a “rueful grin” in “silent tribute to the more shrewdly phrased have-you-stopped-beating-your-wife questions.” And his disarming smile seemed to indicate sincere amusement. Alsop wrote, “The Eisenhower magic derives from the fact that he is essentially a simple and uncomplicated man, who really believes the not very startling and not very profound things he says, and who has never learned to assume either the synthetic manners or the synthetic opinions of so many professional politicians.”

Even when Eisenhower went over the well-trod ground of praising home and the value of a good mother, he breathed new life into the format. In the hands of a professional politician, or in print, the theme of “home and mother” in the candidate’s speech could have seemed like the most tired clichés ever hawked by the most cynical politician on the hustings. But Alsop found himself won over by the spirit of nostalgia in “Ike’s” hometown, Abilene, Kansas. The general had rescued a speech which contained “a good many kernels of corn” with deeply felt if “shop-worn” sentiment. “This quality saved his major speech yesterday from being rather embarrassing anti-climax.” Alsop was careful to mention Eisenhower’s competent handling of the press conference, which indicated a certain level of political sophistication, but he returned to the themes of his honesty and sincerity again and again as the sources of the candidate’s “freshness and authority.” The adjectives changed only slightly, and the evaluation stayed the same. As the Alsop brothers looked forward to the Republican convention, they saw Eisenhower’s
corny, simple, uncomplicated, shopworn sincerity as assets even as they warned that the nomination process at the Republican convention was not a foregone conclusion.\textsuperscript{14}

For the Alsop brothers, the candidate’s handling of the nomination struggle proved the his basic political competence, and they were dearly committed to an Eisenhower victory. The ability of the Eisenhower forces to best the veteran Taft men who controlled much of the Republican Party machinery impressed them. Perhaps Eisenhower and his handlers were expert politicians, but the Alsops also allowed that the Taft men could have been merely “little better than a bunch of stumblebums.”\textsuperscript{15} They probably believed that the answer contained elements of both explanations. It was simply too soon to judge Eisenhower’s level of skill in this new venue. After all, many of the old pols had underestimated Eisenhower, including Truman aide Clark Clifford, who again proved his inability to predict elections when he gave Joe Alsop 2 to 1 odds on a $100 bet that Eisenhower would not win the nomination.\textsuperscript{16} The Alsop brothers did not want to lose that bet. As Robert Merry put it: “They wanted Taft stopped, and they would do whatever they could to help stop him.” The brothers did exchange some letters with friends, who fretted that their columns covering the Republican convention were not objective, but they lost little sleep over the matter.\textsuperscript{17} After Eisenhower won the nomination and Clifford paid his debt, Drew Pearson seconded the Alsops with the headline, “Eisenhower Went Far For Beginner.” Eisenhower’s handling of Taft had

\textsuperscript{14} Stewart Alsop, \textit{The Reporter’s Trade}, 185-187. From a column originally published 6 June 1952.
\textsuperscript{16} Merry, \textit{Taking On The World}, 228. Clifford sent Alsop a check after the convention. Joe told him: “You are a very good man to bet with.” Ibid., 232.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 229.
demonstrated that Eisenhower had a better organization, leadership, cause, publicity campaign, and war chest.\textsuperscript{18}

As always, Lippmann watched the Republican convention from afar and tried to make sense of the dominant trends while pushing for Eisenhower’s nomination. Believing Eisenhower had captured the mood of the times, he detected a “great popular majority in this country today who are moderate in their views and conciliatory in their temper.” After decades of depression, New Deals, World Wars, and Cold Wars, the American people were tired of fighting. Perhaps Americans were looking for a leader, who could restore—or even establish—something that could be called “normal” life. “They are not looking for adventure and for crusades,” he wrote, “for panaceas and for the tremendous quarrels of men who believe they are infallible.” Lippmann hoped Americans would encourage their leaders to avoid easy, short-term solutions to complex, long-term problems that required careful management. According to the veteran pundit, they were “looking for decent, sensible common ground on which to deal prudently with the uncertainties and dangers about them.” Looking toward the general election, Lippmann was untroubled: “A campaign in which the choice was Eisenhower or Stevenson would be a triumphant vindication of the American system.” Such a contest would show that even in a complex world “the most open of elections could show that there is a great unfrightened majority wanting only to be reasonable and decent.”\textsuperscript{19} It was unquestionably a positive assessment, but the Democratic Party’s choice of Governor Adlai Stevenson of Illinois served another purpose in the creation of the conventional wisdom. It reinforced some prejudices that the pundits held against Eisenhower.

Lippmann actually believed Adlai Stevenson to be a better man than Eisenhower. While his columns praising Eisenhower were not disingenuous, Lippmann thought Stevenson was the more substantial person. Still, Lippmann decided that America needed Eisenhower. After all, Eisenhower could resolve the Korean conflict, save the Republican Party from factionalism, and control McCarthy. And there need not be any contradiction if one believed that the best man should not always be the President.20 Lippmann was not alone in his assessment, either.

After backing Eisenhower at the Republican convention, the Alsops initially found themselves charmed by Stevenson. After a two-hour conversation, Joseph Alsop wrote to the Illinois governor that their talk had “stimulated, enlightened, and encouraged” him. He told Stevenson that “in the most dreadful crisis America has ever entered, you are quite obviously the best qualified man to lead the country.” Then, Alsop proceeded to advise Stevenson on how to handle his delicate relations with Truman.21

Stewart Alsop’s portrayal of Stevenson in the June 28, 1952, edition of the Saturday Evening Post described him as a reluctant yet charming candidate, who had run a first-rate operation in Illinois and had the gift of motivating voters. His character was full of “surprising complications and unexpected byways,” such as a “curious mingling of humanity and ruthlessness.” He was cautious politically and generally avoided conflict when possible. Stevenson’s inner conflict was a different matter: “A war is always going on between his natural appetite for the small details and the large responsibilities of public life, and his persistent pessimism and instinct to withdraw from the struggle.”22

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20 Steel, Walter Lippmann and the American Century, 482.
21 Merry, Taking On The World, 233.
22 Stewart Alsop, “He’d Rather Not Be President,” Saturday Evening Post, 28 June 1952, 120.
The fickle Alsop brothers would not stick with Stevenson for long. They began to lose patience with him after he compared his decision to run for office with Christ’s turmoil at Gethsemane (“Let this cup pass from me”) at the Democratic convention. They found the remark too melodramatic. The brothers still liked and admired Stevenson, but the shine had come off Stevenson’s halo.

Like Lippmann, they were pleased that both parties had chosen anti-communist internationalists and tried to cover the general election in an even-handed manner, but they became concerned as Eisenhower, in the name of political expediency, seemed to mute his criticism of McCarthy before the election. On both principle and for the thrill of the story, the pundits wanted Eisenhower to oppose McCarthy as well as the isolationists of his party. They hoped he would defeat the McCarthy faction of the Republican Party the way he had defeated Hitler. It seemed so close to being possible that they could taste it.

Stewart Alsop identified the quality in Stevenson that would thrill so many of the opinion-makers. Stevenson’s staffers were “what the Europeans would call ‘intellectuals’—they are interested in ideas and in the words used to express these ideas.” The Stevenson headquarters had more in common with a small university than a traditional smoke-filled room. Stevenson was not afraid to give “serious and rather difficult” speeches. After one particularly complicated speech, the Alsops’ brother John (who was then making a run at the governorship of Connecticut) made a comment that introduced a new term into the nation’s political lexicon. Stewart remarked that many Republicans admired Stevenson’s intellect. John replied, “Sure, all the egg-heads love Stevenson. But how many egg-heads do you think there are?” Eisenhower’s “whistle-
stop homilies” were still effective, as crowds still responded “warmly to the sincerity and 
esential goodness of the man, in a way that Stevenson’s notably smaller crowds do not 
respond.” Few observers were impressed with the sophistication of the Republican 
candidate or his supporters, but Eisenhower remained frustratingly effective. “Stevenson 
leaves his listeners amused or thoughtful, but he does not seem to stir their blood.”

James Reston wrote that Eisenhower was a “man of action” while Stevenson 
distinguished himself as a “man of reason.” Eisenhower was as decisive as Stevenson 
was intellectually distinguished. Eisenhower was “tough-minded, simple and direct in 
his approach to questions, Governor Stevenson more complicated and introspective, 
much more inclined to brood and worry over his problems.” Stevenson was a “Wilsonian 
figure, highly literate, idealistic and urbane.” Reston’s labeling of Stevenson as 
“Wilsonian” was not empty praise, either. Wilson’s reputation had risen considerably as 
many came to believe that the horrors of another world war could have been prevented if 
Wilsonianism in general, and Wilson’s League of Nations in particular, had succeeded. 

By late August 1952, Reston had concluded that “Stevenson is a far more complicated 
human being than Eisenhower.” By contrast, “the General not only refuses to worry 
after he makes a decision—he sometimes doesn’t seem to worry much beforehand.” 
Eisenhower depended on his advisors and exuded self-confidence while Stevenson 
filtered his skepticism through wit and charm. Reston conceded that Stevenson was no 
intellectual, but “[a]s much or more can of course be said of Eisenhower. If anything an

Army post is more of an intellectual wasteland than the North Shore of Chicago.”

As the campaign progressed towards a crescendo, Stevenson’s condescension peaked as he offered to “educate” Eisenhower on the woes that a Republican senate would inflict upon the world. Reston’s characterization of Stevenson’s criticism of Eisenhower indicated that the columnist sympathized with Stevenson’s worries.

Arthur Krock worried that Eisenhower’s inexperience in politics would leave him without the tools to deal with McCarthy—something Krock certainly wanted him to do. With the Wisconsin Senate primary upcoming, Eisenhower should have known the question would come “soon, hard, and curved: What did he intend to do about McCarthy?” Eisenhower’s answer disappointed Krock. The candidate “floundered through his reply” and “disappointed many of his supporters” with a meek response that merely explained that he supported all Republican candidates. Krock chalked Eisenhower’s poor handling of McCarthy questions up to inexperience and offered up a constructive solution. Krock suggested that Eisenhower should simply state that McCarthy was not yet the official nominee for the Senate seat and defer questions about the controversial Senator until after the Wisconsin primary. Krock also blamed the medium of television, which “brought upon candidates the wide-open press conference” and exposed Eisenhower “to that question in such circumstances.”

Even Lippmann turned lukewarm on Eisenhower as the campaign progressed and the Republican candidate continued to commit almost unpardonable sins. First, the General had chosen the hated Red-hunter Richard Nixon as a running mate making it

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26 Ibid., 47-49.
more difficult to play the role of “healer” or force a showdown with McCarthy. Further, he had proven to be a disappointing, uninspiring campaigner—at least in Lippmann’s eyes. Lippmann fought past Eisenhower’s dullness, but the columnist’s backing came out of principle rather than enthusiasm.

The emerging trend, though, was that the pundits did not have the kind of enthusiasm for the General that would extend beyond the first crisis or point of disagreement between Eisenhower and the columnists. His record of accomplishment impressed them, but they knew he was human. Lippmann and Eisenhower had met regularly when Eisenhower was the U.S. Army chief of staff. Pearson had known Eisenhower since the invasion of Sicily and even seen evidence of Eisenhower’s famous temper.  

Certainly, nobody in the Eisenhower campaign doubted the words of James Reston when he wrote, “Korea has dramatized the Republican slogan that it’s time for a change.” Reston must have believed this, since when all was said and done he followed Lippmann’s example and voted for Eisenhower. Even if Reston remained lukewarm towards Eisenhower throughout the 1950s, at least Eisenhower campaigned to win. By contrast, Reston later called Stevenson “a loser.”

His qualifications as a “loser” notwithstanding, the pundits never really shook the idea that Stevenson had a very important quality that Eisenhower lacked. Even before the campaign started in earnest, James Reston made his early assessment of Eisenhower

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29 Pearson wrote about Eisenhower’s angry reaction to hearing Truman had called his trip to Korea “demagoguery.” Eisenhower had even gone so far as to write out a statement to the press on the subject but his press secretary, Jim Hagarty, had talked him out of issuing it. Drew Pearson, “Ike was Ready to Blast Truman,” Washington Post, 20 December 1952, 27B.
31 Stacks, Scotty, 130-131.
and Stevenson. “Stevenson is a far more complicated human being than Eisenhower.”

Compared to Stevenson, Eisenhower’s “appeal is not to the mind so much as to the heart.” Reston repeated the joke of the press corps that Eisenhower was “crossing the thirty-eighth platitude” with every speech. But the crowds were big, and in the heartland of America the crowds were “neither so sophisticated nor so cynical. They like the guy. They believe him.” “Ike” had a way of looking at his crowds and making them believe his “little homilies.” Perhaps more importantly, in contrast to Truman, Eisenhower looked and acted the part. “You see this in their faces, which are always smiling in anticipation before they even see him,” Reston wrote. Tellingly, Reston betrayed his contempt for the heartland voters when he wrote that when Eisenhower “utters the most obvious platitude, they look at that serious face as if they had heard something that ought to be graven in stone and passed on to the third and fourth generation.”

This question of Eisenhower’s relationship (or lack of one) with intellectuals eventually reached an absurd climax. James Reston lamented that when “the egg-heads and the pin-heads, the round-heads and the square-heads have had their say, somebody ought to go to work on the problem of how to elect a President of the United States.” Stevenson’s wit and wordplay—“the right word, the memorable phrase, the apt story and above all the short speech”—played to the prejudices of the pundits covering the campaign. “He has taken the view that there is nothing in the Constitution that

commands him to be verbose or dreary. He has ventured the opinion that it might even be possible to have some fun in this campaign.”35

The Alsops split. Joe held his nose and voted for Eisenhower while Stewart went for Stevenson. There were plenty of reasons for their lukewarm support. Whereas other pundits considered the choice between Eisenhower and Stevenson to be a triumph for democracy, the Alsops likened the election to “a trip through the Paris sewers.” Eisenhower had supported all the Republican candidates in 1952 regardless of their policy positions, putting him in the uncomfortable position of supporting some men he despised. In addition, his choice of Richard Nixon for the Vice Presidential slot gained the General few friends among the pundits. In their minds, Nixon was little better than McCarthy. His “Checkers speech” seemed a further insult to the intelligence of the American people. The image of an anti-intellectual Eisenhower that filtered into the columns of the pundits probably worked to Eisenhower’s advantage. After Eisenhower’s large electoral victory the brothers hoped for the best even as they continued to worry about the anti-intellectual Red-baiting Senator McCarthy.36

After Pearson predicted an Eisenhower victory on the eve of the election, he recorded his two reasons for doing so. First, Pearson did believe Eisenhower would win. The trends and all of the polling data indicated that Eisenhower would win in a walk. Pearson’s second reason, though, was “cowardice. I figure that if I am wrong on Eisenhower, I can still live with my Stevenson friends. But if I am wrong on Stevenson, I

36 Merry, Taking On The World, 236-237.
can never live with my Eisenhower friends.” He need not have worried. All sides acted with decency and grace following the election. The pundits still held Stevenson in good esteem. Lippmann, for instance, supported Ike but still did his best to describe the Stevenson campaign in the most favorable manner possible.

Three months after Eisenhower and his administration had settled into Washington, Stewart Alsop told his editor that he wanted to write (but did not) “an amusing, malicious piece” about how Georgetown had suffered under Republican rule. Even if the Truman years had been less exciting than the Roosevelt years, Eisenhower would have to deal with a problem that Truman never suffered through. That is, his political philosophy was completely alien to the journalists charged with explaining his actions. Clearly, Eisenhower was different from “Mr. Republican” Robert Taft, and he had little in common with Senator McCarthy, but the pundits found his political philosophy almost as frustrating. In one letter to a friend, Joseph Alsop predicted: “Eisenhower’s Washington will, I think, be unbearably boring, although rich. Everyone I am fondest of is going away, and no one I like very much is replacing them.”

Eisenhower’s derived his conservatism—which he sometimes referred to as Modern Republicanism or some variation thereof—from his upbringing and boyhood experiences in Abilene, Kansas, his study of history, his experiences with the military, and his dealings with the Democratic administrations of Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman. As he entered office, Eisenhower’s agenda, assumptions, and guiding principles were conservative at their core. He was an individualist, firmly committed to the

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founding documents of the republic (as he understood them), and steeped in the lore of his heroes, Washington and Lincoln. He ran for president in 1952 out of a sense of duty, believing that he was saving the Republican Party from its reactionary, populist wing and restoring it to its moderate, conservative roots while restoring the two-party tradition, balanced government, and dignity to the executive branch.\footnote{Ambrose, *Eisenhower*, 291, 393, 455. See also, Arthur Larson, *Eisenhower: The President Nobody Knew* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1968) and William B. Pickett, *Eisenhower Decides to Run: Presidential Politics & Cold War Strategy* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2000).} It is incorrect to assume that his political philosophy could be understood as some kind of mirror image opposite of New Deal liberalism. And that was the problem. The pundits had long ago defined success in terms of Franklin Roosevelt. While they considered Truman inept, at least the pundits could understand his goals.

Once in office, Eisenhower followed a strict adherence and reverence for the separation of powers that was rivaled— in the twentieth century at least—only by Calvin Coolidge. He believed in strong and forceful executive action in international matters, and acted in domestic politics only when the authority of the executive branch was clear and unquestioned. His friendship and working relationship with Senator Robert A. Taft of Ohio demonstrated his easy fit with the conservatism of his era. He railed against government waste: “I hate bureaucrats. I saw enough of them when I was in the Pentagon—people striving, concentrating on building up bigger bureaus and more power for themselves.”\footnote{Eisenhower, to Drew Pearson. Pearson, *Diaries*, 210.} His internationalism and moderation fit neatly with how he understood American conservatism. To the everlasting ire of more ideological conservatives, Eisenhower, like Theodore Roosevelt, believed that the pursuit of moderate reform was a necessarily conservative aim. Once, at the end of Eisenhower’s
presidency, Arthur Krock remarked that Eisenhower’s political philosophy seemed similar to that of Woodrow Wilson. Eisenhower corrected Krock and declared himself a “T.R. Republican.”42 As he wrote in his diary, “All human experience tends to show that human progress, where advanced numbers of people and intricate relationships are concerned, is possible only as extremes are avoided and solutions to problems are found in a great middle way that has regard for the requirements, desires, and aspirations of the vast majority.”43 Eisenhower’s favorite description of his political beliefs was a quotation from Abraham Lincoln:

> The legitimate object of government is to do for a community of people whatever they need to have done, but can not do at all, or can not so well do, for themselves—in their separate and individual capacities. In all that the people can individually do as well for themselves, government ought not to interfere.44

The opinion journalists found it perplexing. In a conversation with Drew Pearson, Eisenhower pulled out a coin and showed it to the columnist. One side of the coin had a Christian cross and the word “freedom.” The word “God” was on the other. Eisenhower told Pearson, “That coin represents my religion.”45 Surely there was more to it. The pundits devised their own theories about the sources of Eisenhower’s conservatism, in the first year of his administration.

Drew Pearson believed Eisenhower had started out as a liberal but became more conservative as Republican businessmen gained his respect and attention. After the war

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42 Arthur Krock, *Memoirs*, 289. Krock thought the T.R. comparison strange, since Eisenhower seemed to work so well with Congress, while Krock remembered Theodore Roosevelt as a President who tried to “invade the Congressional function,” but Eisenhower knew his own mind.
45 Eisenhower, to Drew Pearson, *Diaries*, 211.
Eisenhower had “no understanding of economic or domestic problems and shortly thereafter was thrown into contact with the economic royalists of the United States.…”

Eisenhower had been a self-described “progressive Republican” until his advisors had decided to “out-Taft Taft.…” 46 Joseph and Stewart Alsop also found Eisenhower more conservative than they had expected, and called his early campaign speeches “markedly conservative” in their appeal to tradition. 47 After Eisenhower’s first 100 days Arthur Krock told his readers: “Perhaps psychological historians, if there are such since Hume, may find some significance in the fact that not until he played golf with Senator Taft, from whom he won the 1952 convention by 110 votes, did General Eisenhower break 90.” 48

It was much easier for Krock to describe the political reasons for Eisenhower’s success in the election of 1952. Democrats had controlled the executive branch since 1933 and Americans wanted a change of party. They were tired of the corruption of the Truman administration, and its “indifference” to the Communists in government. In addition to the stalemate in Korea, Eisenhower’s sterling character (“the over-all issues determined the result were General Eisenhower’s personality and record”), dramatized the differences between the Republican candidate and his Democratic challenger. 49

At the end of 1952 Stewart Alsop asked, “How Conservative is Eisenhower?” It was easy enough to notice the outer trappings. He noted how the President-Elect surrounded himself with rich friends and advisors, and repeated the charge that the

46 Drew Pearson, “Ike Drifted Right, Taft To the Left,” Washington Post, 8 July 1952, 35B.
incoming cabinet consisted of “millionaires and one plumber.” Certainly, it was clear to him that Eisenhower was not anti-business. But Alsop found it difficult to call Eisenhower “liberal” or “conservative.” Eisenhower seemed to like businessmen because he thought of business success as a mark of ability. So, like Krock, Alsop turned to political considerations. He thought Eisenhower might follow the “Dewey formula,” a combination of moderate legislation and patronage, to build a Republican majority. Eisenhower’s campaign pledges to support and extend Social Security and promote moderate progress in civil rights could break off key constituencies of the New Deal coalition. Some of Eisenhower’s conservative friends might be tempted “to turn the clock back” and there would always be worry of recession, but if Eisenhower could manage the trick, the Republican Party could begin “another long period of national power.”\footnote{Stewart Alsop, “How Conservative is Eisenhower?” \textit{Washington Post}, 24 December 1952, 7.}

In private, Eisenhower recognized what needed to be done to make the Republican Party the majority party again. Republicans needed to jettison the right wingers and reject isolationism in any form. As he told his press secretary James Hagerty in December of 1954:

I’ve had just enough from the McCarthys, the Welkers, the Malones, and people like that. This party of ours has got to realize that they won’t exist unless they become a party of progressive moderates—unless they can prove to the American people that they are a middle-of-the-road party and turn their backs on extremes of the left and particularly the extremes of the right.

As he described it to Hagerty, Eisenhower’s great goal, beyond keeping the world at peace, was to build up the “progressive” wing of the Republican Party and make it
strong enough to perpetuate itself. When possible, Eisenhower encouraged like-thinking
Congressmen. “I am going to get the people to think the way we do, to rally around and
dig into this matter and see what we can do.” He was even willing to risk having the
right wing of the party split off and form a third party. He continued, “If the right wing
wants a fight, they’re going to get it.” And if what he told Hagerty was true, Eisenhower
even threatened to leave the Republican Party if it did not more closely reflect his beliefs
by the time he left politics. Eisenhower concluded his diatribe:

And let me tell you one other thing. If they think they can nominate a
right-wing Old Guard Republican for the presidency, they’ve got another
thought coming. I’ll go up and down this country, campaigning against
them. I’ll fight them right down the line.51

Eisenhower’s comments at one of his “stag dinners”—dinners for his male
friends, and usually successful businessmen—in December 1954 followed this same
line. He argued forcefully that the Republican Party had to build up “liberal men of
promise,” particularly younger politicians.52 If later critics accused Eisenhower of
running a “dime-store New Deal” for advocating a program of moderate reform, it was
due to Eisenhower’s comfort with the conservatism that blended the interests of Wall
Street and Main Street. For these conservatives, a program of moderate reform that took
cautious action only after such action was necessary was perfectly understandable.
Alexander Hamilton, Abraham Lincoln, and William McKinley would have understood
it. But even the pundits who understood it, such as the Alsops, found it frustrating.

(Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1983), 129.
52 Ibid., 145.
After Eisenhower’s victory, the Alsops criticized the President-elect for a lack of political acumen. Just after Christmas, 1952, the Alsops thought it “pretty plain that bad trouble is already building up for President-elect Eisenhower.” They fretted that Eisenhower had offended some of his supporters with his patronage choices. Some guessed that the Dewey wing of the Republican Party had taken over the Eisenhower administration. The Alsops worried that Eisenhower aide and soon-to-be attorney General Herbert Brownell was “not acting as a politician.” Eisenhower had angered “the politicians twice over, by failing to give them jobs, and by failing to warn them who will get jobs.” They gave Eisenhower the benefit of the doubt, since the General had the best of intentions. Because he owed no political debts, he could place the best men in government positions. If he wanted to place businessmen in positions of authority, they would withhold judgment for a while. “The big businessmen are, after all, the most powerful single class in the country. If anyone needs to understand the American political process, they need to.” It was good to have them engaged in politics. If they took advantage of their opportunity “it can become a major turning point, leading to the wiser, more informed conservatism that this country badly needs.”

Drew Pearson made his predictions for the coming year on January 1, 1953, and despite his earlier support for Eisenhower, he was not optimistic. It was the beginning of the “Atomic Age,” when the threat of nuclear war would hang over every decision. Eisenhower had to repair the deteriorating relationship with America’s European allies (Pearson assumed Truman had left American diplomacy in tatters). If the President failed to shore up European defenses, Pearson predicted that, “the seeds of future war in Europe

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will be planted in the year 1953.” The Korean War would drag on. Communists would “finally be cleaned out” of Indochina. The Russians would take control of Iran. Taft and Eisenhower would bicker and split as Taft intruded into foreign policy. Pearson looked at Eisenhower’s cabinet and concluded that if it was a shame that Eisenhower had “picked a conservative businessman’s Cabinet,” but at least he had picked the “first team” of conservatives who were not of the stodgy old breed. They were from the “modern, high-powered, up-and-at-‘em school.”

Shockingly, the Alsops were more optimistic. The calendar might indicate a new year, but, the brothers wrote, “the new year will really begin, for America and for the Western World, when Dwight D. Eisenhower takes his presidential oath.” Eisenhower would unite Americans to achieve great goals with a practical program outlined in his inaugural. He would call for “a renewal of faith” to end the “political squalor” of the Truman years. It would be a “wonderfully busy” year as John Foster Dulles reorganized the State Department and the administration took a bold course in Korea and firm one in Indochina. Congress and the White House would have a new relationship based on the cooperation between Eisenhower and Taft. Of course, the Eisenhower Administration would not lead to “a political golden age” because the great problems of the day could not be solved without a great deal of friction. It was encouraging, though, that Eisenhower’s advisors planned on addressing so many problems at once. “American Government has too long been languid and palsied. The biggest trouble, at home and abroad, has been the loss of vigor and self-confidence.” It was “the moment of the greatest danger.” The Alsops wanted action and argued that the times demanded it. “No

President,” they wrote, with considerable exaggeration, “not even Abraham Lincoln, has taken office with such a heavy burden of immediate responsibility, amid such dangers, or surrounded by such difficulties.” But the President would succeed. George Gallup reported that most Americans thought the world would be a more peaceful with Eisenhower running the country.

Lippmann predicted that Eisenhower and Dulles would move cautiously at first. The senior pundit had great hope that Eisenhower could restore the proper working relationship between Congress and the executive branch, after years of distortion by Truman—and even by Franklin Roosevelt. He was sure Eisenhower’s leadership would restore faith in the executive branch after seven years of Harry Truman. Finally, a nice side effect of Eisenhower’s presidency would be that the Republican Party would have a stake in the political success of the executive branch for the first time in a long time.

Eisenhower’s pace impressed Arthur Krock. He remembered how it had taken Truman, by his estimate, two years to become comfortable in office. “The atmosphere of leadership that surrounds him [Eisenhower] is as fresh as it is charged with power and vitality.” According to Krock, Eisenhower’s performances in his first press conferences were the best since Woodrow Wilson. Not only was Eisenhower honest, frank, and sincere, but also, for him to act otherwise, “would be a hateful chore.” Krock was particularly impressed by Eisenhower’s response to a comment made by Adlai Stevenson that the new Republican Administration would someday be known as “the big deal.” As

59 Ibid.
Krock recounted the answer, Eisenhower “said simply he could not believe anyone could think that he, who loved the United States and its people, knew thousands of them and had commanded their youth in war, could do or contemplate anything that would not be in the interest of them all.” As with Stewart Alsop, Eisenhower’s sincerity impressed Krock. “The way General Eisenhower said that, as much as the words themselves, is one important reason why he led victorious armies and is President today.” Krock was frustrated by a lack of cooperation from other administration officials, but he did not criticize Eisenhower personally.

The Alsop brothers warned that Eisenhower still faced tough issues without simple solutions, and as early as January of 1953 they began to hammer home the theme of Eisenhower’s naiveté and inactivity. Certainly, the situation in Korea had not improved, and it had no simple solution. Eisenhower was now perhaps “a bit more sympathetic today that he was before election….” They warned that Taft would dominate Eisenhower and set the political agenda. After Charles E. Wilson’s nomination for Secretary of Defense ran into some trouble, the brothers warned about the “overconfidence, verging almost on arrogance, that led the business leaders in the Eisenhower Cabinet not to divest themselves of stock holdings in companies doing business with the Government.” They were certain—and rightly certain—of their own good intentions.” This kind of overconfidence was dangerous. Wilson’s comment about

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64 Wilson was the former head of General Motors and Eisenhower’s choice to be Secretary of Defense.
the mutually beneficial relationship between General Motors (which he had previously
headed) and the United States was indicative of a worrisome naiveté. According to the
Alsops, Taft would have to come in and fix the problem, thereby increasing his own
influence. Eisenhower had blown his “golden chance to dominate the Congress such as
no President has had since Franklin Roosevelt in 1932” with a combination of
inexperience and overconfidence. It was not Eisenhower’s fault, since “he is not a
practical politician, quite naturally.” The people around Eisenhower had failed him.
They accused Herbert Brownell— one of the General’s closest aides in the transition and
the next Attorney General— of being “a less practiced politician than most people
thought.” Already Eisenhower had missed his chance to act in a more forceful manner.
Now it would be “immensely more difficult for President Eisenhower to develop policies
which do not suit Senator Taft.” The brightest hope for Eisenhower was that he might be
able to turn things around because of his tremendous popular support.

The pundits were incorrect in their assumptions about Eisenhower’s lack of
political skill, intelligence, and experience. Eisenhower had risen from obscurity to
organize operation OVERLORD (the D-Day invasion of Europe), one of the most
complex undertakings in human history. He had worked with some of the greatest
statesmen of all time, and had managed the egos of George Patton, Douglas MacArthur,

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65 During Wilson’s confirmation hearings, Senator Robert Hendrickson of New Jersey asked
Wilson whether his considerable financial holdings or former position in General Motors would influence
his decision making. Wilson replied, “I thought what was good for our country was good for General
Motors, and vice versa.” Democrats misrepresented this statement and repeated it as, “What is good for
General Motors is good for our country.” Herbert Parmet, Eisenhower and the American Crusades (New

66 Joseph and Stewart Alsop, “Taft’s Dominance In Ike’s Congress,” Washington Post, 19 January
1953, 8.
and Bernard Montgomery. Eisenhower liked to present himself as more common than he actually was, but the pundits should have known better.

On the day of his inauguration, the Washington Post ran on its front page a grand photo of a smiling Eisenhower. The headlines on one side of the portrait warned, “His Biggest Problem is Worldwide,”67 but the other declared that the “Capitol Sees Long Period of Harmony.”68 Writers praised Eisenhower’s military career as good preparation for office. Democrats predicted a long “honeymoon” period with Congress. George Gallup described how Eisenhower’s inauguration climaxed “one of the most amazing political stories in American history.” Few men had ever experienced as “prolonged and overwhelming popularity” as Eisenhower. “The public literally would not let him rest on his well-earned military laurels.” Public opinion had kept his name in the forefront of politics since the end of the Second World War. Eisenhower could have won on either ticket. “Most voters didn’t know whether he was a Republican or Democrat—but they didn’t seem to care.” Americans had “practically dragged” Eisenhower from his NATO post to run for president. On the great issue of the day, the Korean War, only nine percent of those polled believed Eisenhower’s opponent could best handle the situation.69

While Drew Pearson was content to merely muse on Eisenhower’s prospects for keeping the peace, the Alsop brothers reminded their readers that the fate of the free world rested on the new President’s shoulders.70 The Alsops believed the Republican Party needed to be shaped up for action. They worried that the “real nature of the

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70 Drew Pearson, “Thoughts on Ride Along Avenue,” Washington Post, 20 January 1953, 35B.
Eisenhower program remains unclear, even after the inaugural.” Eisenhower had to find “bold, positive solutions” that did not merely continue what they vaguely defined as the failed Truman policies of the past. While the Truman Administration never had enough power to address the roots of fundamental problems, Eisenhower did, and the Alsop brothers would judge him “by whether he uses that power.” They remained optimistic, though. “There can be little doubt… that Eisenhower is a man with the courage and wisdom to search for fundamental solutions, if the little men of politics do not hamstring him.”

It seemed as if most people, pundits included, were optimistic. Even Harry Truman’s farewell address, which had outlined his own accomplishments, was forward-looking. George Gallup’s polling revealed that the American public wanted Eisenhower to focus on government corruption and the Korean War, both Eisenhower campaign issues.

But the hopeful confidence of the elite journalists in Eisenhower’s ability had some troubling undercurrents. Lippmann believed Eisenhower would put together a good administration as long as nobody bought into “the rather lazy notion that running a big business and running a big government are the same sort of thing.” This was as much of a warning as it was a hope, since he did worry that Eisenhower’s administration would fall into this “lazy notion.” In the weeks, months, and years to come, Lippmann would have plenty of opportunities to remember this prejudice about Eisenhower.

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Reston summed up his criticism that Eisenhower was sincere, but unable to think in complex terms with one sentence: “He may not be a thinker, but he is a believer.” In the multifaceted, Cold War world, Eisenhower might be outmatched. His immediate problem of the Korean War presented a good example of Reston’s thinking on Eisenhower: “He may not have any clear conception of the way to peace in Korea and the world, but he believes there is a way.”

Some of Pearson’s predictions were shrewd. He guessed that Eisenhower would run foreign policy himself and keep Dulles abroad as a “foreign-policy salesman.” In a short time, Pearson would believe the opposite, but his initial assessment was correct. He also figured that Eisenhower would put his connections in the Army to good use, which would be the case. Some of his predictions were less prescient, such as his claim that Eisenhower would be a one-term president.

Finally, the best hopes of Americans seemed to be confirmed when Dulles announced he believed Eisenhower could stop the wars in Korea and Indochina. At the same time, Truman looked ill-informed yet again when he announced that he did not believe that the Soviets had a working atomic bomb. In short, James Reston’s early predictions were still holding as the conventional wisdom. Eisenhower was not Truman. He was honest and sincere, and the world was a complex place. Eisenhower had certainly done his part to contribute to this image, referring to himself as a “simple

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75 Drew Pearson, “President to Run Foreign Policy,” *Washington Post*, 22 January 1953, 23B.
soldier” or as “just a farm boy.”  But Eisenhower’s short-lived time as the “dream boy,” a figure who would be imagined as everything Truman was not, had passed.

Chapter 5

Years of Frustration

Never was there a more winning personality projected to the American people, and to millions beyond their borders, and television has magnified its effect.¹

-Arthur Krock

For all of his popularity among the American people, Eisenhower eventually fell to Truman-like depths in the eyes of the pundits by the end of it. They did not like his leadership style, pace, priorities, or his handling of Senator Joseph McCarthy specifically and the Cold War generally. Eisenhower’s age and health problems, including a heart attack in 1955, led the elite political journalists to wonder whether the President would “coast” through his term in office. And the inactivity extended beyond American borders as well, since, for a while at least, the Korean War seemed to drag on and Communists threatened an American ally in Indochina.

Eisenhower did his best to ignore the opinion journalists, believing that they had little expertise to offer. They wanted action but the President was loath to let them set the pace of his term in office. He blamed newspapers for creating the McCarthy stir, and it struck him as hypocritical that the same newspapers would put McCarthy on the front page, only to denounce his administration on the editorial page for failing to control the Red-baiting Senator. The President would not publicly attack Senator McCarthy with enough conviction to satisfy the professional opinion-makers. Eisenhower did not see the pundits socially, and he did not approve of others in his administration doing so.

Their dislike for Eisenhower’s leadership, along with his continuing popularity, made for an uncomfortable disparity for political journalists. They could only conclude that the American people were suffering from a kind of massive, nationwide, delusional episode, rendering them hell-bent on ignoring the problems of the Cold War. By 1956, the accepted conventional wisdom among opinion-makers described Eisenhower as an old and amiable, if aloof, leader who was willing to let the country drift and aides govern in his place. The pundits had thought Truman incompetent, but at least Truman was unpopular. The elite journalists could only conclude that Americans did not mind being led in such a way, and they found the public opinion trends of the 1950s downright disturbing.

At the outset, Krock worried about Eisenhower’s penchant for secrecy and how the new President had been “notably uncommunicative to the representatives of the press.” He reported that many aides would “look apprehensively over their shoulders” when they spoke to reporters, worried that word of even a harmless talk would get back to the General. Krock doubted that Eisenhower would truly have a “no-leak” administration, since his story about Eisenhower’s wishes was, in fact, based on leaks. He warned that many Presidents had wanted the same thing, and none had achieved it thus far. Krock advised Eisenhower that most leaks were harmless, that they were part of accepted practice in government when they did not involve national security, and that “the intolerable alternative is total secrecy.” 2 A policy more frustrating to journalists who made their living off leaks would be difficult to imagine.

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The earliest criticism of Eisenhower’s leadership came at the one hundred-days mark. Roosevelt had set the standard in 1932 with his famous flurry of legislation to deal with the depression. Eisenhower fell short of the Roosevelt standard. Krock hoped Eisenhower would pick up the pace. He pointed out that the President had promised vigorous leadership—a “great crusade,” to be precise—during the campaign, but the veteran columnist told his readers that Eisenhower had gotten off to a slow start, due to the overwhelming complexities of the Cold War and the delicate needs of America’s allies. Anyone expecting “the pace and decisiveness” of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s first one hundred days would be let down. Moreover, Krock’s columns argued that Eisenhower misjudged the Soviet threat. The Soviets were wily negotiators, and the American government needed to remain nimble in negotiations if it wanted to keep pace with its global rival.3 Krock was not optimistic that Eisenhower or his team could handle the threat.

The Washington Post’s editorial page took note of the seemingly strange disparity between Eisenhower’s popularity and his performance in office. Clearly, the American people saw something in Eisenhower that the editors did not. There were some bright spots, as the Administration seemed to be moving against McCarthy. But Eisenhower needed to get moving, assert his leadership, and “rescue his programs from the Republican troglodytes—and perhaps repair some of the damage abroad.” They gave him high marks for his “wisdom and patience” in Korea but worried about the performance of some cabinet members. The overall assessment was that the picture remained unclear. Eisenhower had healed some wounds but also taken some “bad

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advice.” It remained to be seen whether moderation could win the day.4 Up to this point, the American people supported Eisenhower—his approval rating stood at seventy-three percent5—but what would he do with this approval?

Lippmann did not believe a strategy of moderation would work against McCarthy, and he used the words of Eisenhower’s inaugural address to make his case. He argued that Eisenhower had claimed that the primary responsibility for protecting America from the disloyal or dangerous rested with the Executive branch. If that was the case, then Eisenhower should guard his turf and resist any attempt by Congress (and McCarthy) to interfere with this executive responsibility. Lippmann acknowledged that lawyers still needed to work out the limits of the Congressional powers to investigate. And he made a strong argument for what would become known as executive privilege:

Yet no one, I suppose, would argue that there is no limit. Senator McCarthy could not, for example, compel the President himself to let himself be examined by the subcommittee, or even by Mr. Cohn and Mr. Schine. But it is fair to say that there is no clear boundary line, that in fact there is a vast legal no man’s land between the power of Congress to investigate and the independence of the Executive.6

Eisenhower needed to move into that critical gap, where there was “no law.” In that “lawless borderland McCarthyism flourishes,” and the balance between the branches of government could be destroyed. Eisenhower did not need to engage with McCarthy, but he did need to protect the independence of the Executive Branch, and Lippmann was willing to support an interpretation of presidential power that would later be criticized as leading to an “imperial presidency.” His 1953 argument indicated that he was more

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worried about the demagogues in Congress than a rogue President. To that end, Lippmann believed that Eisenhower had to execute his constitutional duty and protect Congress from ruining its own reputation and running down the presidency.7

Marquis Childs sounded a similar theme in his six-month assessment of Eisenhower. Like the other pundits, Childs reminded his readers that the problems were large, perhaps too large for one man, and Eisenhower had to do more than he had “yet seen fit to undertake.” Childs worried about Eisenhower’s tendency to allow “drift” in both foreign and domestic affairs. The President remained “a popular symbol above the sweaty battle,” but it was unclear how long it would take before “unreasonable” expectations would lead to “disillusion” even if “it seemingly does not attach to the President.” Childs believed that the complexities of the modern presidency had trapped and overwhelmed Eisenhower. Americans had wrongly looked to Eisenhower as “a king of magic,” and they would be disappointed if they expected Eisenhower to move against the forces of the “twentieth century in which trouble has been compounded on a scale rarely seen in history.”8 But the “unreasonable” expectations came only from the editorial pages and chattering classes.

Eisenhower’s response to these calls for action did not bode well for those seeking bold and dramatic leadership. In one press conference, Eisenhower preached the value of the very tactics that would drive the pundits to frustration. He was “an exponent of the theory of gradualism in Government, the slow, laborious process of translating the will of common-sense Americans into national policy.” While a perfectly sensible response, all the reporters wanted to know was how this would help Eisenhower answer

7 Ibid.
McCarthy. The President deflected the question while noting that “You cannot get ahead… merely by indulging extremist views and listening to them. What do they bring? They don’t bring majority action.”9 The pundits were calling for bold action from their Chief Executive, but Eisenhower was determined to play the McCarthy issue more subtly.

Eisenhower could get away with this style of leadership because on the great matters of the day, Americans trusted Ike. On matters of defense, the differences with Truman were striking. When, in 1953, Truman asserted that Eisenhower’s defense cuts threatened American security, only seventeen percent (less than one-tenth of Republicans and one-fourth of Democrats) of Americans polled by the Gallup organization believed him. Most Americans polled (fifty-five percent) trusted that Eisenhower was only cutting waste and extravagance in the budget.10 The pundits believed otherwise.

Just as Eisenhower’s pace in domestic issues (particularly anything associated with McCarthy) drove the elite political journalists to fits of anger, the President’s Cold War strategy could never be aggressive enough to satisfy the columnists. Drew Pearson predicted that the cuts in defense spending would drive Eisenhower’s poll numbers down.11 Joseph Alsop’s columns continued to call for more money to respond to reports of advances in Soviet aviation.12 Stewart Alsop’s dispatches from Europe warned about

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9 Also perhaps notable, is the process that set off the line of questions that led to a front-page story. Members of the Washington press corps had read the columns of Lippmann and Childs and asked Eisenhower if he wanted to respond with his own assessment of his first six months in office. It is a good example of pundits creating news. Edward T. Folliard, “Eisenhower’s 6-Month Score: Progress—but He’d Like More,” Washington Post, 23 July 1953, 1-2.
the grim realities of the Soviet puppet governments. It was frustrating for the opinion-makers to watch the American people continue to support a President who seemed to put off what they thought to be the hard choices to meet the Soviet threat.

And an announcement from overseas helped Eisenhower’s political standing with the American people yet again. On Monday, July 27, 1953, news of the Korean truce hit the front pages of the newspapers. The reaction from the pundits was decidedly less enthusiastic than that of the American people. Eisenhower’s approval rating jumped five percentage points—from sixty-nine percent to seventy-four percent. Childs and Lippmann warned of the tough peace to follow. Specifically, Childs worried that the next problem would come as the United States tried to work out its policy with China. Drew Pearson outlined how the United States had to make sure that war did not break out again, rebuild Korea and reform Korean politics. In Europe, Stewart Alsop called for “a great effort, involving genuine risks, in an attempt to secure German unification and the withdrawal of the Red Army from the center of Europe.” Privately, he doubted that Eisenhower could pull it off, but he pushed the idea in his columns nonetheless. “In the most unlikely event that such an effort succeeds, the cold war will be half won. If it fails, the West will at least know where it stands.”

Krock again reminded his readers of the “fateful and complex problems and heavier responsibilities” that Eisenhower had to face in the atomic age. He was willing to be patient as Eisenhower grappled with problems—such as Communist aggression—

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14 Edwards and Gallup, Presidential Approval, 12.
16 Drew Pearson, “Challenge of Korea Rebuilding,” Washington Post, 30 July 1953, 39. Pearson also warned that Korea had to avoid the “creeping socialism” Taft had been warning about as well.
that his predecessors could not solve. If Eisenhower wanted to reexamine the world, that would be fine, provided he would eventually come up with solutions that would “repay in overflowing measure the time he is borrowing.” Americans seemed to be as patient as Krock, with Eisenhower’s approval rating standing at sixty-five percent in October 1953.18

Lippmann had little faith in public opinion, but if Eisenhower’s popularity continued, he would plead for the President to understand his own mandate. Eisenhower had acted ably as a “restorer of order and peace after an age of violence and faction,” but if Americans were looking for a crusader, they should look elsewhere. At the age of sixty, the President could not be expected to acquire the “dynamic” or “progressive” traits necessary to be a “crusader.” At any rate, Lippmann understood that few people wanted any kind of crusade in 1952, since by that time, “the Western world had had all the dynamism, all the innovation, all the crusading that human nature can take” during the years of depression, war, and Cold War. To continue on the path of the previous two decades would have invited “catastrophe abroad and dissension at home.” Eisenhower “was to fill a role which in the unfolding of history needed to be filled.” If the country wanted dynamic leadership, they had elected the wrong man. But they did not, and they had not.19 Lippmann was correct about what people wanted, but he still longed for the dynamic leadership of Franklin Roosevelt.

When Eisenhower finally, publicly, split with McCarthy in December of 1953, the elite journalists were still dissatisfied with the administration’s tactics. In private,

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18 Edwards and Gallup, Presidential Approval, 12.
Secretary of State John Foster Dulles could assure the Alsops that the President stood squarely against the Wisconsin Senator, but Eisenhower would not denounce McCarthy by name. After one of Eisenhower’s thinly-veiled attacks on McCarthy, James Reston recorded McCarthy’s response: “Do you think he could have been referring to me?” Reston and the other pundits would have preferred an attack on McCarthy that no one could mistake.

The Alsop brothers did not believe that Eisenhower had devised this quiet strategy for dealing with McCarthy, and they attacked the people in the administration who they believed to be the strategists. Because of his aloofness and naiveté, Eisenhower had been “sold a good many lemons in the name of ‘smart politics.’” The worst of these lemons was the McCarthy strategy worked out by “amateur Machiavellis” guiding the political decisions within the White House. As they understood it, Eisenhower’s adopted strategy was to ignore McCarthy publicly while firing workers as “security risks” who were, in fact, no such thing. They did not mourn the loss of the bad workers—as they understood it, most workers were actually fired for incompetence—but the Alsops believed that Eisenhower’s actions perpetuated McCarthy’s phony numbers game. McCarthy could claim that the people Eisenhower fired were the known Communists from his infamous list. The Alsop brothers had heard rumors that Eisenhower was turning away from this shell game, but the episode revealed that Eisenhower’s political skills were no match for the rogue Wisconsin Senator. Eisenhower’s “amateur Machiavellis” needed ‘to

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understand that they are no equals to Sen. McCarthy, when it comes to slick political flim-flam.\textsuperscript{21}

James Reston’s assessment of Eisenhower’s first year was that the President’s team was “industrious, pragmatic, amateurish but orderly, punctual, frugal, and pedestrian.” In contrast to the “earthy” and “unpredictable” Truman years, Eisenhower was a fine contrast, but Reston worried about his lack of eloquence. Indeed, Reston found the entire Eisenhower administration to be “humorless, obvious, unintellectual (almost anti-intellectual) and lacking… in crusading spirit.” Further, Reston claimed that Eisenhower had put peace and economic prosperity above all other interests. Reston thought Eisenhower’s first year predictably unremarkable, but “conservative Governments are not supposed to produce startling innovations. They are supposed to conserve.”\textsuperscript{22}

Eisenhower rarely thought about what pundits wanted. In January of 1954, Eisenhower mused on the motivations of opinion columnists, and he was not impressed with their analytical skills: “They love to deal in personalities; in their minds, personalities make stories.” Eisenhower went even further in guessing that most journalists, and columnists in particular, had chosen their career path out of a desire for self-aggrandizement. “Everybody loves distinction.” He wrote in his diary that if “a writer can achieve a by-line in the paper… he gets a certain thrill out of seeing his name in black type at the head of his own column every day.” Rarely would they ever doubt their own opinions, once stated. Rarely were columnists refuted or held responsible for

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\item[\textsuperscript{21}] Joseph Alsop, \textit{The Reporter’s Trade}, 222-224. From a column originally published 20 January 1954.
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their opinions. It was a case of, in Eisenhower’s words, “authorial omnipotence.” The only requirement of a columnist was that he must produce a column. “Consequently, the author feels that his word is authoritative and that, as a result, he has a great influence on world events.” Eisenhower drew on his many years of experiences to refute that notion:

For more than twelve years, I have been… at spots that have been considered newsworthy. Consequently, I have seen, when they occurred, the actual incidents reported, or I have clearly understood the motives of the individuals written about. Rarely is such writing accurate.23

While Eisenhower mulled over the ineptitude of political journalists, he faced two high profile challenges to his leadership: the Bricker Amendment and the Army-McCarthy hearings. The constitutional amendment proposed by Ohio Senator John W. Bricker would have given unprecedented powers to Congress to oversee and nullify foreign policy decisions and treaties. Arthur Krock believed Eisenhower would shed the self-imposed shackles of leadership and take a more active role in defeating the amendment.24 In fact, the fight over the Bricker Amendment required much of Eisenhower’s time and political skill during the first two years of his presidency, but it never generated the headlines like the fight between Joseph McCarthy and the U.S. Army.

For two months in the spring of 1954, the U.S. Army and Senator McCarthy held the attention of the nation. Around forty million Americans followed the hearings on their televisions and radios. The purpose of the hearings was to find out whether Senator McCarthy and his aide, Roy Cohn, had pressured the Army to give special treatment to a

part-time member of their staff, David Schine, who was a private in the Army. In addition, the hearings were supposed to determine whether the Army had used its authority over Schine in an attempt to limit McCarthy’s investigation of Communist influence in the armed forces. The coverage led Eisenhower to write to an old friend that: “The McCarthy-Army argument, and its reporting, are close to disgusting. It saddens me that I must feel ashamed for the United States Senate.”25 McCarthy’s accusations of Communist infiltration of the military would ultimately be his undoing, but for those two painful months, the pundits hammered Eisenhower.

Drew Pearson believed that the Army-McCarthy hearings made Eisenhower look almost as bad as McCarthy. He wrote in his diary that the two most important organizations in Eisenhower’s life (the Republican party and the Army) were hurt by the hearings. The Army looked like a bastion of “pull and special privilege” while the Republican Party was “disrupted.” Pearson ended his May 1 diary entry with a special condemnation for Eisenhower: “He has made no move, however, to do a thing about McCarthy.”26 Pearson had the impression that Eisenhower was content to coast through his presidential years. The columnist recalled stories of Eisenhower’s critics who charged that the President “wanted to be like the President of France and just go around pinning medals on people and kissing babies.” He believed that Eisenhower stood idly by while Dulles ran foreign affairs and McCarthy tore “the country asunder.”27 In fact, McCarthy’s influence was overstated by this time. Gallup polls throughout early May

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26 Pearson, Diaries, 311.
27 Pearson, Diaries, 311. In the same diary entry, Pearson also recounted a story he had heard about Dulles visiting Eisenhower before a foreign trip. After shaking hands with Dulles the President reportedly said: “Now, just where are you going Foster?”
revealed that McCarthy had lost the support of most Americans. According to polling data, a McCarthy endorsement would hurt a candidate more than it would help.28

Still, the Alsops continued to clamor for Eisenhower to act more aggressively and attack McCarthy publicly. They turned the dreaded phrase “appeasement” on Eisenhower. The President could never have peace in his time with McCarthy continuing to rampage through every branch of government and the military. After fourteen months of fumbling and attempting to “appease” McCarthy, the Alsops hoped that Eisenhower had learned “the old lesson that appeasement of men like McCarthy never pays.”29 Privately, the Alsops were even more livid. After Eisenhower failed to deliver a promised rebuke of the Senator at a press conference, Joseph Alsop exclaimed in an audible whisper: “Why the yellow son of a bitch!”30

Lippmann found the whole mess to be “disgraceful,” “damaging” and “squalid” and believed the country had to be made aware of “what grave damage McCarthyism has done to America.” Of course, McCarthy was bad, but Eisenhower’s lack of leadership was worse. The real crime was that “the Government has allowed itself to be intimidated by an ambitious and ruthless demagogue.” The government was in “disorder” over the affair and Americans needed to ask, “what it is that has gone so wrong?” Lippmann decried that “the sanity and the security of the country, its self-respect and its liberties are shaken and impaired.” The Senate was partly to blame, but it was not the “decisive” cause of the “failure.” Lippmann argued that McCarthyism was distinctly and

28 George Gallup, “43% Call McCarthy ‘Blessing’ Drawback,” Washington Post and Times-Herald, 2 May 1954, 11M. See also the editorial page the following day.
30 Merry, Taking On The World, 274.
specifically “an invasion of the prerogatives of other branches of the Government, particularly the executive branch. It is for the executive to repel the invasion, to resist the usurpation, to defend its constitutional prerogatives.” In a perfect world, the Senate could control itself, making it “unnecessary for an amiable and peace-loving President to fight for the rights of his office. But the Senate is not nice, and so it will tolerate and connive at the abuses of McCarthy until and unless the President, whose Administration is being abused, stands up and says so far and no further.” When that happened, the Senate would rally to the President.31

Lippmann’s subsequent columns continued to stress the same themes. He called the Army-McCarthy hearings “one of the great constitutional crises of our history.” Eisenhower would not act, or even indicate he believed a crisis existed. Lippmann was dumbfounded that Eisenhower would not defend himself or his office even as McCarthy’s actions were a clear and dangerous threat to the constitutional prerogatives of the Executive branch. He charged: “This affair is degrading and disgracing the United States Government with our own people and in the eyes of the whole world. The remedy for it is to vindicate the principle of the Constitution. The medicine of the Constitution is the cure for the evil, and there is no other cure.” Because the authority of the President was at issue, only the President could fix the problem and restore balance to the American government.

If Eisenhower did not understand the issue, Lippmann suggested that “someone whom General Eisenhower trusts” should explain it to him. Perhaps he needed a “lawyer to advise him on how to defend and recover the rights of his office.” Lippmann realized

that Eisenhower was wary of demeaning the dignity of his office—Lippmann had no desire for Eisenhower to turn into Truman in this regard—but “for some reason or other, let us say his inexperience, he is inclined to exaggerate grossly the effectiveness of issuing statements.” Lippmann thought that at the end of the sorry episode, Eisenhower should go before the American people and admit that he had failed to defend constitutional principles for the “sake of harmony.” Of course, Eisenhower did no such thing. Nevertheless, McCarthy’s approval rating continued to slide, with only about one-third of Americans approving of how he did his job. Meanwhile, Gallup recorded that Eisenhower’s approval rating held at a healthy sixty-four percent.

The Alsop brothers took stock of the press criticism of Eisenhower and found that the problem was in the president’s character—he was too nice. They recalled a quotation by Lord Acton that “all great men are bad men.” Eisenhower was not a bad man, and they wished him to be a great man. The Alsops were not looking for dictatorship, but it was clear that “Eisenhower plainly dislikes the brutal, rough and tumble that is a feature of our political life. Hence, quite often he is working in a medium he does not enjoy.” It was “the admirable traits of the President’s character that inhibit him in the ugly job of political leadership.” The truly damning feature though, was that the Eisenhower administration was “just about as bad at explaining itself to the American public” as the previous administration. Eisenhower would be well advised to avoid the “Daddy knows best” attitude he had been striking recently. Damning as it was, the Alsops were alone in their praise of Eisenhower’s handling of McCarthy. The Administration’s policy toward

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33 George Gallup, “McCarthy Rating Slips to 35%,” Washington Post and Times Herald, 23 May 1954, 5B.
McCarthy had been “sensible and consistent” even if it had been “imperfectly explained.” They continued, “the Administration is doing a great deal better job than it seems to be doing. But the country doesn’t know it, because the Acheson method of self-explanation is being used.”

Eisenhower’s press secretary James Hagerty wrote in his diary that most reporters understood Eisenhower’s statements on McCarthy—except for the “New Dealers and fuzzy boys” in the press corps, by whom he meant the reporters and columnists dreaming of another Franklin Roosevelt. Hagerty specifically mentioned Reston’s characterization in the New York Times of Eisenhower “turning the other cheek” on McCarthy. Hagerty confided to his diary: “Nuts. All these people want is to have the President get down in gutter with Joe.” McCarthy destroyed his own political career when Americans finally saw his tactics on television, but the pundits gave Eisenhower little credit. While the McCarthy problem festered and then finally subsided at the end of 1954, the pundits held on to their belief that Eisenhower had not been firm enough with the Senator and worried about the direction of the Cold War. If Eisenhower could not handle one Wisconsin Senator, the thinking went, how could he handle the Cold War battles brewing on the other side of the world? The irony of questioning the organizer of D-Day about winning battles in foreign lands is almost too rich to contemplate.

Marquis Childs was concerned about the loss of Western Allies if the United States failed to come to the aid of the French in Indochina. He warned that the predictions of the gloomiest prophecy would come true if the French lost Indochina.

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Thailand would follow along with the rest of Southeast Asia. The Communist world could then put economic pressure on Japan to capitulate, threatening the “the strategic perimeter considered essential to American security.” The only thing left would be “the most disadvantageous circumstances that America might be driven to a war of survival.” Childs entertained the idea that this “distant peril… may not be so distant at that.”

The Alsop brothers were also convinced that the Eisenhower administration had not fought the Cold War vigorously enough. In a column titled “They Fight for Us!” the brothers wrote of the tenuous hold and valiant struggle of the French defenders of Dien Bien Phu. If they lost their fight in Indochina, it was because the leaders of the West had caused it with “their divisions and delays, by their weakness and their compromises.” The administration made a mistake if it allowed the French fighters to be overwhelmed by the Communists, and America had to recognize that Dien Bien Phu was a turning point for the Western alliance. “Here, in this Indochina valley,” they wrote, “the dam can break and the flood of communism can pour out over Asia.” If Eisenhower continued his benign neglect, the results would teach America a hard lesson and leave “fearful odds” in future conflicts.

As Dien Bien Phu fell in early May 1954, Drew Pearson described the weakness of the American position at the resulting Geneva conference. As long as the Russians avoided pulling an “unforeseen boner,” the conference would represent “the worst diplomatic defeat for the United States in 20 years.” Eisenhower’s leadership had revealed to the world that the United States did not hold the “initiative, the balance of

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power,” or “the trump cards” to wage the Cold War effectively. Communism had replaced Nazism, and Eisenhower had failed to unite Americans for the challenge. “A nation divided against itself cannot lead, and our European allies know it,” Pearson opined. “That’s why we have lost world initiative.” He believed Eisenhower had hesitated in Indochina because of the distraction of Korea. While Eisenhower waited, the Communists moved.38 The next day the Washington Post ran the banner headline: “REDS CRUSH FORT HEROES: ‘We Won’t Surrender!’ Is Last Word”39

Eisenhower would not move against McCarthy. He would not back the French fighters in Southeast Asia. It was becoming clear to the elite opinion-makers that Eisenhower was no more likely to value their advice than Truman had been. The President liked Arthur Krock and generally admired the reporting in the New York Herald Tribune, but he felt no need for Krock or any other pundit’s counsel. For Eisenhower and press secretary James Hagerty, accuracy and objectivity were more important than analysis; conversely, any hint of bias from reporters could set Hagerty off, especially when it came from the New York Times or the Washington Post. Eisenhower and Hagerty believed both papers were capable of hitting “below the belt” if administration policy did not jibe with their beliefs. After one such incident, Hagerty recorded in his diary that ”Reston and the fuzzy boys [including Edward Folliard of the Washington Post] know better, but can’t get forget to play their favorite side of the record—straight New Deal in thinking and in writing.” In some cases, Eisenhower and Hagerty would simply make an end-around the pundits and release a taped statement to radio, television, and the newsreels. In Hagerty’s words, “to hell with slanted reporters. We’ll go directly

to the people who can hear exactly what President said without reading warped and slanted stories.”

Reston and Hagerty did eventually get together and work through some of their misunderstandings. Reston was upset that the Administration ignored him, and Hagerty tried to soothe his hurt feelings by asking him to call more often. Hagerty felt that it was important to have a good relationship with the *New York Times*. It was critical, even.

“This is very important to us because the *Times* is looked upon—rightly or wrongly—by the diplomatic corps here in Washington and abroad as more or less an official spokesman of the administration. They think that policy or reported policy positions on foreign affairs printed in the *Times* are the gospel truth.” Hagerty was happy with his peacemaking attempts and hoped that might translate into some “good will” between Reston and the administration.

Despite his earlier fondness for the columnist, Eisenhower soon grew impatient with Drew Pearson’s sniping. In late March 1954, both Pearson and the *New York Times* broke the story of the so-called *Lucky Dragon* affair. A Japanese tuna trawler by that name had been caught in the radioactive fallout of a hydrogen bomb test in the Pacific. The story publicized the dangers of radiation when one of the Japanese fishermen died, but Eisenhower reserved his anger for Pearson. Pearson would not let the story die. Eisenhower told Hagerty: “Maybe you have to talk to his men, but as far as I’m

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concerned I wouldn’t let him cover anybody in government, and if anyone was caught talking to him or his men, I’d fire them on the spot.”42

Unlike Pearson, Krock managed to stay in the favor of the Eisenhower Administration. Arthur Krock’s assessment of Eisenhower in August 1954 was generally favorable. He thought the President to be a “wiser but definitely not a sadder man” in light of his experiences in office. Like the other pundits, Krock believed Eisenhower had picked up some badly needed experience in domestic and legislative affairs.43 According to Krock, Eisenhower’s more recent experiences had sometimes left him “learning things and making discoveries” about politics that “have annoyed or even grieved him” even as he maintained his optimism. Some political relationships had not worked out, and Krock wrote that he found Eisenhower “astonished at revelations of the timidity of some politicians facing an election.” At least in this category, “General Eisenhower got some useful and needed education.”44

As the 1954 midterm elections approached, James Reston was still writing about Eisenhower as a political amateur. He could not understand how the “central figure in the drama… still seems remote and vaguely annoyed by all the fuss” of the campaign. Eisenhower’s performance at one news conference convinced Reston that the President had decided to forgo the rough and tumble politics of the election season. When a reporter asked about the continued charges by Republicans that Democrats had been “soft on Communism,” Reston wrote that Eisenhower was “puzzled, as if he had never heard

42 Ibid., 39.
43 Alone among the pundits, Krock also gave due weight to the political experience that Eisenhower had picked up “as Supreme Commander of the armed forces of sixteen nations during the Second World War and as chief of the international units which make up the military arm of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.” Arthur Krock, “General As President Learns About Politics,” New York Times 22 August 1954, E3.
44 Ibid.
of any such charges.” It was difficult to believe, but Reston wrote that he did believe it. Even if it was someone as close to Eisenhower as Vice President Nixon who had been making such charges, Reston concluded of Eisenhower role that “things are done in his name that he knows not of.”

The results of the 1954 elections indicated that Eisenhower’s party was not as popular as their war hero standard bearer. The Democrats took control of the Senate by a one-vote margin, and gained nineteen seats in the House, giving them a 232-203 advantage. Republicans also polled poorly in gubernatorial races, losing eight governorships to Democrats. Eisenhower’s approval numbers, however, remained around the seventy percent mark throughout late 1954 and most of 1955, until another event drove his ratings even higher.

Eisenhower’s heart attack on September 24, 1955, did little to ease the fears of the pundits that Eisenhower was letting the country “drift” through critical years. But even as the pundits grew more skeptical of Eisenhower’s abilities, the President’s approval rating shot up eight points in the first poll taken after the heart attack. Despite these numbers, the elite political columnists tried to convince Eisenhower to resign, or not run for reelection. At the same time, they took the occasion of his heart attack to think about Eisenhower’s legacy in precise terms. Their assessments, while moderately favorable, were hardly ringing endorsements of Eisenhower’s leadership.

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Lippmann addressed Eisenhower’s health (cautiously) in a column on Presidential succession. In his assessment, Eisenhower had obviously lived an important life, serving his country ably for many years. But the President’s good qualities had a downside. Lippmann concluded that Americans were willing to ignore the great issues as long as Eisenhower was at the helm. The President’s sunny disposition had succeeded in convincing Americans that problems were far away, and they need not concern themselves with working out solutions.

Joseph Alsop managed to compliment the sitting President in comparison with Truman, but his comments were hardly rousing praise of Eisenhower. He extolled Ike’s ability to restore “sanity and decency” to the country in light of the presumably insane and indecent Truman years. Eisenhower’s single greatest contribution, though, was “bringing us all back to a sense of the true American style—setting that style, in fact, by his own example, and in the most trying circumstances.” Eisenhower had “rather radically re-made this country in his own image. The discords are stilled.” This was faint praise if the columnist considered the stilling of discord to be a bad thing. At the very least, Eisenhower’s actions made it more difficult for Alsop to do his job. “The great issues are still there, and they are still as dangerous and complex as ever.” Expecting Eisenhower to resign or retire at the end of his term, Alsop let the better angels of his nature praise the tone the President had set in the nation. Under Eisenhower, “the great issues can now be discussed calmly and wisely, which is the essential step to finding the answer.” The President’s heart attack also inspired Alsop to praise

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49 Alsop did not blame Truman for the lack of those two important qualities. Rather, Alsop blamed history for making the postwar world so complicated and unsettling.
Eisenhower for restoring the dignity of his office: “Once again, an American President is looked to, by sophisticates and simple people alike, as the friend of peace and the defender of freedom.” This praise was conditional, of course, on Eisenhower leaving office.

Marquis Childs certainly did his part to try and convince Eisenhower to resign. He tried to tempt Eisenhower with the thought that if he were to resign immediately, he would “step out at the top with the Nation never before so prosperous and at least the promise of peace on the distant horizon.” Eisenhower should bow out because he was not likely to accomplish much more, and his presence in office was now not only superfluous but dangerous, given the difficulties of the Cold War. Childs wrote, “The President’s prolonged vacation at a critical phase of the power struggle with the Communists had begun to draw criticism.” To Childs the heart attack illustrated just how much depended on Eisenhower’s frail heartbeat. “So long as he was there, a smiling symbol of prosperity, we could go our own way with little concern for government.”

Joseph Alsop took a slightly different tack. He believed Eisenhower’s presence in the White House encouraged apathy on the part of the American people. Eisenhower’s temporary absence from public life had proven just how inconsequential his presence had been. Joseph Alsop wrote that Washington was going through one of its “vitaly significant annual proofs of who’s boss.” It was not Eisenhower. Alsop also introduced a stereotype that would follow Eisenhower from then on: “Except in periods of crisis, President Eisenhower reigns but does not rule a good deal of the time.” Alsop mulled

over who should make a run for the presidency in 1956, and thought Americans should consider the possibility of a Stevenson win over Nixon.53

Pearson hinted at the dark conspiracy to keep Eisenhower’s health a secret, reminding his broad audience of readers and listeners of Franklin Roosevelt’s health problems. He stated that the Washington insiders had known the “real facts about Eisenhower’s health….” The President was healthy for his age, but, “his ruddy complexion is deceptive and he is not able to remain in the White House or at his desk for average periods of time.” The long weekends at Gettysburg and the golfing trips to Augusta were all part of an elaborate scheme to keep Eisenhower’s health problems “hushed up.”54

While Pearson warned the commoners of dark conspiracies, the other pundits weighed in on the possibilities for the next few years. Lippmann began writing of Eisenhower “muddling through” his convalescence, after which the President could “mark time” until the next election.55 Joseph Alsop reported that Republican political leaders were pushing Eisenhower to run for a second term, and it would be bad for the country if they succeeded. He believed it was “obviously unrealistic and even pretty shocking to continue the pressure on the President to seek another term.” Republicans had attacked Democrats for doing the same thing to Franklin Roosevelt, but he thought this instance was even worse. Alsop argued in his column that Roosevelt’s health in 1944 was better than Eisenhower’s in 1955 and attacked the “common legend” that FDR had been sick all along. He told his readers that Roosevelt had never had “any recent

illnesses more serious than bronchitis” at the time of his death (this was incorrect).

Eisenhower, he wrote, was in far worse shape. Unlike Eisenhower, “battalions of doctors” had certified Roosevelt as “entirely sound.” And in 1956, Eisenhower would be three years older than Roosevelt had been in 1944. If the Republicans continued to pressure Eisenhower to run for reelection in 1956 it was nothing more than “a symptom of Republican disarray. The Republican leaders have no idea, for the moment, which way to turn or what to do or where to look.”56

As 1955 came to a close, Arthur Krock marveled at Eisenhower’s continuing and unique popularity. Just beneath the main headline, in bold letters, Krock’s column proclaimed: “General as President Holds a Place in Public Esteem Which is Now a World-Wide Phenomenon—ABOVE THE PARTY BATTLES.” Far from hurting his reputation around the world, Krock believed that the heart attack had:

…intensified the world-wide sense of the need for him. But even before illness this evaluation had become a modern phenomenon that required no personal sympathy to increase. The magnitude of this estimate of a national hero, and its unabatement even after his embroilment in politics are tributes to a public man almost unique in troubled and controversial times.57

Eisenhower’s winning personality, smile, and grin, along with “a graceful bearing and a strong physique” radiated “what may be called the inner goodness of a man.”

Krock might have been feeling generous in light of the Christmas season, but his column noted two important points. First, even as critics attacked the administration, or its

policies, “the public disposition seems to be that the President is not responsible” for the shortcomings. Second, the Cold War was not going to end during the Eisenhower administration. If the Cold War were to be managed, and not won outright on the battlefield—or perhaps even if it were—then Americans wanted Ike at the helm.

By 1956, many of the elite political journalists believed Eisenhower had done everything within his capabilities. They tired of what they saw as his hands-off style of governing and were frustrated by the President’s enduring popularity. It seemed as if Eisenhower had somehow managed to hypnotize the American people into ignoring the great and complex questions of the day. Even when they agreed with Eisenhower, (his commitment to internationalism, for example) they still found a cloud within the silver lining. Reston believed that, try as they might, the administration could not get around the stubborn fact that “the President is 65 and has had a heart attack; that he is not a well man and is on a restricted schedule, probably for the rest of his life…”

More substantially, in July of 1956, Eisenhower’s inability to unite the Republican Party behind his policies frustrated Walter Lippmann. The senior pundit warned that Eisenhower could not preside over his cabinet as the Vice-President presided over the Senate. Real leadership required more than intervention in the case of a tie. Cabinet members would only grow more demanding if Eisenhower continued to shun his responsibility in making policy. As Eisenhower moved closer to reelection, Lippmann had not altered his assessment. Eisenhower was “as little able today, as he was when he

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took office, to unite and lead his party in support of his policies.” Without strong leadership, the Republican Party could only unite itself during the election season. Lippmann guessed that this strange condition was “possible because in General Eisenhower’s conception of the American government, the President is not the leader of the system who makes it work but the officer who presides over the Executive branch.” No matter how dire the circumstances or grand the issue, Eisenhower would not reward his friends or punish his enemies. The President needed to get control of congress, but he refused to do so.60

Stewart Alsop complained about the sources of Eisenhower’s “genuine and deep-rooted” popularity. Americans’ love of Ike could not be healthy in the face of the rising Soviet threat. An exasperated Alsop understood that the next campaign would not be waged on policy or the great questions of the day. Instead, it seemed to Alsop as if Americans “intended to vote for the President rather as one might send flowers to a sick friend, to cheer him up.” He could not find anyone willing to vote against Eisenhower because of his recent health problems. It seemed as though the heart attack had only served to enhance Eisenhower’s hold on the electorate and “has clearly made a real human being of the President, in a way that no other political personality is real and human.”61

Other journalists were willing to damn Eisenhower with faint praise as well. Veteran reporter Merriman Smith, the United Press White House correspondent during the Eisenhower years, wrote a book-length treatment of Eisenhower’s personality. His

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work ended up being unintentionally less than favorable, in that it perpetuated the idea that Eisenhower was a good or perhaps even great man, but he was unable or unwilling to be a successful politician.

In *Meet Mister Eisenhower*, Smith stuck very close to the picture of Eisenhower that most of the contemporary public held with one exception: the president’s level of activity. While Smith believed most of the public thought Eisenhower was disengaged or unconcerned, Smith portrayed him as a man of vigorous activity. Smith even wrote of the difficulty of “keeping up with” Eisenhower as he went about his daily business.\(^6^2\) Despite writing a favorable and generally agreeable work on the nature of the President’s private character, Smith’s book portrayed the former general as a captive of his office, frustrated at his inability to move the government, or the country, the way he used to move armies.

The theme of the book and the basis of the title was supposed to describe Eisenhower’s struggle and failure to come to grips with the limitations of no longer being in the military. The book was supposed to be about “what happened to General Eisenhower when he became a mister.”\(^6^3\) In other words, what happened to the man when he was unable to move great armies at his whim? Smith thought Eisenhower was frustrated and annoyed with the compromises and politics of the American system. When the veteran reporter questioned Eisenhower on “the worst part, the most annoying aspect of the presidency” the President’s one-word answer was “Accommodation.”\(^6^4\)

Near the conclusion, Smith offered this opinion of a proposed second term for

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\(^{6^3}\) Ibid., from the introduction.

\(^{6^4}\) Ibid., 307.
Eisenhower: “...he’ll run again—right straight for [his retirement home in] Gettysburg.”

At the start of the 1956 presidential campaign, Reston wrote the first piece in a New York Times series analyzing the overall Eisenhower record. He began with a discussion of the differences in the world from the time when the former general took office in 1953. The population of the United States had increased by more than 11,000,000. Britain and France appeared on the decline on the international scene. Germany and Japan were on the rise. Churchill and Stalin were gone, as were King Farouk in Egypt and Mohammed Mossadegh in Iran. Eisenhower faced a far different world from the one that confronted Truman or Roosevelt. Perhaps most importantly to Reston, it appeared that the “military power and particularly the capital development of the Communist world have bounded far ahead of the Administration’s expectations.”66 The United States was falling behind the Russians, and Eisenhower had not seen it coming.

Although questioning the quality of Eisenhower’s understanding of the world situation, Reston gave Eisenhower credit for some domestic political victories. The President had brought the Republicans into the modern era and out of isolationism. The Republican Party was no longer associated as a strongly with an ineffective response to the Great Depression. Additionally, Reston credited the Eisenhower administration with an innovation, entirely new to American politics: trying to get along with everybody, including the opposition. While Reston applauded this new technique, he was unsure

65 Ibid., 293.
about the Administration habit of “judicious leaving alone” in matters of great import. The journalist also noted that there had “certainly been no moratorium on zigging and zagging” especially in foreign affairs. For example, foreign economic aid had been predicted (by other pundits, presumably—Reston did not say) to fade slowly, but in response to Soviet challenges in the Middle East and elsewhere, it was made more or less permanent, thanks to Eisenhower’s influence upon Congress. On the other hand, Reston believed Eisenhower had misunderstood the results of confrontations in Germany, Indochina, and the Middle East. Although the Administration claimed victory in each instance, Reston believed that the rest of the world saw deteriorating American influence in those areas.67 On this point, the pundits were unanimous: Eisenhower ignored trends and facts regarding the worldwide Communist threat.

Despite these criticisms, Reston never attacked Eisenhower personally; all of his comments were directed towards the Eisenhower administration. Reston wrote of “it” rather than “he” when summarizing the strengths and weaknesses of the government under Eisenhower. When Reston did direct his comments or criticism toward the President, he blamed Eisenhower’s illness, staff system, or the concept of delegating authority to men of differing philosophies. Reston’s characterization was of an administration holding the reins loosely and perhaps finding itself a little overwhelmed at times. He noted that the Eisenhower administration had spent more time on public relations than any previous administrations, and yet, “it has been inarticulate and

67 Ibid., 42.
constantly in trouble for failing to explain its policies adequately and for making unfortunate and unnecessary public pronouncements.”

Reston’s colleagues at the New York Times continued the series, and their assessments indicated how pervasive the prejudices of the pundits had become by 1956. Looking at Eisenhower’s personal role in the administration, veteran newsman William S. White noted the difference between the popularity of Franklin Roosevelt and Eisenhower. Both men were the objects of the public’s affection, but there was no corresponding hatred on the part of the opposition for Eisenhower. White was probably not far off the mark when he claimed, “nobody hates Eisenhower.” He did not seek to alienate opponents in the manner of Franklin Roosevelt (attacking opponents with glee to bolster his political base), but Eisenhower had also never inspired as Roosevelt could, or taken real risks.

Like Reston, White acknowledged and praised Eisenhower’s role in subduing the old Republican right wing. He found that the President had forgone frontal attacks on Congressional Republicans and had instead used the Democrats in Congress to pressure his own party into compliance. White noted that Eisenhower had “more trouble on more grand issues...with the Republican Eighty-third Congress than...with the Democratic Eighty-fourth Congress.” White criticized Eisenhower, as the Republican Party leader, for not taking action to deal with Senator McCarthy. Instead, White chose to give the Democrats credit: “The issue posed by Senator McCarthy was not dispensed of until after the Democrats had won the Senate in the 1954 elections. And while the President's

68 Ibid.
70 Ibid., 13.
dislike of what was called McCarthyism had been a consistent and well-known dislike, he never moved with any sustained force or implacability as the head of his party against the Senator.”71 White likened the president’s party leadership to that of a swinging pendulum. He would stand against McCarthy—if only meekly—but also praise his Vice-President, Richard Nixon, when he equated membership in the Democratic Party with subversion.

The final article of the *Times* series looked specifically at Eisenhower’s foreign policy. Reston’s colleague Wallace Carrol judged that Eisenhower’s style of leadership left question marks in many minds around the world. He believed Eisenhower to be a genial man of “complete goodwill and sincerity.”72 Despite these personal characteristics in the President, Carrol believed that many nations found the United States to be “given to truculence, self-righteousness or pettiness in argument.”73 He found three factors that explained the disparity between how other nations viewed the United States and how America saw itself. Carrol first blamed the Republican leadership’s attitudes that had developed during “twenty years of frustration in the wilderness.” Secondly, he blamed the Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, for his abrupt manners and behavior in dealing with foreign nations. Finally, Carrol blamed Eisenhower’s administration for failing to cope with the complexities of Cold War diplomacy.74

Carrol’s criticism also indicated another assumption of the press corps, one encouraged by Eisenhower. Like most of his contemporaries, Carrol assumed Dulles to

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71 Ibid.
73 Ibid.
74 Ibid.
be the prime mover in the United States foreign policy, and the more astute politician. He gave Dulles credit for something the seemingly apolitical Eisenhower could have never accomplished, manipulating the right wing of the Republican Party. “Dulles was a shrewd and practical man,” Carrol wrote. The Secretary of State had “resolved to take whatever steps were necessary to keep the extremists in Congress off his back.” Carrol credited Dulles with crafting vaguely defined “administrative measures” to dull the influence of the reactionaries in Congress. With the Democrats actively supporting the Eisenhower policies, the Administration enjoyed considerable freedom to write its foreign policy record. By “administration,” Carrol meant “Dulles.” He mentioned “speculation that, just as the President stayed above the battle on the home front but permitted Vice-President Richard M. Nixon to do the political infighting, he made a similar division of responsibilities with Mr. Dulles in foreign affairs.” In hindsight, this sort of admission or hint might appear to involve Eisenhower with the sort of scheming associated with the later “hidden hand” portraits of him, but this was simply not the case. When Carrol wrote of Eisenhower as being “above the battle,” he most emphatically did not mean that Eisenhower was above the battle, directing the action; he meant Eisenhower truly stayed behind the scenes, never getting involved, or even wanting to. Carrol could not have known what later biographers with access to Eisenhower’s papers knew. Eisenhower was firmly in control. As Stephen Ambrose described it:

75 Ibid. 8.
76 Ibid.
77 Ibid.
So tightly did Eisenhower control Dulles that Dulles, each evening that he was on a trip, sent a cable reporting on what had transpired that day and what he intended to say the following day. Dulles carried messages; he did not make policy. And, frequently, Dulles had to be saved from his own mistakes, which Eisenhower was more than willing to do, even at his own expense.79

Falling into the same trap as most of his contemporaries, Carrol sought to solve rather than manage the Cold War: “This has not been a presidency of dynamic new ideas. President Eisenhower took over most of the policy ideas and vehicles of the Truman Administration.” Rather than conceding that a stalemate or peace was an acceptable alternative to action, Carrol concluded: “The Administration inherited a complex and baffling situation; it leaves... a complex and baffling situation.”80 The sum of the articles suggests that Eisenhower was a good man, perhaps not equal to his tasks as President, but personally honorable and well intentioned.

Other reporters followed. Robert J. Donovan, one of the most respected reporters from the New York Herald Tribune, offered a book-length portrayal of the President’s first term and the decision to run for a second.81 His story was more or less the Eisenhower story. Donovan almost never strayed from the task of reporting the events of the administration, and the resulting narrative actually ended up resembling the first volume of the Eisenhower memoirs.82 Donovan was no “stooge” of the Eisenhower administration, but he was a favorite reporter. The President trusted Donovan to give an honest account of the events during the administration and therefore gave him almost unprecedented access to the cabinet and other high-ranking government officials.

79 Ambrose, Eisenhower: The President, 50.
80 Carrol, “Eisenhower’s Four Years,” 1.
Eisenhower, in exchange, was able to influence his own portrayal. To Donovan, Eisenhower was a principled pragmatist at the helm of a strong cabinet—a fair, decisive, active, and efficient chief executive. Donovan concluded that Eisenhower’s greatest achievement was “his guidance of the people away from the hatred, the suspicions, the bickering, the lies, the bitterness, the savagery even that had defiled American public life since the end of World War II and particularly since the start of the Korean War.”

Stewart Alsop certainly agreed that Eisenhower had a peculiar and powerful political gift. The President had a “very special sort of aura, exclusively his own.” In contrast to Franklin Roosevelt or others who aspired to greatness, Eisenhower had not inspired “fanatical admiration” or “deeply emotional hero-worship.” Americans simply felt “genuine personal affection. Above all, he cheers people up.” The Alsops would return to this theme again as they continued to keep an account of the troubled world, but they had to establish the premise first. Eisenhower’s personality was like a drug. Scanning the crowd of a campaign rally or country fair, Alsop thought, everyone “looked as though they had had a good tonic. They looked cheerful, amused, and happy. They were almost all smiling.” Alsop was not smiling though. He studied the “aura” trying to distinguish its “special quality.” Eisenhower’s trademark grin was a part of the equation, but Alsop also argued that the President’s “shy-seeming earnestness” and “aw-shucks’ manner” were remarkably effective.

Joseph Alsop did not believe that Eisenhower’s success at inspiring the crowds at the national plowing match—“the President’s most important port of call,” he wrote sarcastically—or livestock shows should determine the course of world history. It was

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as if Alsop had wished that the President had been slightly condescending to the children lined up to see him at the national plowing match. He found something slightly unsettling about how Eisenhower would ask about the number of piglets a farmer was getting per litter—and the leader of the free world actually looked as if he was interested in the answer—“which, like any other amateur farmer, he no doubt was.”

But Eisenhower was not condescending to the children or the farmers, and Stewart Alsop thought it was one hell of a way to pick a president. The President “talked to them [the children] seriously… in the manner of a man who really likes children, and they were immediately smiling and at their ease.” At both the livestock show and the plowing match, Eisenhower “displayed conspicuously his great asset as a public speaker, the ability to seem to mean what he says.”

But Alsop found most of what Eisenhower said to be worthless. The speeches were “not very original and not even very interesting.” But with Eisenhower’s aura, it was possible to give a speech that, if given by a lesser politician, would have made him look like “a vote-grubbing hypocrite.” It was Alsop’s way of calling Eisenhower a “vote-grubbing hypocrite.” Eisenhower had managed the trick of convincing farmers that he was “deeply dedicated to both peace and to the plow.” When Alsop wrote that Eisenhower’s homilies on thinking about the needs and interests of 168 million Americans could produce “cynical snickers,” he was writing about himself. The “enormous crowd” responded with “sympathy and belief,” and not sarcasm. Alsop must have been beside himself. He was in awe of both Eisenhower’s ability to lull Americans into a false sense of security and the willingness of Americans to buy it:
No one who saw him in action [...] could doubt for a moment that the Eisenhower aura is far and away the Republicans’ greatest asset. It remains to be seen, of course, to what extent that almost universal liking for the man will be translated into votes.84

James Reston, writing of the same campaign stops, came to many of the same conclusions. The people living in the middle of the country liked Ike. Eisenhower excelled at grinning and saying “simple, friendly things” to the hordes of well-wishers. Even if they did not like the President’s policies or intend to vote for him, Reston believed that he saw an undeniable mutual affection between the people and their President, “because he is like them, and because he genuinely likes them.”85

The Alsops predicted an Eisenhower victory on the eve of the election. They credited Eisenhower’s engagement in the campaign, the advantages of incumbency, the speechwriting of Emmet Hughes and “the Eisenhower aura,” for his victory. Eisenhower’s “glowing personality, which somehow cheers people up, makes them feel happy and confident,” would triumph over the real needs of the American people or the world. Eisenhower was too weak on defense, but the President’s personality and history combined with some high profile hydrogen bomb tests hid “the much larger issue of the Eisenhower Administration’s dangerous shortcomings in the defense and foreign policy fields.” More important for Eisenhower’s Democratic opponents, the President had managed “to obscure the bread-and-butter issues which a Democratic candidate must forcefully exploit in order to win.” The Democrats needed the working class, and in


1956 they did not have it because Eisenhower’s appeal stretched across party lines.86 The Alsops believed that Stevenson and the Democrats could still win, if they managed to exploit class differences: “For as long as one travels the country and talks to the voters, one becomes vividly aware of the fact that this is a far more class conscious society than is generally supposed.” The key was to convince the lower classes to return to their natural home in the Democratic Party. But Stevenson was a tough fit for the “role of protector and friend of ‘the little guys.’ And this is perhaps the main reason why, unless appearances deceive, he seems destined to a second defeat.”87

The crisis arising in the Suez on the eve of the election confirmed the growing gap between what pundits wanted from Eisenhower and what Americans wanted from their leader. Egyptian leader Gamal Nasser had seized the Suez Canal in July of 1956. Eisenhower had tried to restrain Great Britain and France, both owners of the canal. But against American wishes, the interested countries had coordinated with the Israelis to invade Egypt and seize control of the waterway.88 Walter Lippmann thought the Suez crisis had revealed the limits of Eisenhower’s leadership-by-grin. The President’s aura had masked his lack of long-term planning in foreign policy. The President seemed to have a formula for peacemaking that involved little more than stopping the shooting and “have both sides accept the status quo” without worrying about the tough business of a long-term settlement. The crisis itself had proved Eisenhower’s failings. Any further action from Eisenhower had to be substantive. “Because this time there was Nasser who

86 Eisenhower’s approval rating among Democrats was forty nine percent in August 1956, and fifty seven percent in November 1956. Edwards and Gallup, Presidential Approval, 20.
does not and will not accept the status quo, who is so great a disturber of the peace that those who are hurt by him cannot take it forever.”

Marquis Childs called the Suez crisis a “disaster to American foreign policy, increasingly visible in its stark and unrelieved nakedness, [and it] is all the more shocking against the background of the persistent optimism that has come from everyone in the Administration in recent months.”

But the crisis did pass, with few Americans feeling as though Eisenhower had botched anything. Just past noon on Election Day, America’s European allies told Eisenhower they were withdrawing their forces from the Suez.

Eisenhower won in a landslide, setting up the pundits for four more long years of Eisenhower’s frustrating leadership. Reston called Eisenhower’s victory the “most spectacular Presidential election victory since Franklin D. Roosevelt submerged Alfred M. Landon in 1936.” For the pundits, 1961 must have seemed a lifetime away.

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Chapter 6

Second Term Doldrums

Writing a political column is like climbing a ladder which has no end, and you can never see more than one or two of the rungs ahead. When nothing very much is going on, writing a political column can be agonizing—you reach up for the next rung, and there isn’t any. During the two Eisenhower administrations, there were many long placid stretches when hardly anything at all was going on. There was therefore hardly anything to write about, and thus no rungs on the ladder to grasp.¹

-Stewart Alsop

The pundits were not enthusiastic about the prospect of another four years of Eisenhower. In their eyes, the President was not waging the Cold War effectively. He was boring. He had done everything they thought he was capable of doing. They were willing to give Eisenhower a pass on civil rights—an issue that seemed to pale in comparison to the Soviet threat—but on any number of issues Eisenhower seemed to them remarkably disengaged.² With the launch of the Soviet artificial satellite Sputnik they worried that Eisenhower was letting American military capability fall behind in order to balance the budget. With advances in Soviet rocket design, a new phrase entered the political lexicon: “The Missile Gap.” A new conventional wisdom said the Russians were going to build nuclear missiles capable of destroying the world while Eisenhower pinched pennies. When Eisenhower’s health again seemed to falter, the pundits called for Eisenhower’s resignation again. With the resignations of two of Eisenhower’s most trusted staffers—who most political journalists thought were running the government—


² Marquis Childs was the notable exception. He called racial integration “foremost among” the issues Eisenhower should have tackled in his second term. Marquis Childs, Eisenhower: Captive Hero, (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1958) 244.
they worried about the lack of a rudder on the ship of state. And when John F. Kennedy, a young, exciting Senator preaching Cold War readiness made his play for the nation’s highest office, the pundits struggled to find adjectives to express their excitement.

The Alsop brothers were Eisenhower’s most persistent and effective detractors. Their columns grew increasingly dark and pessimistic as the decade progressed. Even if many Americans were willing to trust and support the President, the Alsops found an influential audience willing to embrace their increasingly vociferous criticism, when a series of challenges hit Eisenhower simultaneously. The President’s approval rating actually dipped slightly below fifty percent at the end of March 1958, but Joseph and Stewart were tired of Eisenhower’s second term before it had even started. ³

In November of 1956, the Alsops predicted that Eisenhower’s habit of putting off tough decisions would mean trouble in his second term. “The chickens,” they warned, would “come home to roost.” Eisenhower had managed to fool the American people into believing that all was well, but “the horizon is positively black with homecoming chickens, some of which look remarkably like vultures.” In addition to darkening the sky, Eisenhower had done some good things, notably doing away with the “rancid, neurotic bitterness” of the Truman years, but the President had not prepared Americans for the challenges to come.⁴ Eisenhower had convinced the Alsops that the positive achievements of his administration had happened with little or no direction from the White House. Somehow, Eisenhower had accidentally been successful at “calming passions and consolidating the progress of the past.”

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But the cost of calming passions had come at too high a price. The passionate and divisive debates of the Truman years had now given way to a “national complacency which is not justified by the facts.” The recent turmoil in the Suez should serve as “a warning, as loud and ominous as the wailing of a siren.” Such instability and division between allies could only mean that Eisenhower failed to defend America’s national interests and security. The Alsops thought that Eisenhower’s great failure in foreign affairs could be traced back to the President’s timidity. Eisenhower’s guiding principle in foreign policy “has been to avoid like the plague bold measures which would upset the existing order of things, and to hope for the best.” The brothers admitted that, up to now, Eisenhower’s inaction had worked better than they hoped. America had not scored any great diplomatic victories in Eisenhower’s first term, they claimed, but their worst fears had not yet been realized. Their judgment of how Eisenhower had managed this trick indicated how disillusioned they had become by 1956: “Somehow we have lucked through, without global war or total disaster.”

The brothers warned that this luck would not last forever. As they surveyed the globe, American interests seemed to be in retreat on every front. They predicted Britain and France would soon need “large injections of American oil and dollar aid to continue to exist economically.” Eisenhower would have to ante up if he wanted to avoid seeing the Western alliance fall apart. If the alliance collapsed, the United States would lose all of the British bases used by the Strategic Air Command. They concluded: “It is hard to imagine a nastier prospect for the new Administration.” America was hopelessly dependent on Great Britain and vice versa. The Alsops called for a “reappraisal, however

5 Ibid.
agonizing, of our relations with our allies…. The recent Soviet actions to brutally put down a rebellion in Hungary could be the prelude to an even “colder war, with all sorts of painful implications…. The hope for stability and luck would not be enough to guide the United States and the Western allies, and the Alsop brothers had no confidence in Eisenhower to make the dramatic readjustment needed to meet the needs of the changing world:

“But the existing order of things is changing whether we like it or not. And if the new Administration does not adjust to the change, and continues to try to luck it through, the chickens on the horizon will turn out to be vultures in very truth.”

Walter Lippmann had long since abandoned the Eisenhower bandwagon. In the 1956 election, he had even gone so far as to offer campaign advice to Stevenson advisor George Ball (his advice was to attack Dulles). After the election, Lippmann wanted to make sure Eisenhower and America understood just how narrow the President’s recent victory had been. The voting margin was not close, but the victory was a personal one for Eisenhower, not a vote of confidence for the Republican Party. The President had campaigned well, exuding the decency for which he was rightly famous, but the he had manifestly not been “enlightening or interesting.” Stevenson had tried to provoke him into a campaign of ideas, but “the President refused to be provoked into debating anything.” The great mass of the American people allowed Eisenhower to deny the existence of anything worth debating.

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7 Steel, 508.
Marquis Childs agreed that Eisenhower’s victory had been a remarkably personal one. He thought Eisenhower had been forced to campaign on personality rather than ideas because the Republican Party remained organizationally weak and out of step with the American people. Eisenhower had gone to great lengths to support Republican candidates, but he failed to bring in Republican majorities in 1956 just as he had failed in 1954 and 1952. The only success in the campaign came from “the magic of Eisenhower, the symbol; the Ikenology, as it was called toward the end of the campaign when thousands chanted ‘We Like Ike’ and every platform and billboard was dominated by a picture of the smiling President.” According to Childs, this was as hollow a victory as a landslide could be: “It was Ike and Ike all the way.” With Eisenhower the first President constitutionally limited to two terms, Childs grew more impatient for him to use his personal appeal to achieve some kind of great goal.9 People expected more from Eisenhower and would be more critical of failure. “He had been given a great vote of confidence,” Childs wrote, “and the feeling was growing that he should now get on with trying to solve the problems facing the nation.”10

The Alsops concurred, and hoped that the personal triumph would force more Republicans into following the Eisenhower model of “Modern Republicanism” even if they held out little hope for Eisenhower’s foreign policy. A second term and a landslide victory gave him four more years to remake the party in his image. The Alsops hoped that the Eisenhower of 1956 was more politically savvy than the Eisenhower of 1952, who “knew little of politics and constantly turned to others for advice.” The babe-in-the-

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10 Marquis Childs, Eisenhower: Captive Hero, 244.
woods had become “an acknowledged and confident master of the political art, perhaps the greatest of this generation.”\textsuperscript{11} But the master of the art of personality politics would have a tough time dealing with his own foreign policy legacy. They predicted that it would take years before anyone would know just how much damage Eisenhower had done to American diplomacy after what they termed a “disaster” in Egypt. The Alsops thought that the immediate effects were beyond question:

The most strategically vital region of the modern world has been handed to the Kremlin on a silver platter—with the American government as a rather conspicuous platter-bearer. Or putting it another way, the American government has energetically assisted in installing Egypt’s President Gamal Abdel Nasser as the Soviet viceroy of the Arab lands. That is almost sure to be the result of recent events.\textsuperscript{12}

Arthur Krock argued that Eisenhower, like Truman, was an uncomplicated man. Krock asked the questions about Eisenhower that everyone seemed to be thinking, or implying. Was his staff actually a hindrance? Did he hate politics and politicians? Was he bored or lazy? Why does he seem uninformed at times? Why did he choose not to come out against McCarthy or his other political enemies? Krock answered these questions in the most positive light possible, given the tools available to him. If Eisenhower seemed uninformed, it was because he was concentrating on a specific problem. Krock seemed to think it was enough to reiterate Eisenhower’s “simple virtues of mental and moral integrity, humility, candor and compassion as these words are commonly construed by the American people.”\textsuperscript{13} He dismissed the charge that the

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{12} Joseph and Stewart Alsop, \textit{The Reporter’s Trade}, 311-313. Column originally published 16 November 1956.
\end{thebibliography}
President was making deliberate use of language in order to confuse or baffle questioners. Krock believed the President to be intelligent but not given to that sort of subterfuge. Try as he might, though, Krock’s assessment of Eisenhower fed into the perceptions of Eisenhower that the other pundits held.

When Stewart Alsop compared the Eisenhower administration of 1957 to the Truman administration of 1949, he did not mean it as a compliment. Alsop saw yet another President ignoring Soviet belligerence. In 1949, after the Soviets announced that they had tested a nuclear weapon, Alsop believed Truman and Secretary of Defense Louis Johnson had acted as if nothing had changed. Now it was Eisenhower and Dulles who threatened the future of the free world with their inaction:

When the Soviets announced their successful test of the intercontinental ballistic missile, another unilateral disarmament program was going full blast. The Administration knew for certain that the Soviets had in fact tested the weapon. But again, instead of having a hard new look at our defense situation, the first instinctive reaction was to pretend that nothing had really changed.\(^{14}\)

By contrast, Alsop found Eisenhower’s reaction more irresponsible than Truman’s. In 1949, the United States had the upper hand in the nuclear race. Now, Alsop argued, “most authorities” believed any advantage the United States had over the Soviets—if an advantage existed at all—to be slim. Further, Alsop believed the Russians had a “commanding lead in the race for an operational ballistic missile system.” With such weapons at their disposal, the Communists could hold the free world hostage to their will. Eisenhower and “the dispensers of soothing syrup” needed to level with the American people and consider what would happen if the Soviets had the ability to destroy the retaliatory capacity of the Western allies within minutes: “If that time is permitted to

come, the Korean war, the price we paid for our first exercise in economy-before-security, will seem a mere nothing.”

In the greatest domestic crisis of 1957, the confrontation over public school integration in Little Rock, Arkansas, the pundits were not forceful advocates for Black rights. Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus resisted a court order to integrate the public schools of Little Rock. Eisenhower tried to reason with Faubus at first, but eventually sent federal troops into the South to protect the rights of African Americans for the first time since Reconstruction. Rather than push for greater social change, the opinion journalists concerned themselves with criticizing Eisenhower’s lack of leadership and worrying about how such events would influence the course of the Cold War. As Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus’ blustering turned to belligerence, Walter Lippmann warned that Eisenhower could not “retreat and surrender.” Lippmann believed that Faubus’ use of the National Guard to block integration was “an instrument of nullification” and required strong action from Eisenhower. Marquis Childs described how the actions of the Arkansas governor were a propaganda windfall for the Communist bloc: “It has acutely embarrassed President Eisenhower and the Administration as the Department of Justice gropes for some way out of the mess without seeming, on the one hand, to accept nullification of the power of the Federal Government and, on the other hand, to engage in open civil war.” Childs concluded that Faubus was a rather minor character in the grand sweep of world history. He would “pass into oblivion,” but the

\[15 \text{ Ibid.} \]
\[16 \text{ Walter Lippmann, “Nullification in Arkansas,” Washington Post, 10 September 1957, A15.} \]
events in Arkansas would have profound implications for American foreign policy. ¹⁷
James Reston doubted whether Eisenhower would have the resolve to stay engaged in the
Little Rock crisis. “Both in golf and in politics, his backswing has always been better
than his follow-through.” ¹⁸

Once the situation in Little Rock hit its crisis stage, Stewart Alsop found
Eisenhower a poor manager. Eisenhower’s image had taken a hit for “enjoying a golfing
vacation amid the decaying splendors of Newport during the gravest constitutional crisis
in many decades….” The President and the Republican Party would suffer at home
among black voters and America’s image had suffered abroad also. Now that the
situation had become a showdown between Eisenhower and Faubus, Alsop believed that
the President should “shed the role of amiable vacationist, and assume the role of resolute
national leader in time of crisis.” ¹⁹ As the crisis continued Stewart Alsop complained
that Eisenhower’s policy “seems to depend on the passage of time and local pressures for
reason and moderation….” Instead of calling for more “resolute action,” Alsop believed
the time was right for healing. He hoped Eisenhower would make a “truly heroic effort,
using all the means of communication at his command, to explain the inescapable reasons
for his actions, to reassure and strengthen the reasonable majority in the south, and to
quiet the passions which are endangering national unity.” ²⁰ Eisenhower could not do so
to Alsop’s satisfaction.

Dissatisfaction with Eisenhower’s handling of the Little Rock crisis was mild compared to the constant chorus of frustration expressed by the pundits regarding the President’s method of waging the Cold War. Lippmann called Eisenhower a “naïve man” for believing that simple, rhetorical advocacy would bring about any real or long-lasting changes. Lippmann believed Eisenhower had delegated too much authority to Dulles for far too long. This level of delegation was a “novel conception” of the presidency, but Lippmann did not think it was working. In cases where Eisenhower’s moralizing seemed to conflict with Dulles’ actions, the resulting confusion did little to further American interests abroad: “The net practical effect has been to make the world think that the President preaches one thing and that Mr. Dulles does something else.”

Marquis Childs believed that Eisenhower’s heart attack had set off a wave of sympathy that delayed criticism of his administration, but the truce was over. By September 1957, Childs reported that, “the chorus of criticism is becoming louder.” Eisenhower was frustratingly untroubled by the doomsday choir: “If the man on the golf course is aware of the criticism and the grave questions raised about the economy and the threat to peace in such troubled areas as the Middle East, he shows no signs of it.” Childs admitted that Eisenhower still looked healthy and moved with a “brisk, cheerful snap” but thought he saw signs of aging nonetheless. The President had grown more temperamental with each passing year, and that kind of strain was not good for a man who had recently suffered a heart attack. Childs was frustrated that the public seemed relatively pleased to have a “part-time President.” In the 1956 election, Americans had

“either ignored the warning or believed it to be unimportant. Today, with so many grave problems confronting the Nation and the world, it is very much to the fore.”

Childs continued his assessment in October 1957, describing Eisenhower as “sagging.” The echo of the chant “We like Ike,” had “long since died away and the tide of the President’s great victory has ebbed.” Childs wrote that Eisenhower still had a “wide hold on opinion as a man and hero” but none of the power or influence that one might expect of a President who had so recently received a massive vote of confidence from the American people. Out of desperation, the Republican Party looked to Richard Nixon for leadership, but Childs held little hope for this arrangement. As Vice President, Nixon was “not a deputy prime minister” and could not act as the “substitute President” that Americans needed in light of Eisenhower’s inaction. Childs’s assumptions and dire predictions about Eisenhower’s leadership reached Alsopian proportions. His loaded questions reveal the depth of Childs’s antipathy toward Eisenhower: “Is the deterioration of the President’s position as great as some of his critics say? Can he recoup the loss by asserting a more vigorous and active leadership on the great issues before the country? Is it not now evident that his own ambition to be President of all the people and to lead by friendly persuasion is no longer practicable?” Childs’ answer was to warn his readers that the country faced tough decisions “on which the well-being, if not actually the existence of the Nation, depend.”

The launch of the Soviet satellite *Sputnik* on October 4 seemed to confirm the criticisms of the pundits. *Sputnik* was the first artificial satellite to orbit the earth, and its

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launch created the illusion of a technological “gap” between the free and Communist worlds. Its launch seemed to be hard evidence that America was losing the Cold War.

The Alsops forgot any restraint they might have exercised on behalf of propriety.

Stewart Alsop had a question for the Eisenhower administration: “Will the American Government now tell the American people the blunt, unpleasant truth about the race for the decisive weapons of the future, the ballistic missiles?” Under Eisenhower’s leadership the government had “a conscious policy of concealing or muffling the facts” about Soviet capabilities:

All the evidence, in short, clearly indicates that the Soviets are frighteningly far ahead of this country in the race for the decisive weapons of the future. Given this country’s immense industrial power, there is no reason on God’s earth why they should stay ahead. But they will certainly stay ahead if the policy of the American Government continues to be to bury the essential facts in great dollops of soothing sirup (sic). It is time to tell the country the blunt truth, and the responsibility for so doing rests where it has always rested, with the President of the United States.24

Alsop also warned of “a mounting body of evidence, taken most seriously in the Washington intelligence community,” that Sputnik was actually a spy satellite with “eyes to see.” In case his readers missed the significance of such a technological feat, Alsop concluded that spying was not the purpose of Sputnik’s eyes. Instead, the Soviets were planning to map “every important American target” for their “total destruction.” Stewart Alsop called for “a little less bland complacency and a little more frantic energy….“25

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Not to be outdone, Joseph Alsop gave his judgment of the “disastrous event” and unleashed a torrent of accusations about Eisenhower’s leadership. The launch of Sputnik was not an isolated event. The Western alliance had been falling apart since Eisenhower had first taken office. Alsop realized that this characterization of Eisenhower was “brutal,” but he concluded that “the danger to the West” was so great that one needed “to be brutally truthful about the overall result of the Eisenhower years.” Eisenhower had alienated all of America’s allies, and reduced American military strength to the point where it was no longer the predominant world power. Alsop compared the state of the Western alliance to “a majestic mansion progressively riddled by dry rot.” Of course Eisenhower had served up the “customary dollops of arsenical soothing syrup” to the public in order to cover his crimes, and Americans still admired Eisenhower “for his good intentions,” but Alsop did not believe that Eisenhower was “respected abroad as a strong and forceful leader” any longer.26

Drew Pearson’s accusations were equally broad and bold. He charged that the Eisenhower Administration, “knowing that… we were lagging badly behind Russia, deliberately covered up the facts.” Beyond this simple deception, Pearson also charged Eisenhower with undertaking a series of policies that undermined American security. First, Eisenhower had not done enough to ameliorate the rivalries between the services that were holding up the American missile program.27 Pearson also blamed the “witch-hunting tactics of U.S. Government agencies” that “investigated, hounded and discouraged” patriotic scientists. Pearson gave the example of Dr. Robert Oppenheimer,

who had headed the atomic project at Los Alamos, and lamented that Oppenheimer’s “inventive brain” was no longer a weapon of the Cold War,” since the administration had affirmed Oppenheimer’s loyalty, but branded him a security risk in 1954. The Oppenheimer case alone was a grave loss, robbing America of a great mind, but the greater loss came with “lesser known scientists” who feared becoming another front-page story. Pearson argued that scientists were free-thinkers who could not have worked with Senator McCarthy or Richard Nixon scrutinizing their ideas.\textsuperscript{28} Just as in Truman’s time, Pearson found “fumbling and vacillation” in the Eisenhower administration that threatened the future of civilization.\textsuperscript{29} As the weeks passed, Pearson grew still bolder and claimed that Eisenhower had not merely avoided solving the problems of inter-service rivalry in the military, but was personally responsible for disputes that hindered missile development.\textsuperscript{30}

Walter Lippmann agreed that the launch of \textit{Sputnik} signified a wide failure on the part of the Eisenhower administration. \textit{Sputnik} could mean nothing less than that the “Western World may be falling behind in the progress of science and technology.” Lippmann was worried about more than simply being at the mercy of the Soviets. He thought that American society had stagnated. If America continued to lose momentum, it would “deteriorate and decline, lacking purpose and losing confidence in itself.” The President had to lead Americans to accept this “profound challenge to our cultural


values.” Eisenhower, who had been conducting himself in office as if he were “in a kind of partial retirement,” had not set a standard for American excellence. He had allowed society to drift without policy or purpose, leading to “chronic disaster[s] like Little Rock. We find ourselves then without a chart in very troubled waters.” Sputnik had revealed the truth that America was “far from being all powerful” and had “profoundly shaken” America’s “prestige and influence.” The crisis of confidence came as America realized that it did not control the air and could not regain military supremacy in that area for years to come. Lippmann also blamed the Eisenhower administration for the “frozen and sterile” diplomacy that had led to disunity among the NATO allies. Eisenhower could not rally the European nations, and they fell into “their miserable quarrels about the remaining fragments of the old empires.” Eisenhower’s willful ignorance and unwillingness to address the great issues drove Lippmann to surmise that Eisenhower had decided to answer weakness with stubbornness:

There is a widely held view that while we are no longer in a position of strength, no longer in command of the air, the only thing to do is to stand pat, and to prove that if we are not quite so strong as we would like to be, we can at least be stubborn. This is a great fallacy, born of fear and lack of faith and a dull and wooden spirit.

Lippmann longed for “good ideas—like the Marshall Plan, like the Point IV Program, like NATO itself” with “the power… to rally men and revive them.” Surely, Eisenhower could come up with something better than to “stand still where we and our allies happen to be.”

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The launch of *Sputnik* gave the Alsops the moment they had been waiting for since Eisenhower’s election in 1952, and they did not want it to end. They could attack Eisenhower with abandon as proof of their argument maintained its orbit. Stewart Alsop attacked Eisenhower’s honesty, since he had “promised to give the country ‘the rough with the smooth’ but seemed to only report the smooth and made the the rough a good deal less rough.”34 Joseph Alsop came to the “melancholy and alarming judgment” that all of the “gyrations of […] Dulles” and “soothing speeches” of Eisenhower had “neither reassured our friends nor impressed our enemies.” Looking back to the optimism of Great Britain just before the start of the Second World War, Joseph Alsop saw a “parallel [which] will raise gooseflesh on anyone with a good memory. …[T]he American Government’s response to its recent rude awakening seems much too like the British government’s response to the rude awakening of the Austrian *anschluss* in 1938.”

Similar beliefs produced similar actions and similar failures to take action. In particular the Eisenhower Administration failed to do nearly enough to halt the grim, progressive unfavorable tilt of the world power balance, in many ways so comparable to the tilt of the European balance in the Hitler years. And now, as in 1938, the true state of the power balance has been suddenly, brutally and unmistakably revealed.

To the Alsops, the launch of *Sputnik* had revealed just where America stood in the Cold War—behind. There could be no myth of American supremacy anymore. They called for effort and sacrifice to defeat what the world now knew was a “Russian lead.” “Politically, therefore, the *Sputnik* has been an unqualified catastrophe,” they wrote, “for the world’s belief in the American lead was our greatest remaining asset.” Eisenhower was primarily responsible for this loss. He had either lied about, or ignored the threat.

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He was not interested in fixing the problem. Joseph Alsop directed his prescription for change squarely at the White House. He called for “[n]ew men with new ideas… to strike a new note of vigorous, disinterested leadership. And a new call to effort and sacrifice is needed to show that America’s reserves of power are really being mobilized in deadly earnest.” The world would again listen to the United States if the President would give some indication that he was “getting down to business again,” but the trumpets had yet to sound any clarion call.\(^{35}\) Stewart Alsop called it Eisenhower’s “Daddy knows best” policy.\(^{36}\)

Eisenhower soon had to contend with charges that he had allowed a “missile gap” to develop. A little more than a month after the Soviets launched *Sputnik*, they continued their missile program with the test-firing of an new generation of intercontinental ballistic missile. In early November, they launched *Sputnik II*, a heavier space vehicle with more thrust and a live dog inside. Before these developments, most westerners believed Soviet technology to be primitive. The shock of the developments led to excessive praise of Soviet technology, and worry that the Soviets now held a “balance of terror.” Schools even began to change their curriculum to emphasize the hard sciences. Even after the United States launched three of its own satellites in early 1958, many Americans remained ill at ease.\(^{37}\)

Even as the Alsops and the other pundits fumed and debated over how badly the Eisenhower administration had bungled the Cold War, another piece of evidence


surfaced. In the spring of 1957, Eisenhower had put together a panel of civilian experts in order to assess the civil defenses of the United States. Massachusetts Institute of Technology president James Killian, a member of Eisenhower’s new Science Advisory Committee, chose H. Rowan Gaither, a former president of the Ford Foundation, to decide the panel’s membership. Gaither put together a panel of some of the most panicky critics of Eisenhower’s Cold War strategy. Someone leaked the contents of the report to Washington Post reporter Chalmers Roberts, and the story ran on the front page on December 20, 1958. Popularly known as the Gaither Report, the committee’s findings included the assertion that Eisenhower’s defense policies had left America vulnerable to nuclear annihilation. The report argued for a massive and expensive buildup in both offensive and defensive weapons systems and shelters.

Stewart Alsop called the Gaither Report the “grimtest warning” given to the American government “in its history.” He spared no words in describing the threat that the United States faced from the Soviets. America had to undertake a massive military buildup in order to be able to defend itself by 1960—at the earliest. In the meantime, the Soviets would have the ability to hold the population of the United States as nuclear hostages and destroy the bases of the Strategic Air Command (the “shield of freedom”). Alsop hoped that, at long last, the Eisenhower administration would “get down to business in the life-and-death race with the Russians.”

Joseph and Stewart wrote that Eisenhower’s indifference to national security in the late 1950s made them nostalgic for

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the days of the Truman “disarmament,” which was “downright cozy” when compared with Eisenhower’s “missile lag.”

Marquis Childs blamed the “incredible” stalemate in Washington on the 1958 midterm elections, but he held out little hope that the Gaither Report would spur the Eisenhower administration to action. Eisenhower and his men were simply too old and too sluggish to take up the challenge presented by the report. Implementing the recommendations of the report would require an immense effort and a “great thrust forward with vast energy and inevitable sacrifice.” Childs sensed and reported that “old drift of inaction” coming from Ike:

We had been rudely awakened by the sputniks. But we seemed to prefer to go back to sleep. In the words of the familiar hymn:

Earth might be fair and all men glad and wise…
Would man but wake from out his haunted sleep.

Just as they had done in the Truman administration, the pundits began to call for Eisenhower’s resignation. After Eisenhower suffered a minor stroke at the end of November 1957, the editorial page of the Washington Post declared it “Time to Use the Vice President.” Walter Lippmann thought that the demands on the President were “exceptionally severe.” The strain of office must be “just about intolerable” for an “invalid” such as Eisenhower. Lippmann suggested that the President step aside and let Nixon govern while he recovered.

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41 Joseph and Stewart Alsop, *The Reporter’s Trade*, 143.
the “needed vigor and vitality through the three long hard years” left in the presidential term. His grudging answer was that it was better for Eisenhower to stay in office, but he concluded that the American people had better just get used to having a “part-time president.” Considering the perilous times, keeping Eisenhower in office was “not a happy prospect, and there is no use in pretending” otherwise.\(^{45}\) Pearson wanted Eisenhower to resign. He was careful to note that he was not criticizing Eisenhower or praising Nixon, but he told his vast audience that the United States was facing a threat more serious than anything since Japan attacked Pearl Harbor. The Russians could “wipe out our major cities, lay waste our industry, and cripple us as a Nation.” Pearson did not like Nixon or his “unfair, underhanded attacks” on his political opponents, but at least Nixon was capable of making “quick, firm decisions,” unlike the aging President.\(^{46}\)

Eisenhower seemed to have the upper hand, though. His approval numbers took a brief hit, sinking to fifty two percent after the *Sputnik* announcement, but overall, the American people continued to put their trust in Ike.\(^{47}\) The constant, shrill attacks of the Alsop brothers seemed out of step with the times. These were the years of maximum frustration for all the pundits, the Alsops in particular. Joseph took some of his frustration out on Stewart, finally convincing the junior partner to dissolve their partnership. Joe continued the column for the *Herald-Tribune* on his own. Stewart continued to write for the *Saturday Evening Post*. Their styles changed accordingly. Joe was writing for Washington insiders; Stewart’s work for the *Post* explained the world of


\(^{47}\) Edwards and Gallup, *Presidential Approval*, 26. Eisenhower’s approval rating went back up to fifty seven percent the following month and hovered in the low sixties for the first half of 1959.
the Washington insider to middle America. The reception to the swan song of their partnership, a book called *The Reporter’s Trade*, indicated just how out of step with middle America the brothers had become. Their publisher, Reynal, sold less than one-third of the initial print run. By the end of the 1950s, the Alsops were writing for liberal Democrats and intellectuals. Among Americans who did not count themselves as members of either group, Eisenhower was not a stumbling, bumbling, aging, inarticulate “part-time President.” Or even if Middle America believed any part of this image, Eisenhower had still managed to deliver years of peace and prosperity.

The arrows of the other pundits were similarly ineffective at denting Eisenhower’s reputation. That did not stop them, though. James Reston agreed that Eisenhower was “not a scholar,” and he worried that every time the President’s “muffed” and dodged, he would damage presidential prestige. Drew Pearson was hot on the trail of one Ellis Slater, a Seagram executive, for giving Eisenhower a cow. Pearson fearlessly investigated the strict rules of the Aberdeen Angus Association in order to get to the heart of the matter, but he was unable to find much. After White House Chief of Staff Sherman Adams’ resignation in September 1958, Pearson called Adams’ gift-taking “meager compared with that of his chief.” Pearson accused Eisenhower of accepting paintings from American Airlines and allowing the Augusta Golf Club to build a

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48 Merry, 327.
49 Merry, 337.
51 According to Pearson, the Aberdeen Angus Association forbade the artificial breeding of Angus bulls. If a calf is the result of artificial breeding, the association refuses to register it. Mr. Slater had sent a vial of bull semen to Eisenhower, then registered the cow in the name of his farm, then transferred the cow back to Eisenhower in order to be registered. He admitted to Pearson that he had broken the rules: “I thought the President should have a calf from our fine bull,… but never at any time have I given a cow to the President.” Drew Pearson, “Ike’s Angus Cow in 2 Transfers,” *Washington Post and Times Herald*, 17 September 1958, D11.
$250,000 cottage for his wife, Mamie. The charges were a mishmash of exaggerations and distortions that most Americans simply ignored.

Marquis Childs’s 1958 book *Eisenhower: Captive Hero* portrayed the President as a nice man, with some ability, who had been captured by the American people and forced into a job for which he was unprepared. Childs repeated the charges he had made so many times before. If the public had been expecting a victorious and bold Caesar, they would be disappointed with Eisenhower’s “timid and hesitant” leadership: “He agreed to go for a ride on the tiger, but he has never ceased to look back nervously.” Childs believed that Eisenhower’s final years in office would continue to reveal the “painfully apparent” differences between the his reputation and his performance. Eisenhower’s lack of intellectual curiosity, indicated by his love of military history and Westerns fiction, had not served him well in the White House. Once in office he was surrounded by advisors “who would see to it that he made the right decisions.” Eisenhower had delegated most of his constitutional authority away, especially in foreign affairs. It was unfair, then, to judge the Eisenhower record in foreign policy. Instead, “[t]he record of the administration in this department becomes, therefore, largely an account of the Dulles policy and its successes and failures.”

Taken as a whole, Eisenhower had severely diminished the office of the President by refusing to exercise his powers, turning the clock back to the late nineteenth century.

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54 Ibid., 4.
55 Ibid.
56 Ibid., 110.
57 Ibid., 113-114.
58 Ibid., 188.
when “a ceremonial president was content to let the tides of economic destiny have their way.” Eisenhower’s illnesses and staff system likewise forced cabinet members to take power, yet the public still held him in high esteem. Childs could not explain how Eisenhower, with his “indifferent and hesitant approach to the powers of his office” still managed to maintain the image of a “strong man sweeping all before him as the triumphant commander of the allied armies of Europe.” The office “to which Roosevelt contributed so much with the glitter of his personality” had become dull with Eisenhower’s presence. Eisenhower had not been petty, or “small man” like Truman, and Americans wanted someone like Eisenhower who was “above politics,… a big man.” But Childs was disappointed with Eisenhower’s “inflated” personality by 1958. In the final analysis, Childs found little in Eisenhower beyond the “magnification of the personality… rather like the tune of a song that persists long after the words have been forgotten. For his failure to use the powers of the office, Eisenhower, in the interpretation of weak and strong, must be put down as a weak president.” Childs compared Eisenhower to President James Buchanan: “It was not that President Buchanan did anything bad. He simply did nothing.” Of course, President Buchanan’s lack of leadership on the eve of the bloody American Civil War resulted in hundreds of thousands of deaths. The charge that Eisenhower resembled Buchanan in any way was hyperbole run amok.

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59 Ibid., 290-291.
60 Ibid., 291.
61 Ibid., 291-292.
62 Ibid., 300.
Childs was not out of step with educated opinion. In his review of Childs’ work, *Commentary* columnist William V. Shannon heartily agreed with all the charges.\footnote{William V. Shannon, *Commentary*, 26 October 1958, 353-355.} Despite the President’s allegedly bad temper and his struggle to keep it under control, Childs and Shannon claimed that Eisenhower had a passive temperament that made him unable to make decisions. Childs and Shannon agreed that Eisenhower had entered office unprepared and holding outmoded views on the role of government in society and presidential leadership. One month after reviewing the Childs work, Shannon published his own appraisal of Eisenhower and his administration and described Eisenhower as a transitional figure. The 1950s would be nothing more than a period of “postponement.”\footnote{William V. Shannon, “Eisenhower as President; a Critical Appraisal of the Record,” *Commentary*, 26 November 1958.} In Shannon’s view, the American people sought national unity by entrusting the presidency to a man brought up in the apolitical ethos of the professional military. He claimed Eisenhower cobbled together a coalition of followers that led to a holding action in foreign policy matters. Shannon believed that this holding pattern was effective in Europe only because of the stability of the region.\footnote{Ibid., 394.} In other parts of the world, such as the Middle East and Far East, Shannon thought that this holding action was a dismal failure. On the domestic side of the equation, Shannon asserted that Eisenhower was so beholden to outmoded ideas that he failed to provide effective leadership. Other than his ambivalence to labor unions, Eisenhower, he said, stuck to traditional Republican economics: “He believed in the absolute primacy of thrift, he wanted to return government functions to the stares, he believed deficit financing was sin, he believed
high taxes were “stifling free enterprise.” According to the author, Eisenhower in the White House was closer to an Iowa Rotarian than to a Wall Street Banker.” Shannon portrayed Eisenhower’s Whiggish sensibilities as quaint but silly. He hoped the Eisenhower years would be largely insignificant and that America had a large enough margin of error to forgive the opportunities wasted during the decade.

There were, of course, other dissatisfied groups besides frustrated columnists, Democrats, and liberal intellectuals. In the late fifties, William F. Buckley, Jr., editor of the conservative magazine *National Review*, accused Eisenhower of “sin against reality” and the American people of “raging national ignorance” in their support of Eisenhower. His article, published in 1958, opened with a short parable ending with the assertion that silence had reigned supreme for the first five years of the Eisenhower administration. According to Buckley, no crisis had been able to stir Eisenhower to activity because of the president’s deficient understanding of where to lead the American people. Much as administration critics of other ideological persuasions had done, Buckley claimed Eisenhower did not truly understand the severity of the Communist threat. Buckley asked: “What man who knows Communism would have gone to Geneva [for a peace conference] to act as a sounding board for Communist propaganda?” Buckley did not give Eisenhower credit for understanding much of anything, and wrote that the “Eisenhower movement, in 1952, was fundamentally a retreat from understanding—a
retreat from an explicit expression of the meaning of American society.”69 Since Eisenhower understood so little, he implied, it was a good thing he did so little. To Buckley, the American people were drugged by propaganda in the mainstream media into supporting Eisenhower’s incoherent philosophy. Worse, the conservative Buckley charged that Ike had not acted with enough fervor to undo the New Deal or much of the Truman legacy. As a professional naysayer, Buckley was unable to grasp an indigenous American political philosophy greater than the narrow concerns of the conservative intellectual elite. He ended his essay by wishing “the Lord to grant Washington another leader, and Gettysburg another squire.”70

James Reston’s 1959 assessment of Eisenhower was more moderate, but damning nonetheless. Eisenhower had managed to maintain his popularity, and that was no small feat, but it did not qualify a President for greatness. Popularity and leadership were different things. Reston acknowledged that Eisenhower had “personal charm” in spades. What the Eisenhower administration lacked was “vitality and political skill at the center.” The good ideas never made their way to the top. In most cases, younger aides could not exchange ideas with the President. In the rare occasion when an idea did manage to fight its way to the top of Eisenhower’s hierarchy, it would inevitably die due to a “shortage of executive energy and political skill…..” Reston hoped people would remember Eisenhower’s lack of physical energy, political skill, and enthusiasm when they made their decisions in the 1960 election.71

69 Ibid.
70 Ibid., 59.
Arthur Krock disagreed with Reston. Krock found Eisenhower to be a man of remarkable vigor for his age. Like most observers, Krock believed that Dulles had been the more active player in foreign policy while Sherman Adams had either prevented anything from reaching Eisenhower’s desk or run domestic policy himself. But after Dulles’s death in 1959 and Sherman Adams’s resignation in 1958, Krock wrote that Eisenhower had taken charge of both areas.\textsuperscript{72} Eisenhower’s health continued to hold up. As Krock described it, Eisenhower moved with confidence (“strode not walked”) and his skin showed a touch of sun from his golfing vacations in Palm Springs. He had none of the stiff or listless movements of someone approaching seventy years old. His mind was sharp and his “blue eyes were as bright and clear as millions remember him during the Second World War.” The clarity of his recent speeches revealed his full recovery from his stroke.\textsuperscript{73} Krock also thought that the ebbing of Eisenhower’s influence was right, proper, necessary, and natural. By July of 1960, both parties had chosen their nominees, and there was no shame in holding the constitutionally mandated status of “lame duck.” Both Nixon and Kennedy were robust and vigorous standard bearers. Krock thought it good politics for Republicans to look to Nixon for guidance. The Democrats would err to attack the Eisenhower record too harshly. Eisenhower still held the veto. It was a more difficult situation for Nixon, who would have to grapple with distinguishing himself without criticizing Eisenhower. Krock thought it unfair to expect too much from Eisenhower during the final months of his term.\textsuperscript{74}

Joseph Alsop had long ago given up any pretense of fairness with regards to the Eisenhower record and was likewise pleased when Americans made the right choice in 1960 (Kennedy) in light of Eisenhower’s term. Eisenhower had put off the hard decisions, and it was time to answer, “the question of whether the revolutionary and potentially destructive historic forces of the postwar era have already got completely out of hand.” The serenity of American life hid the challenges facing the nation so well that it might seem like “a lunatic’s question to a great many people.” Americans had been conditioned by the Eisenhower administration to bury their heads in the sand and ignore things such as the Communist threat in Laos. Eisenhower had been very effective at shaping public opinion but to a terrible end: “The President no doubt sincerely believes that all problems grow less grave if you just ignore them.” Eisenhower was telling Americans that the world situation was “constantly improving” even though, to Alsop, “the world situation has constantly deteriorated.” The deterioration had been both “large” and “concealed,” with the result that Kennedy’s job would be “immeasurably harder.” The terrible momentum of the Eisenhower years needed to be “abruptly halted and reversed” in order to avoid world catastrophe. During Eisenhower’s watch, the West had lost critical influence while wide swaths of Southeast Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America now took marching orders from the Kremlin. It would be up to John Kennedy to “avert this fatal transformation of the world we live in.”

75 Joseph Alsop, “The Question for 1961,” Washington Post, 2 January 1961, A15. Alsop’s constant criticism of the Eisenhower administration almost led to revelations about his sexuality. In late 1959, Eisenhower’s press secretary, James Hagerty, pulled Herald-Tribune reporter Robert Donovan aside and began a tirade about how everyone in the Eisenhower administration was “fed up” with Joe. Hagerty told Donovan that they were going to take away Joe’s press credentials. When Donovan asked how they were planning to get away with it, Hagerty replied: “He’s a fairy.” Donovan replied that he thought Joe’s sexuality should not be used against him that way. Hagerty, fuming, responded: “He’s a fag, and we know he is.” Hagerty stormed off, but Joe’s credentials were never revoked, and Alsop never moderated his
Reston attempted to make sense of Eisenhower’s successes and failures during his two terms and explain the gap between public and elite opinion of the President. Eisenhower seemed remarkably good at determining what Americans wanted from a President, namely, someone who was “generous and optimistic, but not militant or experimental.” At the same time, Reston argued that critics with a wider view were dissatisfied with Eisenhower for being out of tune with the larger, revolutionary spirit taking hold around the world. Eisenhower had helped create the American mood, but he could not control the mood of the world. Eisenhower “was a good man in a wicked time; a consolidator in a world crying for innovation; a conservative in a radical age; a tired man in a period of turbulence and energetic action.” The pundits could see the wickedness of the world that Eisenhower had tried so desperately to hide. When Eisenhower had set any kind of limited goal for himself, he was successful; and Americans appreciated this. They were willing to grant Eisenhower an affectionate and grateful farewell for his service, but also because he truly represented their wishes. Americans had no love of “unlimited goals” or continental adventures. They genuinely cared for peace, prosperity, and the reassurance “of a renowned soldier optimistically calling for agreements at home and abroad without demanding too much sacrifice or
criticism. Merry, 363. Joe Alsop had gone to Moscow in January 1957. After one dinner party, Alsop—after receiving a spiked drink—went back to his hotel with a young man. The next morning Soviet agent confronted Alsop with photographs of his liaison and told him that homosexual relations were a serious crime in the Soviet Union. They offered to overlook his offense if he would be willing to work, with compensation, for better relations between the U.S.S.R. and the U.S. They told Alsop that if he did not agree to work with them, they would advise U.S. officials of Alsop’s activities and go ahead with legal proceedings against him. Alsop refused to cooperate and went straight to the U.S. embassy where he left a letter, confessing what he had done, for his old friend Chip Bohlen, who was the U.S. ambassador to the Soviet Union. When Bohlen read the letter, he rushed Alsop out of the country. When Alsop got back to Washington, he reported the incident to J. Edgar Hoover at the F.B.I., who then informed the Secretary of State, the Attorney General, the Secretary of Defense, and President Eisenhower. The KGB mailed the incriminating photographs to various American journalists, but none of them would publish any stories about Alsop’s sexuality. Richard Helms, A Look over My Shoulder: A Life in the Central Intelligence Agency (New York: Random House, 2003), 150-151.
painful thought.” Reston reported that Eisenhower’s attractive traits as a “human being with decent instincts and sound objectives” would never be enough to satisfy those who saw a world full of “unique and cunning” challenges. Eisenhower had underestimated his critics even as he had underestimated the complexities of the world. From his stifling staff system carried over from his military training to his natural deference to the Congress, Eisenhower would only act when forced. He would not use the bully pulpit to educate or lead the nation. He would act as a crisis manager, but nothing more. There was nothing nefarious in Eisenhower’s efforts:

> Again this system was based on personal qualities that were popular in America. They reflect, not a tendency to Caesarism, which the Democrats threw at him in the first campaign of 1952, but modesty and even a kind of self-abnegation. He was orderly, patient, conciliatory and a thoughtful team player—all admirable traits of character.76

But there were problems with having a President who possessed these fine qualities. Reston believed that Eisenhower had decided as early as 1953 not to put the American people on notice about the “startling facts of the new world of rocketry and nuclear weapons, to spell out the challenge and seek consent for much greater efforts and sacrifices.”

As time went on, the gap between the intellectual community and Eisenhower widened as Soviet Communism spread throughout the world. The release of the Gaither Report and the launch of *Sputnik* only hardened the resolve of the intellectual community. Eisenhower remained committed to his belief that he could convince the Communists not to make war. The Communists would get, instead of defeat, a series of truces—in Korea, Indochina, the Taiwan Strait, and Berlin. Reston could take some comfort that “[n]othing

has been settled but nothing has been lost.” He could still credit Eisenhower for those things he had done early in his term. Eisenhower had taken the middle road, brought the Republican Party out of its isolationism, “consolidated the New and Fair Deal,” avoided war, and satisfied a public “in no mood for overseas adventures.” On balance, though, Reston still believed that Eisenhower had failed to promote America’s interests abroad with Communists on the march around the globe. On the bright side, “President Eisenhower at least maintained enough power to deter the big war, and the big depression, and that was his important if limited objective from the start.”

The editorial page of the Washington Post largely agreed with Reston’s assessment of the Eisenhower years. Eisenhower had been a unifying symbol and “fit the national mood in 1952.” Americans had been willing to overlook the “lack of preparation of the supreme military commander for a supremely political task….” Although the editors acknowledged that they were making a rash judgment, they ventured an opinion that:

The two Eisenhower Administrations… have fallen short of both their promise and their opportunity. We say this in all charity. The disappointment lies not in the absence of good intentions. It lies, rather, in an infatuation with images and inapplicable maxims, in a failure to supply decisive leadership in domestic and foreign affairs, in a reluctance to use the full powers of the Presidency in a period when nothing else suffices.

Eisenhower had succeeded in consolidating the New Deal and had moved the country away from isolationism, but he had failed to deal with McCarthyism in a quick or courageous fashion. The greatest disappointment came from the “inertia” of the administration, which “proved inadequate to the mounting requirements of a great nation during a period of intensive external challenge by revolutionary fervor and Communist

77 Ibid.
power.” After thanking the Eisenhowers for their public service and wishing them health and happiness, the editorial page ended with optimism: “Now the scene shifts to the Kennedy Administration, with all of the breath-taking challenges and awesome pitfalls of fresh opportunity.”

Joseph Alsop did not think too highly of the optimistic portions of Eisenhower’s farewell address: “Since the President is neither a fool nor a hypocrite, this summary of the present national situation is at first somewhat bewildering.” Of course, Alsop was not truly bewildered. To him, Eisenhower was simply being Eisenhower, demonstrating yet again that his favorite tactic was to “deal with difficult problems and dangerous situations by displaying massive unconcern, and meanwhile hoping that time will remove the difficulties and denature the dangers.” He was pleased that the age of Eisenhower was passing, and that the Republic had been rescued before Ike could place it in any more danger. The President had been remarkably lucky to leave before the results of his policies could come home to roost. In the past, the tactic of delaying tough decision could work, but in the new era, even conservative leaders needed to be “more agile.”

As Alsop biographer Robert Merry put it: “Inauguration week in Washington was bitterly cold and filled with snow, but the weather couldn’t diminish Joe’s excitement at seeing the fogies of the Eisenhower camp finally leave town.” Eisenhower and his minions bored Joseph Alsop so much that he even began missing Harry Truman—and even wrote

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80 Merry, 357-358.
Truman a letter of apology.\textsuperscript{81} For his part, Eisenhower privately referred to Joseph Alsop as “the lowest form of animal life on earth.”\textsuperscript{82}

Only Arthur Krock considered Eisenhower’s presidency to be a success. In his memoirs, Krock acknowledged that holding such an opinion made him distinctly unfashionable “in the dominantly leftist press here and abroad, and especially among [my] journalistic colleagues in Washington….\textsuperscript{83} He praised Eisenhower’s ability to maintain peace and unity at home and abroad. He thought the Suez crisis to be a minor blemish, but one that did not detract from the larger successes. He worried about Communist dictator Fidel Castro in Cuba, but understood the limits of what could be done. When he thought about Eisenhower, he remembered the warm personal qualities such as Ike’s, “[p]hysical vigor, a ruddy and pleasing countenance, a personal warmth of manner, high intelligence, professional competence, and a most infectious grin….\textsuperscript{84} Krock did believe, as so many others did, that Eisenhower had delegated an “unusual degree of foreign policy formulation and conduct” to Dulles, but to no great harm.\textsuperscript{85} Likewise, Krock also believed that Eisenhower’s adherence to a staff system had led to some missed opportunities.\textsuperscript{86} Krock could never quite understand how Eisenhower’s statements to the press could be so bewildering yet, in private, the President “spoke with full clarity and full grasp of the problems of the Presidency. His syntax was orderly and

\textsuperscript{83} Arthur Krock, \textit{Memoirs}, 274.
\textsuperscript{84} Ibid., 280.
\textsuperscript{85} Ibid., 290.
\textsuperscript{86} Ibid., 306.
unconfused, his sentences parsed."\textsuperscript{87} Looking back at the Eisenhower era after the shocks of the 1960s, Krock believed that Eisenhower “was the President the nation wanted and needed most for the eight years of his tenure—a conservative, but a progressive conservative; a candid, honest spokesman for the interest of the people of the nation and the free world.…”\textsuperscript{88} Krock’s memory did serve him well, but it was a lonely recollection among the pundits. Most of Krock’s colleagues could hardly contain their enthusiasm for Ike’s successor.

\textsuperscript{87} Ibid., 325. Krock even suggested to Eisenhower that he should get a tape recorder, put it next to his bed, record his clear, private thoughts then have the tape transcribed.  
\textsuperscript{88} Ibid., 326.
Chapter 7

The Second Coming

There is a zing and a zest in the air of Washington. It’s a spirit of hurry-up, get going, keep going.¹

-Drew Pearson

The pundits greeted Kennedy’s election and ascendancy to the White House with emotion approaching religious ecstasy. After years of hoping for another candidate who could match the wit, charm, political skill, and activity of Franklin Roosevelt, the pundits had found their champion. A decade and a half of Missouri mules and ho-hum “bobble-heads” had finally ended. The elite journalists spent much of the 1950s in exile. None of them were close to Eisenhower personally. The guests at Eisenhower’s “stag” dinners were more likely to be businessmen rather than academics or journalists, and there were certainly few New Dealers in the crowd—unless one counts Eisenhower himself, or his brother Milton who had served in the Department of Agriculture for many years under Franklin Roosevelt. The change of administration could not have been more stark or welcome for the pundits. As Stewart Alsop described the change: “The Kennedy people were a great deal more agreeable and conversable than the Eisenhower people, most of whom were worthy but stuffy.” And no more stumbling for the next rung of the column-writing ladder, either, since, “in John F. Kennedy’s 1,000 days there was always plenty to write about….²

Certainly, Kennedy’s opponent in the 1960 race—Eisenhower’s Vice-President Richard Nixon—offered little hope of returning any kind of glamour or style to

² Stewart Alsop, Stay of Execution, 97.
Washington D.C. society. All of the pundits backed Kennedy in the election of 1960, even if they did have a certain level of respect for Vice-President Nixon. During the course of the Kennedy Administration, every dinner party at Joseph Alsop’s home included at least one high-ranking official.³ While Kennedy was no intellectual, his quick wit, charm and outward sophistication dazzled many intellectuals who had been bored, and, in their eyes, underutilized during the Eisenhower years. Kennedy waged an all-out charm offensive to woo intellectuals such as Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., and James MacGregor Burns, using Kennedy speechwriter and top aide Theodore “Ted” Sorensen as a go-between.⁴ Unlike President Truman, Kennedy could inspire a following. Unlike President Eisenhower, Kennedy seemed willing to use presidential power to wage a more vigorous and innovative Cold War. He seemed the perfect combination of favorite traits from both Roosevelts. Kennedy’s election and short presidency was almost everything the pundits could have hoped for; his assassination froze the memory of him in seemingly perfect glory.

John Kennedy did not fall from the sky in 1960. Political columnists had reason to write about him as a Congressman and then as a Senator. They knew of his famous father, who had served as the head of the Securities and Exchange Commission and as ambassador to England, and had followed John’s career with interest. Reporters and news outlets dutifully recorded the stories about his heroic wartime service as the captain of

³ Merry, Taking On The World, 367. The regulars were: Robert Kennedy, McGeorge Bundy, Walt Rostow, Lawrence O’Brien, Sargent Shriver, Arthur Schlesinger, the Bissells, Bohlens, Nitzes, Harrimans, Achesons, and Grahams. Katherine Graham remembered that Joseph Alsop had been a Kennedy booster since at least 1958. At one dinner party, Alsop indicated that he thought Kennedy could be President. Graham responded, “Joe, surely you’re not serious. You don’t really think Kennedy could be President, do you?” Joseph told Graham, “Darling, I think he will certainly be nominated and quite probably be elected.” Katherine Graham, Personal History (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), 259.

They knew of his brother Robert Kennedy’s service for McCarthy. They knew the charming Kennedy family.

As far back as 1953, Drew Pearson’s columns drew a distinction between Kennedy’s anti-communism and the witchhunting of Joseph McCarthy. There had been rumors of friendship between the two men, but Pearson reported that Kennedy “would rather have nothing to do with Senator McCarthy.” John Kennedy, Pearson wrote, had little to do with McCarthy himself. Rather, McCarthy was “making eyes” at Kennedy’s sister and was on Joseph Kennedy’s “good side.” In addition, McCarthy had “promised his younger brother, Bob, a job as an investigator.” Drew Pearson anxiously drew distinctions between McCarthy and John Kennedy in order to avoid associating him with the soon-to-be discredited Wisconsin Senator. Pearson pointed out how John Kennedy “took pains not to apply for McCarthy’s committee and said privately: ‘There are too many Kennedys associating with McCarthy already.’”

John Kennedy wanted to make his name in different ways. He had already garnered attention for his good looks. In a short profile, the Washington Post described Kennedy in 1953 as a “handsome, 35-year-old bachelor” who had upset the political powerhouse Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr., in the 1952 Massachusetts Senate race. Instead of mentioning any McCarthy connection or Red hunts, the Post portrayed Kennedy as a mainstream internationalist with a focus on foreign affairs.

John Kennedy was a staunch anti-communist throughout his years in Congress. He had taken a tough anti-communist line in his first congressional election in 1946, calling the Soviet Union “aggressive” and a “slave state” capable of destroying free

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5 Drew Pearson, “Senate Bid to Churchill Balked,” Washington Post, 18 January 1953, 5B.
peoples of the world if the United States failed to meet the “moral and physical” threat post by the Communist world.\footnote{7} Despite being a member of President Truman’s own party, Kennedy attacked Truman in a speech on the floor of the House of Representatives for not facing the Communist threat aggressively enough. In February of 1950, Kennedy had even inserted a column into the \textit{Congressional Record} authored by the Alsop brothers attacking the Truman administration (and specifically Secretary of Defense Louis Johnson) for a lack of preparedness. He wrote Truman a letter warning of a lack of civil defense preparedness and sent copies to forty five newspapers.\footnote{8} He ran for the Senate in 1952 as an anti-communist, and after his election victory, he called for a “maximum effort, one that has some relation to the unrelenting efforts of the Soviets to build up irresistible military strength.”\footnote{9} Kennedy also supported helping the French defeat Communism in Indochina in the 1950s, and was frustrated by Eisenhower’s apparent resistance to the idea.\footnote{10} When the Senate voted to censure McCarthy, John Kennedy was the only Democrat in that body not to register a vote. Kennedy had even defended McCarthy at a dinner at Harvard University’s Spee Club. A speaker attacked both Alger Hiss and Joseph McCarthy, and Kennedy rose to his feet to interrupt the speaker, asking, “How dare you couple the name of a great American patriot with that of a traitor!”\footnote{11} In short, Kennedy’s anti-communist bone fides were beyond reproach.\footnote{12}

In his memoirs, James Reston admitted that his first impressions of Kennedy were informed by what he thought of Joseph Kennedy. John Kennedy seemed to have all of his father’s charm “and many of his wayward habits,” but had a firmer grasp of the realities of the postwar world. Reston thought Kennedy “a little too clever and fancy,” but “intelligent… irresistibly witty, and like all the Kennedys, recklessly handsome.” Kennedy’s sense of humor included a healthy dose of the absurd and mockery. Reston was impressed with his inquisitive nature.\(^\text{13}\)

By 1958, James Reston had already marked Kennedy as a “comer” and used his column to promote some themes about Kennedy that would become commonplace. First, Kennedy was an ambitious, rising star in the Democratic Party. Reston reported that the older, stuffier, establishment Democrats of the Old Guard had been hostile to Kennedy’s meteoric rise. They were jealous of his youth and good looks. They did not like how Kennedy “read, and even wrote books, and spoke to people at Harvard….” But Kennedy was ambitious and “swinging for the fences” politically. Extending the metaphor, Reston believed “his batting average this session” was ”pretty good.” The veteran journalist also portrayed Kennedy as a cool, dispassionate man “on the make” who shrugged off criticism that he was too young to play in the big leagues.\(^\text{14}\) Reston’s image of Kennedy in 1958 was certainly common among the pundits, with one exception.

Arthur Krock was a special case. He was an old family friend of the Kennedys, and perhaps familiarity brought a measure of contempt. Of all the pundits, Krock was the least impressed with Kennedy and the most skeptical of his leadership. Part of this skepticism can certainly be attributed to Krock’s increasingly pronounced conservatism,

\(^{13}\) James Reston, *Deadline*, 287.
but there was a level of cynicism toward Kennedy simply not present in any of the other political journalists. Even years later, after Kennedy’s assassination, Krock admitted that he had not foreseen the political rise of John Kennedy. Krock had certainly done his part to promote Kennedy’s career over the years. He had (very actively) edited and written the (uncredited) forward for and arranged the publication of Kennedy’s senior thesis, eventually published as *Why England Slept*. It was Krock who had suggested the inclusion of Robert A. Taft in Kennedy’s book *Profiles in Courage*.¹⁵

By his own account, the 1960 campaign strained Krock’s relationship with the family, and by the time of Kennedy’s assassination, Krock was an open critic of the President.¹⁶ Perhaps Krock had seen all of the advantages Kennedy enjoyed over the years. In his *Memoirs* Krock certainly believed that “the father was a foremost factor in the election victory of the son.”¹⁷ Still, his columns during the 1960 campaign were favorable and factual. He could praise Kennedy’s “hard-driving organization” that had won an “astounding” victory by operating “with the precision of the caliper that measures one-millionth of an inch.”¹⁸ But he resented the growing love affair between Kennedy and the other pundits. Krock kept his criticisms in check, but he grumbled. The closest Krock would come to an open criticism of Kennedy during the campaign was a column

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¹⁶ Krock resented two incidents in the 1960 campaign. Joseph Kennedy had once called him to complain about the content of one of Krock’s columns and a Kennedy operative accused Krock of watering down the *Times*’ endorsement of the Democratic ticket. Krock denied that he had anything to do with the editorial endorsement. He thought both incidents “revealed a hostile tendency, from which he recurrently relaxed for a while after his inauguration, but which was firmly embedded in his mind at the time of his death.” Krock, *Memoirs*, 366.
comparing the Kennedy-Nixon debates to those of Lincoln and Douglas. Krock found Kennedy and Nixon to be remarkably civil—too civil perhaps.\textsuperscript{19}

After the election, Krock moved still closer to open criticism of the Kennedy administration. He was skeptical of Robert Kennedy’s nomination to become Attorney General. He wrote that the F.B.I. needed to avoid any involvement in politics and worried that Robert Kennedy would have a difficult time avoiding politics. The “burden” of being the nation’s chief law enforcement officer had fallen on the “youthful shoulders” of a “professional politician, who made an indispensable contribution to the victory of the President-elect.” Krock moderated his own criticism of Robert Kennedy’s selection by reporting the analysis of an unnamed person “whose long and close acquaintance with the Kennedys” made him or her able to certify that “Bob Kennedy has the equipment to enable him… to allay the fears and suspicions naturally aroused by his appointment.” The political opposition might attempt to make political hay out of the first questionable incident, but “Bob” could handle it. The source admitted that the younger Kennedy brother had his limitations as a lawyer, but his competence and “personal integrity with the depth furnished by native character and sincere piety” would overcome them. The source praised Bob Kennedy’s “moral courage,” “first-rate, restless mind, and… zest for getting at the facts of a matter.” The confidential source warned of another trait of the Kennedy family. No matter how friendly your relations with the family, if one made any criticism of them, “a tangible drop in the temperature of personal relations” would

follow. Krock never revealed his source, but if it was not Krock himself, he certainly agreed with every word.20

Krock also predicted that Kennedy’s administration would make no clean breaks with the past. The momentum of foreign and domestic policies could not be overcome by charm and style. New promises could not overcome old facts “when problems are deep rooted, fresh solutions are few and dubious,” with the country politically divided. He predicted caution and gradualism on all matters, even as other pundits continued to forecast differently. The Soviets might be tempted to test Kennedy’s willingness to follow the Truman-Eisenhower policies in Berlin, Formosa, or China, but Krock predicted that Kennedy would respond with prudence and caution. Krock wanted to make sure that Kennedy understood that moderation and caution would meet with praise.21 In subsequent columns, Krock warned Kennedy that liberal pressure groups would try to move him to the left on myriad issues. Any radicalism on these issues, however, would effectively end Kennedy’s “honeymoon,” Krock warned. Krock outlined the “priority list” of the Americans for Democratic Action (ADA), a group with an agenda that summarized the wishes of other liberal organizations.22 Krock’s message to Kennedy was clear. If he moved on any of these issues, Krock would criticize him.23

Most pundits, though, were quite happy to relish the differences between the incoming and outgoing administrations. Marquis Childs delighted in telling his readers how “[t]he Kennedy operation will bear little resemblance to that of President

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22 The liberal wing of the Democratic Party founded Americans for Democratic Action in 1948. It was the premier liberal lobbying group.
Eisenhower’s eight years.” Unlike the stuffy Eisenhower who had used a staff system to prevent innovation in government, Childs reported that Kennedy had been reading and digesting the works of political science professor Richard Neustadt, who had advocated a vigorous and active leadership style.\textsuperscript{24} Eisenhower’s stifling staff system, with Sherman Adams running interference, would go the way of the dodo, and good riddance to it.\textsuperscript{25} Innovation would inevitably flow from such an arrangement, and the pace of change would pick up considerably.

Joseph Alsop expressed his joy in a letter to a friend: “I wake up every morning to find that two or three really brilliant and capable men have been added to the new administration.” In a letter to George Kennan on the subject of Kennan’s return to government service, Alsop wrote: “It cheers me up; it reassures me; it greatly reinforces my… alarmingly high hopes for the future.”\textsuperscript{26}

Walter Lippmann’s columns comparing Eisenhower to Kennedy were respectful to the outgoing President, even if Lippmann himself was excited by the prospect of a young, dynamic leader finally occupying the White House. He believed that the warnings of Eisenhower’s farewell address would be “remembered and quoted in the days to come” but in the final analysis Lippmann would trust in the competence of Kennedy’s men. “They will need a lot of luck. But I do not know of any Administration in our times in which the level of competence has been so high.”\textsuperscript{27} Lippmann’s enthusiasm for the “competence” of Kennedy’s men knew no bounds. After the

\begin{footnotes}
\item[26] Merry, \textit{Taking On The World}, 368.
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inaugural address Lippmann guessed that the world was so receptive to Kennedy’s message, “due to belief in the strength and the efficiency of the Kennedy Administration.” Unlike Eisenhower, who seemed to have a measure of contempt for intellect, Kennedy was not afraid to surround himself with smart people, and the world would pay attention. “During the election, and since […] Mr. Kennedy has built up the impression,” wrote Lippmann, that the President-Elect’s team “has the know-how to do what it decides to do.” Unlike the clamor for action that followed Eisenhower’s election, Lippmann again warned that the public should be patient as Kennedy worked through the difficult problems ahead. As the administration went about its work, the public would have to be “informed and persuaded,” presumably by Lippmann, so that “when we are disappointed we must persevere.”

Lippmann neglected to mention that Kennedy speechwriter Theodore Sorensen had shown him a copy of the inaugural address, and the journalist had even made some changes that were incorporated into the final draft. Arthur Krock, for one, was disgusted with Lippmann’s fawning over the young President, and remarked privately: “I may be getting old and I may be getting senile, but at least I don’t fall in love with young boys like Walter Lippmann.”

Part of Lippmann’s joy with Kennedy’s choices certainly came from his own involvement in their selection. On December 6, 1960, Kennedy dropped by Lippmann’s home to discuss the selection of a Secretary of State. Kennedy wanted to nominate Senator J. William Fulbright of Arkansas but could not because of potential opposition.

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29 Steel, Walter Lippmann and the American Century, 525. For example, Lippmann changed the word “enemy” to “adversary.” Ibid.
from liberals and blacks, who objected to the Senator’s opposition to civil rights legislation. Lippmann suggested to Kennedy that he would have to get used to getting along with segregationists if he intended to win reelection. Kennedy replied, “I know that, but the Africans and our own blacks will raise a terrible howl if I appoint him, even though he’s probably the best man for the job.” Lippmann and Kennedy discussed the problem of what to do with Adlai Stevenson. The President-Elect resented how Stevenson had withheld his support for Kennedy during the Democratic convention, hoping to emerge as a dark horse candidate. Lippmann and Kennedy both understood that the liberal wing of the Democratic Party loved Stevenson, and Lippmann suggested that Kennedy name Stevenson as the American ambassador to the United Nations. Kennedy mentioned that Dean Acheson had been pushing for Dean Rusk to take the top job at State, but Lippmann thought Rusk “a profound conformist.” Lippmann did not think Rusk was creative enough for the job: “You’re hardly likely to get from him the kind of original advice a President needs.” Lippmann suggested McGeorge Bundy, and Kennedy left the meeting undecided. After further consultation with others, Kennedy gave Stevenson the ambassadorship, made Rusk the Secretary of State, and Bundy his special assistant for national security. The decision upset Stevenson, and Kennedy left it to Lippmann to console the new ambassador and convince him of the importance of his new post.31

Lippmann was not the only journalist thrilled by Kennedy’s election. He even charmed Arthur Krock, initially. Even though he had privately mocked Lippmann for “falling in love with” Kennedy, Krock wrote about the new President’s “special grace, “

which, along with “his youth, his air of confidence, and the quality of his prose” combined for a sensational and exciting mood in the capital. And Kennedy was not willing to give up on the old man, either. At one of the inaugural balls, Kennedy asked Krock for his opinion of the inaugural address. Krock told Kennedy that it was the best since Woodrow Wilson’s. Kennedy asked if he was going to write that in his next column, and Krock replied, “I already have.”

Krock’s column published on January 22, 1961 was good to its author’s word. He noted the “extraordinary” contrasts between Eisenhower and Kennedy. A new generation was sweeping into nearly every high position in the executive branch. Such a change had not taken place since Theodore Roosevelt. Alone among the pundits, Krock again described the outgoing President as a man of great vigor and “glowing health.” The main thrust of the column, though, was that Kennedy might differ in method, but his goals were the same eternal goals of every President. There were “personal” contrasts between Eisenhower and Kennedy, but the “constancy and basic policies and purposes of the American people” remained the same. Although Krock did not miss an opportunity to take a swipe at Kennedy for accepting the 1960 Democratic platform and its “irresponsible pledges to attract the votes of special interest groups,” he compared Kennedy’s inaugural address favorably to Woodrow Wilson’s (noting that he was present at both inaugural celebrations), just as he promised Kennedy. Krock’s subsequent columns emphasized Kennedy’s political skill in choosing a cabinet that both united

32 Krock, Memoirs, 367.
Democrats and divided Republicans. He compared Kennedy’s pace with Franklin Roosevelt’s famous “100 Days.”

Other aspects of Kennedy’s style impressed Krock’s younger colleague at the *New York Times*. During the transition period, James Reston called Kennedy’s position toward the Soviets “cool and correct.” He was ignoring the Soviets until after the inaugural, when he would move with “extreme caution.” Presuming to speak on behalf of the American people, Reston gave a sarcastic accounting of what Americans wanted from Kennedy in the New Year, in part arguing that Americans had to be patient with the incoming administration. Americans did not want any more “nonsense” from the Russians or foreign wars. Americans wanted disarmament and strong armed forces. They wanted to get rid of Castro without intervening in Cuba, to “do something” about China, to be faithful to our colony-holding allies while adhering to an anti-colonial tradition, to enter common markets without foreign entanglements, to control the United Nations, and to bring prosperity to all Americans. In contrast to the columns concerning the complexity of the world that appeared during the Truman and Eisenhower administration, Reston was decidedly *not* arguing that Kennedy was inept or ill-prepared (he joked that Kennedy should appoint some Yale and Princeton graduates instead of all Harvard men). Instead, Reston’s aim was to prepare the American people to own up to their contradictory goals.

Reston also portrayed Kennedy’s opponents as dazed and overwhelmed by Kennedy’s political skill. The “political and news-making power of the Kennedy

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Administration” seemed to steamroll all opposition in its path. In Reston’s view, Kennedy held all the advantages. He was a “vigorous young President” who had appointed “a resourceful and energetic Cabinet and a powerful and well-led majority in the House and Senate.” Reston also argued that the Kennedy public relations juggernaut would continue well into the future as well. Kennedy had “already almost swept” the popular Eisenhower administration “from the front pages.” Kennedy would wow reporters with live news conferences on television. Reston dismissed this idea as “the goofiest idea since the hula hoop” but knew that Kennedy would master the format.

Even if Kennedy had not mastered all of the communication aspects of the modern presidency, his family could “flutter the society writers.” Kennedy and his family were going to overwhelm the American people with an unbelievable combination of powers. Reston was awed by the prospect of Kennedy doing something that Franklin Roosevelt could not have accomplished: “Franklin Roosevelt tried, but he didn’t have the competitive television networks of 1961 at his command.” Reston even warned that Kennedy’s mastery of the medium could throw the whole system of government out of balance. “After all, if it hadn’t been for the TV debates against Nixon, he wouldn’t be where he is today.” Krock agreed.

All the plaudits from all of the pundits paled in comparison to the new heights of hyperbole reached by Joseph Alsop at the rise of John Kennedy in the election of 1960. Joseph had been a friend of the family since he met Kathleen “Kick” Kennedy just after

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38 Ibid.
39 Ibid.
40 “…I share the view that when Nixon agreed to the TV debates with Kennedy, on the terms both accepted, he took an unnecessary gamble that cost him hundreds of thousands of votes in an election that was decided by a popular plurality of 118,574 in a total of 68,838,219 votes cast.” Krock, Memoirs, 369.
Joseph’s friendship with John began in 1947. They had drifted apart in the 1950s but renewed their friendship in early 1958, and Joseph found that he liked how the young Senator had matured. Joseph thought Kennedy had been a little too glib as a young congressman. But as a Senator, Kennedy had come into his own. They shared a love of foreign policy, and Joseph was absolutely smitten with the Senator’s new wife Jacqueline. The young couple were frequent guests at Joseph’s famous dinner parties. It was Joseph who prompted Kennedy to denounce the Eisenhower administration for the alleged “missile-gap” and then promptly wrote columns praising him for his courage. In order to preserve the fiction of his own impartiality, Joseph actually lied in one of his columns. He reminded his readers that he was a registered Republican, and that he would be supporting Senate Majority Leader Lyndon Johnson for the top spot on the Democratic ticket. While it was true that Joseph was a registered Republican, he had no intention of voting for Nixon, and he did not want Johnson at the head of the Democratic ticket. Alsop was for Kennedy all the way.42

Stewart Alsop also came to like and admire Kennedy, but Joseph’s devotion to the Democratic nominee hardened during the campaign to an almost comical degree. He occasionally engaged in a crude form of polling in order to provide material for columns on voter sentiment. When one voter informed Joseph that she would not vote for Kennedy because he was a Catholic, Joseph responded: “Thank you, Madam. I think you

41 Kick died in a plane crash in 1948, but the two were close friends for about two years. Merry, *Taking on the World*, 341.
Joseph also exchanged affectionate notes with Jacqueline, offering support and advice on how to handle the press and the rough and tumble world of a presidential campaign.

Joseph also played an important role in Lyndon Johnson’s appointment as the Vice Presidential nominee. At the Democratic convention, Joseph, along with Phillip and Katherine Graham (publishers of the *Washington Post*), pressed for Lyndon Johnson to take the second spot on the ticket. When Johnson balked at accepting the offer, Phil Graham produced Kennedy’s private number, leading to the phone conversation between Johnson and Kennedy that sealed the Democratic ticket. Joseph reported on these events, excluding his own role from the account. Throughout the campaign, Joseph’s friendship with Jacqueline deepened, and by election night it is fair to say that Alsop loved the Kennedys. Kennedy must have genuinely valued Joseph Alsop’s advice (much of which merely confirmed his own wishes), because he actively solicited Joseph’s advice and followed it on occasion. Alsop urged Kennedy not to make Fulbright the Secretary of State (his vanity, thought Alsop, might lead to disloyalty), pushed for Douglas Dillon, a Republican, as Treasury Secretary, and suggested ambassadorships for George Kennan and Averell Harriman. Kennedy accepted all of these recommendations.

Kennedy’s inaugural address hit all of the themes the pundits valued. It was aggressive, dedicated to foreign policy, forcefully and convincingly delivered. The praise for Kennedy’s inaugural address was almost unanimous. Lippmann praised it as “a remarkably successful piece of self-expression.”

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43 Ibid., 345.
44 Ibid., 346-356.
45 Ibid., 357.
had managed to reflect the best qualities of the man and the office, and projected exactly the right image to the rest of the world: “The address was brief, it was deliberate and decisive, it was efficient and ardent.” The ideas were not new but they were a “restatement in fresh terms of the purposes in which virtually all of us in this country believe.”

In his *Washington Post* column, Marquis Childs wrote of Kennedy’s “realism” and “elevated” style. The “lofty tone” of the address had struck just the right note: “Without being overly rhetorical, the words he spoke had a noble sound.” Childs described the symbolism of the inaugural in terms as striking as its subject. He first noted the “moving symbol” of the youthful and attractive incoming first couple on either side of Eisenhower on the inaugural stage, “and even the most doubting or hostile critic could hardly have been unimpressed by their quiet confidence, their reserve that had in it nonetheless a sense of joyousness and hope.” The silhouette of Kennedy stood in front of the “glistening dome of the Capitol and the brilliant blue of the sky” as he delivered his “simple yet moving” address. Childs predicted that the beautiful image of the incoming President would “remain for a long time a part of the American vision.” Kennedy looked prepared to face the tough challenges with “courageous readiness.”

It seemed that the years of exile would finally come to an end, and the smart, interesting people would once again dominate the social scene in Washington. Some pundits even had a sense of humor about the forces Kennedy had unleashed. Reston found Kennedy “personally responsible… for liberating the professors from their Republican exile, and they are now beginning to punish the Republic with vast, gassy

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reports written in that highfalutin and vapid textbook prose which only professors can compose or understand.” Kennedy’s men would not shy away from inflating their jobs along with their prose, “and inflated language is already the curse of the cold war.” It had been “good for journalism but not necessarily for diplomacy or peace.”

Joseph Alsop described the night of Kennedy’s inaugural as “the last during which I felt like a young man.” Indicative of the change of tone in the city, his own dinner party was “glorious fun.” Later that night, the new President stopped by his house at close to two in the morning and stayed for almost an hour. When the Secret Service cars arrived at his house on Dumbarton Avenue, Alsop’s neighbors threw open their windows and cheered the President. Years later, Alsop could recall the image of the youthful Kennedy standing on his doorstep, exhilarated by the excitement of the day.

Alsop biographer Robert Merry described the thrill:

There was a new spirit in the city, a political and social ferment, as well as the prospect of imaginative leadership in the executive branch. Georgetown was once again fashionable. Joseph now would enjoy easy access to the inner councils of policy-making. He would be invited to the White House for the first time since his cousins [Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt] had lived there nearly two decades before. He would attend state dinners, interview the president in the Oval Office, exchange gossip with the First Lady.

Joseph later remembered those days as the best of his life. At his first dinner with Kennedy in the White House, Alsop marveled at seeing ten pounds of fresh caviar in a golden bucket and bottle after bottle of Dom Perignon. He drank too much and scolded Franklin Roosevelt Jr. for calling the President “Jack.” Everyone ridiculed Mamie

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49 Joseph Alsop, I’ve Seen the Best of It, 433.
50 Joseph Alsop, I’ve Seen the Best of It, 435.
Eisenhower’s color choice of “vomit-green and rose pink” for bedroom and bathroom. The first couple dined at the Alsop home often—by one estimate, once every six weeks. Joseph wrote, “because of the contrast with the aging and self-righteous Eisenhower administration, the first period of the Kennedy era was… downright exhilaration—perhaps more exhilarating that it ought to have been.” People flocked to his parties and tolerated his prickly personality because of his relationship to the President. When Alsop walked out of an interview with Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, Kennedy convinced McNamara to visit the Alsop home for breakfast, only to have Joseph’s pet toucan “give a deafening shriek, and with unerring aim” spit “at least half a well-chewed banana into McNamara’s bald spot.”

Alsop could not praise the new President enough, privately or publicly. He told his readers that Kennedy was a snob—but one in the manner of Theodore Roosevelt—and like T.R., Kennedy was charming enough to get away with it. He called the President a “physical fitness snob. All the Kennedys have this singular trait.” Beyond fitness, Kennedy was also courageous, just as T.R. had been. Kennedy’s final conceit, though, was perhaps Joseph’s favorite. Kennedy was an “experience-snob—in wanting what he does and what happens to him to be vivid, intense and, above all, meaningful, rather than cosy and average humdrum.”

True to the grandest expectations of an intelligentsia returning from exile, the President-elect and Mrs. Kennedy had invited more than one hundred fifty leaders of the arts, sciences, and humanities to the inaugural, and the Lippmanns took the opportunity to

52 Joseph Alsop, I’ve Seen the Best of It, 438-440.  
53 Ibid., 441.  
have a tea party. The most important difference between the inaugural balls and the Lippmann party was that the latter’s list was even more exclusive than the President’s. The staff writer who reported the event gushed, “It was, even for Washington with its famous-name party guests, quite a gathering.” Playwright Arthur Miller, poet W.H. Auden, authors John Steinbeck and John Hersey were perhaps the most famous guests in attendance, but the entire guest list “read like an intellectual who’s who of writers, artists, composers, philosophers, scientists, and musicians.” 55 The distinguished and exclusive group mingled and traded stories. It could not have been clearer that the dull Eisenhower age had passed.

The most important journalists, at the height of their power and influence, stood in near unanimous awe of the President. In his memoirs, Alsop wrote that he could not remember a single area of disagreement with Kennedy. 56 Washington Post publisher Phil Graham, in a letter to British philosopher Isaiah Berlin, described his feelings toward Kennedy as “beyond enthusiasm into passion,” and the two people “closest to our state of mind, in order of non-detachment,” were “Walter Lippmann and Scotty Reston.” 57 In the words of Lippmann biographer Ronald Steel: “Lippmann became one of the shining ornaments of the Kennedy administration. Courted and feted by the New Frontiersmen, invited to their parties, solicited for his advice, brought into their deliberative councils, he

56 Joseph Alsop, I’ve Seen the Best of It, 453.
enjoyed a participation and an influence he had not known since his World War I
days….”

Marquis Childs catalogued all the differences between Eisenhower and Kennedy.
His columns described how the new administration admired excellence. Kennedy’s family had not come from old American stock. Kennedy was young (the first president born in the twentieth century), Catholic (the first president to break that taboo) and smart with a cultured, beautiful wife and family. Childs had to reach back into the previous century to find an inaugural that symbolized as much: “Nothing quite like the big binge of this Inaugural has been seen since Andrew Jackson moved into the White House and brought to Washington from the furthest creek and the remotest backwoods hamlet the people in force.”

Drew Pearson described the whirlwind of activity surrounding the Kennedy cohort as they swept the boring Republicans out of the halls of power. Pearson noted that the level of “turmoil” increased but found it to be “a pleasant turmoil.” Former enemies forgot old grievances. Nobody seemed capable of being “really sore.” “After all, you don’t elect a Democratic President every year, especially the youngest in history.” The atmosphere was electric and contagious with “a spirit of hurry-up, get-going, keep-going” motivating public servants and cynical reporters alike. The age of the “sourpuss” President, such as Calvin Coolidge, had passed forever. No “square-faced” man such as Herbert Hoover could ever win election again: “For if future presidents are going to stand up to rapid catch-as-catch-can live TV press-conference debate, they will have to be

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58 Steel, 525.
endowed with a bit of John Barrymore plus the gift of gab of a Huey Long.” Future Presidents would need good looks, acting ability, and a “tongue locked to… [one’s] brains.” Pearson guessed that brains might have to “take a back seat in favor of looks,” but announced that the country was lucky indeed to have a President with all of those traits.  

One of the prejudices of the pundits, one that Eisenhower could certainly never satisfy, was that they craved action, crisis, and drama. Joseph Alsop hoped Kennedy would “from the very moment that he takes the oath… create a climate of action.” Kennedy could only succeed by “bringing the country up short with a sharp warning of the exceptionally grave national situation, which most people have hardly noticed.” Kennedy’s “deeply held belief, that we are in the midst of a literally mortal struggle which literally imperils our national survival” heartened Alsop. He warned that the coalition of conservative Democrats and Republicans in Congress constituted a bare majority in that body. Alsop thought that Kennedy was up to the challenge: “As these words are written, all the resources of presidential authority have been mobilized, in the former manner of Franklin Roosevelt, in order to secure a favorable outcome.” To Alsop’s delight, it appeared Kennedy was ready to “fight it out in Congress.”

Drew Pearson compared John Kennedy to Franklin Roosevelt as “a man with full knowledge of the weight of destiny on his shoulders…” –implying, of course, that Eisenhower had not been such a man, and Truman, presumably, had collapsed under the weight. But Pearson believed that Lincoln was an even more appropriate example for

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Kennedy. “For while Roosevelt inherited a nation prostrate, people starving, banks closed, Lincoln inherited a people divided.” He wrote, “Like Lincoln, John F. Kennedy inherits a world divided—and the prospect of war.” Kennedy understood that the world could not continue “half slave and half free.” Pearson surveyed the world and saw challenges that only a Kennedy or a Roosevelt (or perhaps a Lincoln) could handle:

Africa so torn with hate and confusion…; South America smoldering with resentment against its one-time leader and friend; Southeast Asia falling between the alternatives of local corruption and Western ineptitude until it becomes ripe for the Red Chinese to pluck; Pakistan, from which the U-2 flights were launched, signing a new economic alliance with Moscow; Japan more and more eyeing the trade opportunities of the Chinese mainland; Western Europe divided over Berlin and skeptical about NATO’s future.

Eisenhower had not done the American people or the Kennedy administration any favors with how he had left the world. Pearson argued that Eisenhower had “ lulled” the world “into complacency.” Eisenhower, “such a charming gentleman,” had told Americans so often that “all is well and he knows best,” but by Pearson’s estimation, only “dynamic, audacious, courageous leadership” would prevent the end of the world.66

Drew Pearson hinted that the 1960s might resemble the 1930s if Kennedy was not up to the challenge. Americans had been too confident for too long, the prosperity simply could not go on forever. Pearson believed that the foreign aid of the 1950s had kept the world economy afloat. Foreigners took American aid and used the money to buy American goods, so “In effect, we have been paying ourselves for our own goods.” If the process ended, “economic dislocation and depression result.”67 Pearson’s warning continued:

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President Kennedy believes that the economic and foreign policy problems facing the Nation are far graver than the Eisenhower Administration let on. He is almost depressed by the gloomy unemployment and business outlook that he believes the Republicans deliberately hid from the people. And there are so many foreign policy disasters—Laos, the Congo, Berlin and Cuba—handed to him that Mr. Kennedy’s address to the Nation will be a very sober warning of the dangers ahead.68

Lippmann saw the challenges but thought they offered Kennedy a unique opportunity. “There are grave problems which need to be solved and there are agonizing issues which must be worked through. But there is no overall national emergency…. Therefore the Kennedy Administration does not have to improvise and to proceed breathlessly to do things.” Kennedy’s able cabinet should take a few months to think through some new ideas. The new president had chosen men who all had “an extraordinary background of experience in public life. The Cabinet is sometimes described as a group of professors.” Indeed they were bright, but they were also politically savvy. “There is not one of them who does not already know his way around Washington and there are few among them who do not combine practical experience with a theoretical discipline in the subject with which they will deal. They are, moreover, a highly sophisticated lot.” The next few months could act as a “shake-down cruise” if no major crisis appeared. He hoped our allies would “understand that under the American political system a change of Administration is not the same thing as a change of government in a parliamentary state. It is a much bigger and more radical operation.”69

Joseph Alsop did not think Kennedy had as much time to contemplate the challenges of the day, since the “vast, revolutionary, potentially destructive forces” of the

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time were “very close to getting wholly out of control.” Alsop wrote, “After years of supineness, therefore, the American Government will now have to spring into sudden, vigorous often risky action on dozens, quite literally dozens of different fronts, everything to be done is complex and difficult, yet almost everything is to be done at once.” The countless “grave local situations” had to be dealt with in days, not weeks. Kennedy had prepared to meet the challenges of the day by hiring “a really startling number of men with outstanding gifts.” Alsop was “moderately optimistic” for the coming year. Certainly there would be setbacks, but “the trend, which has been down for so long, ought to turn up before the next new year.”

Just as Lippmann had prodded Eisenhower to use his personal popularity for some higher purpose, the veteran pundit urged Kennedy not to rest upon his high Gallup poll ratings. Kennedy had the makings of a great President, if he would only take the time to be a “great teacher.” Kennedy already had “very great gifts of precise analysis and judgment” along with “a rare combination of courage and political sophistication.” Lippmann was optimistic that Kennedy could put that last element of greatness in place. He had “no doubt that this instinct to teach is in him. It is in every man who has deep convictions and a passion to realize them.”

Instead of Kennedy’s teaching abilities, Arthur Krock was more concerned with some of the practical political matters that Kennedy would face in Congress. He worried that Kennedy seemed too eager to provoke fights that would lead to grudges within the Democratic Party. Kennedy had intervened in a House Rules Committee fight that Krock

thought hardly worth the effort, even if his side prevailed in the end. Krock noted that the fight would probably fall into the category of a “family fight,” which it certainly was. He worried how Kennedy’s health care proposal jibed with his statement that it was a time for Americans to ask what they could do with their country. In each of these matters, Krock hoped that Kennedy would draw on his years in both houses of Congress to arrive at constructive solutions.

Krock was impressed with Kennedy’s pace and patience with the press, but implicit in the praise was the criticism that Kennedy might be a President who would waste time on trivial matters. Kennedy seemed to be everywhere—hailing Senators in parking lots, firing off messages, calling for legislative action, attending dinner parties, and strolling down Pennsylvania Avenue. Krock was particularly interested in describing the role of Kennedy’s press conferences in creating the prevailing atmosphere. Kennedy used press conferences both to answer questions and announce policy, but Krock detected some problems with Kennedy’s preferred medium. The questions of reporters would stray into trivial matters or were clearly asked “in the principal interest of publicizing the questioner.” Krock counted sixteen questions at the last press conference “which a responsible President should not sensibly have been expected to answer, or were wastes of time by reason of triviality.” Kennedy replied to useless questions at lengths exceeding “all reasonable requirements of courtesy….”

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Krock also thought that Kennedy’s level of activity was creating as many problems as it solved. Reversals of Eisenhower policies toward the developing world and in agricultural policy struck Krock as little more than wheel-spinning.76 Supporting decolonization in Africa offended old allies such as Britain and France, whom we needed in the Cold War effort.77 Krock thought Kennedy’s agricultural bill would “compound the present chaos in the situation” and “expose the general consumer to wholly self-serving programs of farm organization leaders” while subjecting farmers to even more federal control. He worried that Kennedy’s domestic program indicated that the President was moving toward “expansions of federalism hitherto unknown in this country.”78 But Krock’s complaints about trivialities and government expansion would fall by the wayside, while descriptions of Kennedy’s pace would take on new meaning soon enough.

A Communist insurgency, receiving men and materiel from the North Vietnamese and the Soviets, threatened Laos. Deputy Director of the Central Intelligence Agency Richard Bissell had warned Joseph Alsop about the upcoming trouble. In response, Alsop wrote Kennedy and threatened to oppose the nomination of Kennedy foreign

76 Giglio, *The Presidency of John F. Kennedy*, 107-117. Although Kennedy had supported the Eisenhower farm program as it was crafted by Secretary of Agriculture Ezra Taft Benson in the 1950s, he made the declines in farm income and low commodity prices campaign issues in 1960. Kennedy proposed a program based on guaranteed parity income for farmers who accepted mandatory production and marketing controls to increase farm income and reduce surpluses. Kennedy and his Secretary of Agriculture, Orville Freeman, submitted the farm bill to Congress in April 1961. Ibid.
77 Kennedy had mentioned Africa over five hundred times during the 1960 campaign, and historian James Giglio wrote that the “New Frontier’s greatest imprint came in Africa.” Kennedy sent good ambassadors to Africa, often bypassing the Foreign Service, where many career diplomats had a “neocolonialist mentality.” Kennedy sent John S. Badeau, a former president of the American University in Cairo, to Egypt; William Attwood, a journalist from *Look* magazine, to Guinea; and former Truman appointee Philip Kaiser to Senegal. Kennedy also sent more foreign aid to Africa, and spent a tremendous amount of time on issues in the troubled Congo. Later, when Krock chided Kennedy for denying a visa to an African diplomat, Kennedy told him he would allow the diplomat into the United States if Krock would take the African to lunch at the Metropolitan Club. Ibid., 221-226.
policy advisor Chester Bowles (Alsop thought Bowles would be too soft on Laos) as undersecretary of State unless Kennedy took the situation more seriously. Alsop’s columns, predictably, took the hardest line imaginable in Laos, and Kennedy spent more time on the Laotian insurgency than any other issue in his first one hundred days in office. After Kennedy threatened the use of force in a press conference, Joseph Alsop filed a column (written from Thailand) praising Kennedy’s toughness.  

Arthur Krock approved of Kennedy’s “resolute notice to the Communist nations that the United States will execute its commitment to a neutral and independent Laotian Government.” Krock noted, though, that this was precisely the kind of “brinksmanship” that the Kennedy men had criticized before coming to power. Krock praised Kennedy for realizing that brinksmanship was, in fact, the “soundest peace-keeping diplomacy, always providing a nation was not bluffing and made this plain to any others concerned.” But the bulk of the column was dedicated to finding inconsistencies in previous Kennedy statements on foreign policy and Southeast Asia. Kennedy would have to show his skills as a diplomat by changing the policies of the past to meet the needs of the present. 

The American people overwhelmingly supported the Kennedy administration in those first months. After barely winning the election, Kennedy’s approval ratings rocketed above the seventy percent mark and stayed there until the summer of 1962,

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79 Merry, 368-369. Merry believed that Joseph “cut more slack for the president than Joseph probably would have granted Eisenhower, who likely would have been attacked for half measures and for offering Moscow a free hand to subvert the Vientiane [the capital of Laos] regime. Kennedy’s actions hardly constituted the tough course portrayed in Joseph’s prose; there was little reason to believe America was willing to go to war over such a tiny, remote place. And Joseph’s approval of a policy he had opposed just a few weeks before reflected his willingness to tailor his outlook in support of his favorite in the White House.” Ibid.

when they dropped to just above sixty percent.\footnote{Gallup, \textit{Presidential Approval}, 32-35.} Krock believed Congressmen would get their first taste of Kennedy’s public support when they returned to their districts for the Easter break. It would be up to Kennedy when to use his public support to push an agenda, but Krock predicted that when he did, it would be a powerful force.\footnote{Arthur Krock, “Kennedy’s Support,” \textit{New York Times}, 2 April 1961, E9.} As Kennedy approached one hundred days of service in office, Krock was surprised by the “vigor of the bi-partisan resistance in Congress to major legislative proposals from the President.” Kennedy was having trouble translating popularity to legislative success. Krock interpreted this “paradox” of Kennedy’s leadership to indicate that the President was more popular than his policies. Krock acknowledged the artificiality in judging Kennedy after only a few months in office and warned that the real tests of the President’s political stamina were yet to come.\footnote{Arthur Krock, “The ‘First 100 Days,’” \textit{New York Times}, 16 April 1961, E11.}

Fidel Castro, the Communist dictator of Cuba, had been growing friendlier with the Soviet Union near the end of the Eisenhower administration. The United States recruited anti-Castro Cubans to take part in an invasion of Cuba to overthrow the dictator. He approved of an assault on only two beaches in Cuba’s Bay of Pigs, hoping to hide America’s role in the invasion. The first air strikes took place on April 15, but Kennedy canceled further air strikes after international protests condemned the action. The actual invasion of the island on April 16-17 was a failure in almost every way.\footnote{James N. Giglio, \textit{The Presidency of John F. Kennedy} (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1991), 56-60.} The planning was flawed. The invaders never had air superiority, and the Cuban air force disabled freighters carrying crucial equipment. An undetected coral reef wrecked some boats. No
popular uprising emerged. The invaders lost their beachhead. Castro’s forces took more
than twelve hundred prisoners; the dictator remained in power. It was a military failure
as well as a political, moral, and diplomatic nightmare. Afterward, Eisenhower
commented that if the facts were ever known about the invasion, it could be called a
"Profile in Timidity and Indecision." 85  Time magazine called it "a hickory stick in the
Presidential education of John Kennedy." 86  The Bay of Pigs fiasco made the Kennedy
administration seem aggressive, immoral, and weak all at once.

Few pundits blamed Kennedy in their columns. There seemed to be more than
enough blame to go around. Marquis Childs called it one of the “messes inherited by the
new President.” 87  When Childs assessed the failures of the Cuban invasion, he blamed
military intelligence, out-of-touch American diplomats, and the “exile mentality.”  He did
not mention John Kennedy. 88  Drew Pearson blamed the CIA. The invasion was a good
idea, but the agency had bungled the operation. “The whole episode can only be
described as a CIA fiasco. Our cloak-and-dagger boys have been playing a grim game
with the lives of Cuban freedom fighters, many of whom have now been abandoned.” 89
A few days later Pearson added that “it was poor judgment by President Kennedy, plus
bumbling by the CIA, which pulled the rug out from under American prestige.” 90

Arthur Krock warned Kennedy that he needed to remind the Soviets that
diplomacy in Laos and failure in Cuba did not “presage the slightest yielding by the
United States on holding Berlin, on the strengthening of N.A.T.O. and on all necessary

resistance to the extension of Moscow-dominated governments to the Western hemisphere.” Krock argued that Kennedy needed to make sure that Soviet Premier Khrushchev would not “miscalculate” and take a gamble in any of these areas. Krock believed that the Bay of Pigs debacle had injured the reputation of the United States in the rest of the world, but Krock thought Kennedy could learn some important lessons from the episode. First, “ill-conceived,” “half-measures” were never going to work. Second, Americans would unite “behind any firmness in foreign policy the President may assume.”

Gallup’s poll of presidential approval bore out Krock’s assessment, since Kennedy’s approval rating after the invasion hovered near eighty percent.

Lippmann believed that an astonishing number of normally responsible men were too anxious to use American might in places such as Laos, Vietnam, and Cuba. “In my view, they have let their pride, their frustration, and their impatience exaggerate fantastically the importance of these small peripheral countries. This exaggeration is at the expense of a clear and steady and resolute view of the strategy of our great adversary.” Lippmann warned that he could not “imagine any course of action better calculated to lose the cold war than to become engaged in the jungles of Indochina or in an occupation against the guerilla forces of Castro.” The Soviets had not committed their armed forces to any of these “peripheral countries”; therefore, the United States should not allow itself to be distracted by them. Lippmann wanted to make sure Kennedy did not commit America to “costly little wars which cannot be won easily if they can be won at all, while the Soviet Union and China have their hands free.” To Lippmann, the failure

92 Gallup, Presidential Approval, 32. Gallup’s reading on May 3 was 83%. Ibid.
of the invasion was a blessing in disguise. It might discourage the “addicts of these little
wars” who had not stopped to think of the consequences of their actions:

Have they thought what a little war in Cuba would be like after the
Marines had captured Havana and a few cities had then to govern a
revolutionary peasantry?

American armed engagement in these peripheral countries, with the Soviet
Union’s power uncommitted, would be the height of strategic folly. These
peripheral countries, including Cuba, cannot pose a vital threat to the
security of the United States, and we must not exaggerate their
importance.93

Television newsman Howard K. Smith asked Lippmann how the “brilliant men
who surround Kennedy” could have made such a mistake in Cuba. He responded that the
men who actually made the decision to go ahead with the operation were senior advisors,
not the younger Kennedy men. Perhaps the Kennedy men were not strong enough
politically to overrule their superiors? Lippmann guessed that Kennedy “didn’t feel that
he knew enough to overrule the CIA—the Chiefs of Staff, what there was of the State
Department, and so on.” But he was quick to add that Kennedy was “a man who can
learn.” There were plenty of lessons from the Bay of Pigs, but Kennedy would learn to
trust his own judgment over that of his military advisors: “I think he’s learned that more
than any other thing from Cuba.” Still, Lippmann looked on the bright side. The Cuban
operation was “wrong in itself” and “foolishly handled,” but a victory might have been
worse. He envisioned fourteen hundred men on the Cuban shores who then provoked a
bloody and potentially lengthy civil war, with the United States responsible for its genesis
and its fallout.94 Lippmann thought that Cuba was “a thorn in our flesh but not a dagger

94 Walter Lippmann, Conversations with Walter Lippmann (Boston: Little, Brown and Company,
in our hearts.” He did leave open a few possibilities which should trigger a response from the United States: “I would call the establishment of a missile base or a submarine base in Cuba as marking a threat. I think we must keep the thing under really close watch, and it’s perfectly easy to do.”

Stewart Alsop believed “there is no use blinking the fact that in the eyes of the world the United States has suffered a terrible defeat.” But unlike Lippmann, Alsop thought the Bay of Pigs invasion held a more aggressive lesson. “The prestige and even the honor of the United States are now obviously and wholly committed to Castro’s ultimate downfall.” Alsop had a difficult time understanding Kennedy’s actions in the Cuban affair. He wrote, “The fact is that there has been something oddly uncharacteristic about the President’s role in the Cuban affair. To be sure, since the operation failed, his actions have been wholly characteristic of the man—he has taken the whole responsibility for the failure on himself and he has passed the word down the line that there will be no recriminations and no scapegoat hunt. The uncharacteristic phase came earlier.” Kennedy had previously been a cautious character. “He had looked very hard, carefully weighing every conceivable factor likely to affect the outcome. And then he has leaped very hard, using every conceivable means to assure success.”

Kennedy was a good decision-maker, so he must have been given bad information. But there was no getting around the fact that Kennedy did not seem to weigh the “consequences of failure.” Unlike the boldness of the man, the invasion had been “so uncharacteristically tentative.” Alsop thought that Kennedy must have been listening to United Nations Ambassador Adlai Stevenson and his “holier-than-thou public

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95 Ibid., 62.
stance,” which was difficult to sustain after American complicity in the operation was obvious. Alsop predicted, “one way or another, the American commitment to bring Castro down will have to be honored. The commitment can only be honored if the American Government is willing, if necessary, to strike to kill, even if that risks the shedding of American blood.”

Even if Alsop’s columns defended Kennedy, privately he thought that the Bay of Pigs invasion proved that Kennedy was “not historically prepared to deal with the enormous burdens of the presidency.”

Krock reported that Congress was starting to question Kennedy’s judgment in light of the Cuban invasion and the President’s apparent backing of a scheme to swap tractors for prisoners captured in the invasion. Krock noted that in both cases, Kennedy appeared to have acted on bad advice. Krock suggested replacing the policy makers in the Central Intelligence Agency, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and “several of the young and enormously self-confident college teachers to whom the President has assigned administrative and policy-making powers.” In light of these two poor decisions, Krock found it perfectly natural that Congressional leaders might be worried about upcoming meetings with world leaders such as Charles DeGualle and Khrushchev—both formidable characters. Krock wrote that the anxiety over Kennedy’s judgment was not commonplace, but merely notable.

Nevertheless, the pundits and the public stuck with Kennedy. Kennedy’s approval ratings before the Cuban invasion were already high—seventy three percent—

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98 Joseph Alsop, I’ve Seen the Best of It, 443. Alsop, writing in the late 1980s, still thought that this point had been “ignored by many historians.” Ibid.
but they shot up to eighty three percent after the invasion.\textsuperscript{100} The honeymoon continued.

The pundits had set the conventional wisdom. Kennedy had established a new tone, style, and level of sophistication; innovative and flexible, able and wise.

\textsuperscript{100} Edwards and Gallup, \textit{Presidential Approval}, 32.
Chapter 8

Crisis and Martyrdom

Why I should so irrationally mind the president’s loss, and mind it much more than the loss of my own father, I cannot say. But clearly, after that bright, blustery November day, nothing would quite be the same in my life again or, it hardly needs saying, in the life of this country.¹

--Joseph Alsop

Kennedy had set the proper tone for his administration in his first six months in office, and the pundits had created the conventional wisdom for the Kennedy era. They would make no attacks on Kennedy’s intelligence or complaints about Kennedy’s lack of sophistication. They praised his cool, pragmatic, and innovative leadership. The elite political journalists had even given Kennedy a pass on the Bay of Pigs invasion. Of course, if Kennedy did not learn from his mistakes, he would be held to account, but broad public support indicated that the American people were as happy with Kennedy as the pundits. Unlike the Truman years, the pundits were not crossing their fingers and hoping for the best. Unlike the Eisenhower years, their hopes for Kennedy knew few bounds. There were moments of inactivity and mild complaints from the elite political journalists during Kennedy’s final time in the White House, but two dramatic events—the Cuban missile crisis and his assassination—seemed to wash away all memories. The eyes of the pundits were too blurry with tears to see Kennedy’s short term in office clearly. The conventional wisdom about Kennedy would rest on his image, his crisis leadership, and the tragedy of his death.

In the late spring of 1961, most pundits were optimistic about the upcoming the summit meeting between Kennedy and Khrushchev in Vienna. They were sure he was

¹ Joseph Alsop, *I’ve Seen the Best of It*, 464-465.
smart enough to handle himself properly. They reassured their readers of Kennedy’s toughness, resolve, brains, vigor, sense of history. They were anxious to see movement on the diplomatic front between the two leaders responsible for keeping the Cold War from evolving into a hot one. When the summit did not live up to their expectations, they covered up what they knew and put the best face on the events.

The meeting took place in late May and early of June 1961. According to the conventional wisdom, Eisenhower had let the United States fall behind in the Cold War, and Drew Pearson did not pass up the opportunity to contrast how Kennedy had revitalized American foreign policy since the flabby Eisenhower years. Because of Eisenhower’s failures, Kennedy could not negotiate from a position of power in absolute terms, but Kennedy was bright enough to compensate for the predicament Eisenhower had put him in, using his political skill, personality, and shrewdness. Arthur Krock told his readers that Kennedy was going to Vienna with plenty of resolve and a public willing to “back it up if need be.” Kennedy’s personal popularity among the American people would also help convince Khrushchev that he was the “resolute and able leader of democracy.…”

Marquis Childs predicted that Kennedy’s relative youth would give him distinct advantages over his older European counterparts—de Gaulle, Adenauer, Khrushchev, and Macmillan. He argued that Kennedy’s power came from his potential to stay in office for quite some time. Childs did not think Kennedy’s negotiating partners would survive (politically or literally) Kennedy’s first term in office. Further, Childs believed Kennedy’s background and generational outlook had prepared him for the intricacies of

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international diplomacy. Kennedy had chronicled the “sobering” years before World War II in his book *Why England Slept*. He had been through all of the “grim experiences” of war and “built his mature knowledge of the world and its management” over the subsequent years. Kennedy had “attacked the problems of foreign policy” with “intensity and… seriousness” during his years in Congress and had prepared himself “for the long pull” and for the time when his generation would take over leadership of the world.

Like Childs, Joseph Alsop thought Kennedy compared favorably to his fellow statesmen. Despite their age difference, both Kennedy and de Gaulle had “a long sense of history,” but de Gaulle and the other elder statesmen visiting with the President had flawed, unchanging worldviews. Like Pearson, Alsop argued that Eisenhower had left America with an unfavorable balance of power in the world by neglecting foreign policy and forming a “bizarre collection of pseudo-military pacts based on no visible power realities,” even as he failed to deal with the “dangerous local situations on the Cold War frontiers.” Worst of all, perhaps, Eisenhower seemed to buy into an “ill-founded theory that grave international problems can be solved by being nice….” Unlike Eisenhower, “Mr. Kennedy, quite clearly, is not much of a believer in the effectiveness of mere niceness.” Alsop compared Kennedy’s current situation to how Franklin Roosevelt had saved capitalism with new ideas and an ebullient nature.

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6 Ibid.
The meeting with Khrushchev was much tougher and grimmer than any of the pundits had predicted. James Reston knew what had happened but did not report what was probably the best story from the meeting. Kennedy had promised Reston an exclusive interview at the conclusion of the meetings. The President arrived an hour late, and looked “shaken and angry” when he sat down next to Reston and let out a long sigh. Reston commented that it must have been a rough session, and Kennedy’s reply was so frank that the reporter was taken aback. Khrushchev had spoken bluntly about Berlin, saying he was going to “pull [their] testicles” by putting pressure on Berlin. If Kennedy would not allow the Soviets to control access to Berlin, they would do so unilaterally. Kennedy replied to Khrushchev that he would use force to maintain access to American troops in Berlin, and the meeting ended on that note. He told Reston that the Soviets were willing to take a hard line because “anybody who had made such a mess of the Cuban invasion had no judgment, and any president who had made such a blunder but then didn’t see it through had no guts.” Soviet-American relations depended on the Soviets believing that America would “insist on our rights” and “fight for them.” The President admitted that he had not convinced Khrushchev of American resolve and told Reston that he had to “demonstrate our firmness, and the place to do it… was Vietnam.” The choice of Vietnam shocked Reston: “I don’t think I swallowed his hat, but I was speechless. If he had said he was going to run the Communist blockade into Berlin, I might have understood, but the reference to Vietnam baffled me.” At that point, the President was called away to another meeting.7 The specific details of this interview with

7 Reston, Deadline, 291.
Kennedy would not become public for years, but Reston blamed the Bay of Pigs invasion and the Vienna Summit on Kennedy’s inexperience.8

At the time, Reston sugarcoated his meeting with Kennedy. His readers would only know that the meetings had closed with “hard controversy” and with Kennedy “solemn.” Reston reported that there had been “no ultimatums and few bitter or menacing exchanges” between the two leaders. He reported that Khrushchev had called the meeting “a very good beginning” and that Kennedy was in a “solemn, although confident, mood.” Kennedy had managed to reestablish the diplomatic ties severed since the U2 incident, but the “official statement on the meeting was vaguely incomplete.”

Kennedy had answered Khrushchev point-for-point and made sure the Soviet Premier understood the firmness of the American positions. Kennedy had his first encounter with a formidable opponent, and Reston wrote that the President had “come out of it very well. He did not expect much and he did not get much, but he went away… more experienced and he rates more highly in the estimation of these men who watched these exchanges than he has at any time since he entered the White House.”9

In addition, Reston wrote in his column that Kennedy’s European trip had some important, psychological benefits. Meeting with the Russian leader helped Kennedy put problems such as the Cuban debacle into perspective, restored his confidence as well as his sense of humor. “Paris was a good tonic for his Castroitis.” Chatting with de Gaulle had buoyed his spirits. Perhaps the meetings with de Gaulle and Khrushchev gave Kennedy a greater sense of the importance of setting priorities in foreign policy, as well as a deeper understanding of what united the West and divided the Soviets from the free

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8 Ibid., 293.
world. Kennedy understood these things theoretically, but after the meetings, he knew them firsthand. Kennedy had been “searching for ways to sort things out, to reduce complexity to identity, to divide the dependable from the capricious,” and while “Europe has not done this for him… it has helped.”

Lippmann called the meeting “significant and important” because it reestablished meaningful diplomatic contact between the United States and the Soviets. He explained that most meetings ended in a draw, just as the Vienna summit had, since Kennedy and Khrushchev were both aware “that neither of them is in a position to deliver an ultimatum to the other, and that neither is able, even if he personally were willing to yield to the other beyond the point where an accommodation of their interests not a surrender of them, is reached.” Lippmann’s only criticism of Kennedy was that the President had told the American people in his televised address following the summit that foreign aid was a “burden.” Lippmann thought Kennedy should “have told them that it is a rather meager first installment of what this country will have to do in Latin America, in Asia, and in Africa, to arrest and reverse the expansion of communism.”

Even Lippmann’s columns on the state of the Cold War were uncharacteristically optimistic. Lippmann tried to convince his readers to face up to the realities of the Cold War without giving into despair or “suicidal tendencies.” Communism would only sweep the world if the West allowed it. Defeatism came only with a misreading of the world trends. If Americans assumed that Communism had the initiative in the world, they were mistaken. True, there were many social reform movements and even social

revolutions, but Lippmann argued that Americans had to differentiate between Communism and these reform movements. Reformers did not need to feel any allegiance to Russia or China, and nonalignment did not always indicate hostility to the United States. The Soviets would only direct these movements if the West continued to “identify ourselves with the opponents of change rather than with the leaders of change.” Lippmann gave examples of how Moscow had been frustrated by Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and Guinea—whose leaders refused to take orders from Khrushchev. The key was to harness the reform movements in the world rather than fight them: “The wave of the future is not Communist domination of the world. The wave of the future is social reform and social revolution driving towards the goal of national independence and equality of personal status.” If Kennedy continued to recognize this reality and maintained his flexibility, the United States could find more friends in the world, if not always full and formal alliances.

Krock fretted about Kennedy’s constant level of activity during his travels, which Krock compared to that of Theodore Roosevelt. Surely, Krock wrote, Kennedy’s vigor must have some limits. Krock deemed Kennedy’s public activities between May 27 and June 8 to be “excessive.” Kennedy had spent too many hours in “intense preparation, concentration, and vigilance over brain and tongue, plus numerous conferences on problems of government that demanded decision.…” Kennedy had to put forth a “superhuman” effort to live through the endless flights, speeches, dinners, briefings, parades, wreath-layings, two meetings with Khrushchev, and five long conversations with Charles de Gaulle. Further, Kennedy’s restless nature and confidence in his own

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ability often led the President to simply pick up the phone and give orders or find whatever information he needed directly, rather than going through proper channels. Krock thought Kennedy’s fatigue would inevitably lead to disorganization.14

Drew Pearson did not criticize Kennedy for failing to achieve much in the meeting. It was enough that Kennedy and Khrushchev had met personally. Any difficulties could be blamed on the “many” and “tough” problems Eisenhower had left to his successor.15 When Pearson contrasted Kennedy and Eisenhower, he concluded, “there is no comparison. The difference is startling. President Eisenhower was completely vague, almost never gave Khrushchev a direct answer. He would reply, ‘I must take that up with Dulles,’ or ‘I’ll have to discuss that with the State Department.’” Kennedy, though, was “completely prepared” to represent the American position—forcefully if necessary. The talks between the two leaders had been both blunt and frank, but Kennedy had acquitted himself well.16

Joseph Alsop turned the lack of good news coming out of the summit into an object lesson in Kennedy’s realism and honesty. Alsop called the meeting unique, because “no attempt at all was made, at least by an American contingent, to dress up a meeting that changed nothing as an earth-shaking and historic event.” Kennedy and Khrushchev had done little more than size each other up. Alsop praised Kennedy for not pretending to have achieved results. Unlike Eisenhower, who had generated a “wholly phony atmosphere” in his previous meetings with the Soviets, Kennedy had held his ground. Kennedy had achieved his “modest but sensible objective.” Appropriately,

“real spirit of Vienna was stern and chilly,” as it should have been. Kennedy was “stony and uncompromising” in the face of Soviet challenges. Alsop argued that Kennedy’s firmness would convince the Soviets of Western resolve, especially when it came to the crisis in Berlin. Alsop was less sanguine about the situation in the rest of the world than Lippmann. Kennedy’s speech had been “somber,” and that was the proper note to strike: “In situation after melancholy situation, a single, simple, central fact stood out. The leaders of the West, apparently including the new leader of the United States, have not found the answer to the new brand of brinksmanship which Khrushchev is practicing all over the world.” The result was “chilling,” but Alsop still held that the chill was preferable and “very much more invigorating” than a brand new, or phony, “Spirit of Vienna” would have been.

Marquis Childs thought the summit was an important first step. He considered it a victory if the summit prevented future “miscalculations” of a type that could lead to war. Just as Reston had proclaimed Europe a good cure for “Castroitis,” Childs believed Kennedy had used the opportunity to demonstrate to the Soviets that he had fully recovered from the crises in Cuba and Laos. Kennedy’s cool determination had won the day yet again, as “Khrushchev saw a resolute man who could say without bluster that the United States would stand firm for the positions where its fundamental interests were involved.”

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With the Vienna summit behind them, Kennedy and the pundits entered a period of settling in. The President’s approval ratings dropped slightly, and it began to look as though they might follow a pattern similar to Eisenhower’s. Both men’s approval ratings hovered around the seventy percent range during their first year in office. Both seemed to have succeeded in capturing the hearts of the public. Both could claim some victories and had managed to avoid being touched by the various and inevitable frustrations and disappointments of their first six months in office.

The pundits were confronting some new realities as well. The New York Herald Tribune was in shambles under the ownership of John Hay Whitney, and the syndicate suffered along with the brand. The New York Times was clearly the dominant national newspaper of record. The Washington Post picked up some of the slack for the Herald Tribune, taking over some of the more prestigious syndication contracts. Lippmann, Krock, and Pearson had slowed their pace some, and were taking more vacation days. Stewart Alsop had lost a bit of his insider status with the dissolution of the “Matter of Fact” column. Joseph Alsop continued to write alone, but he was a much better critic than cheerleader. Even Marquis Childs chased fewer headline stories.

By July, Reston was reporting that the Kennedy administration had fully recovered its confidence. The shock of Cuba had passed. Vienna was behind them. Perhaps, Reston wrote, it was just the “golden summer days,” but he could not help but feel a new sense of optimism “that something can be done about Berlin, about Communist subversion in Southeast Asia, and about unemployment.” The pessimists who had dominated conversations in the capital grew fewer in number. Reston wrote that “something more balanced and steady” had replaced both the “presumptuous
exuberance” of the early days and the “gloomy fatalism of May.” Kennedy was far enough removed from the campaign to be able to drop the “tiresome public musings” about the depressing state of affairs. Congress was twisted in a knot of legislation, but at least “the mood is better and this is the essential first step to sound policy decisions.”

Soon after reporting this new mood of optimism, Reston wrote a series of three articles assessing Kennedy’s first six months in office. He found that just as in the Eisenhower administration, Kennedy often found himself at the mercy of events beyond the control of Washington. In contrast with Eisenhower, Kennedy dominated his administration: “President Kennedy is obviously more willing to spend and plan and innovate and use Presidential power than former President Eisenhower,” but on matters of national security, Reston saw continuity. He wrote that like Eisenhower, Kennedy’s record was “spotty but on the whole favorable.” The Bay of Pigs invasion was the low point and had provoked more belligerence from Moscow, but the economy was in good shape. “President Kennedy… primed the pump [with his tax cuts] and counted on the Lord,” and it had worked. The Bay of Pigs invasion and the Vienna summit had provoked needed self-scrutiny. Perhaps the Kennedy men had been too optimistic about their abilities to change the world, but the trip had given the foreign policy team some much needed experience. “In short,” Reston wrote, “the shake-down cruise has really shaken down.” Kennedy was beginning to understand that he could not alter the “deep tides of history,” but “he has made a fairly good start.”


In the second article, Reston sharpened his critique to describe how Kennedy’s foreign policy had the same goals as the Eisenhower’s, but Kennedy’s technique was more “flexible and adventuresome.” Kennedy would take risks to extend the range of American influence, especially in areas where a nuclear exchange was less likely. He had, after all, supported the invasion of Cuba and had been prepared to use force in Laos. Kennedy was taking a harder look at Vietnam, and exhibited “a bolder spirit of preparation to meet the much more real danger of war in Germany.” Kennedy looked at the wider picture, taking economic planning for developing countries seriously. He was more tolerant of neutral nations than Eisenhower had been, and he believed that they were a “powerful force against Communist expansion.” Kennedy backed initiatives such as disarmament proposals and national self-determination in order to score propaganda points. Taken together, the Kennedy record was more interventionist, innovative, thoughtful, and experimental.23

The final article in the series dealt with Kennedy’s domestic record, and Reston found Kennedy more frustrated that he could not go “nearly so far or so fast as he had hoped.” Kennedy had been moderate enough in domestic policy to alienate the extremes of both the right and the left. Kennedy had secured passage of a housing bill but would not fight for an education bill with little chance of passage.24 Reston identified the four greatest challenges in domestic affairs as population growth, economic growth, civil rights, and national purpose. But Reston argued that Kennedy had not made much progress since the Bay of Pigs invasion, and had been preoccupied with foreign affairs.

24 The Housing Act of 1961 expanded existing programs for urban renewal, public housing, and housing for the elderly and college students. It subsidized low interest loans for middle income families with incomes too high to qualify for public housing. Giglio, The Presidency of John F. Kennedy, 104.
since then. The President’s attempts to change the national mood had started in grand fashion with his splendid inaugural, but beyond some “skirmishes,” the “imperatives of the ‘cold war’” had kept Kennedy from “sustaining a comprehensive attack.” Unlike the innovation which marked Kennedy’s foreign policy, Kennedy’s domestic program “has been largely General Eisenhower’s.” Kennedy’s record was, in Reston’s opinion, not much when compared to the “torrent of promises in the campaign,” but far better than expected.25

That autumn, Reston noted that some intellectuals seemed frustrated with Kennedy’s failure to transform American society in a few short months. He did not mention the names of any prominent intellectuals or lobbying groups, but he gave a general account of what intellectuals had hoped for at the beginning of Kennedy’s administration. Events in Cuba had shattered the hopes of intellectuals that “intellect and morality had been allied to power under Kennedy,” and that this combination would produce “magic.” Reston thought intellectuals, being fans of words and style themselves, had “overestimated the capacity of words and style” to affect real change. Older Washington politicians were used to the inflated rhetoric of the campaign trail, but the intellectuals were finding out that Kennedy was “more of a politician than an intellectual, more concerned with success than with any new idea of what he wants to succeed.” Of course, Reston reminded his readers, there were no guarantees that the opinions of

intellectuals were “right or fair.” He simply found it interesting that intellectuals had turned so quickly.\(^{26}\)

Krock’s conservatism came to the fore as he became more publicly critical of Kennedy. He argued that Kennedy’s firmness abroad contrasted with his rather flabby domestic policy. Krock complained about Kennedy ignoring the American transportation network, overpopulation, welfare “chislers, congenital idlers and continuously reproducing mothers from the tax-finance relief rolls,”\(^{27}\) When Kennedy proposed new programs, Krock noted that Kennedy had no plans to pay for them.\(^{28}\) When Kennedy lost a battle with Congress over foreign aid, Krock called it a setback for Kennedy’s prestige.\(^{29}\) With each mild tweaking of the President, Krock returned to a theme: Kennedy played a high stakes game if he continued to rely on public support as the source of his power. All of his failures would be as public as his successes.\(^{30}\) In order to manage some of these high profile failures, Kennedy had relied on some old political tricks, such as appointing and relying upon advice from Republicans during times of crisis. Still, Kennedy used the tactic to good effect.\(^{31}\) When Eisenhower made statements of support for the Kennedy administration in an interview with television newsman Walter Cronkite, Krock called it “good news for American democracy.”\(^{32}\)

It was good news for Kennedy that Reston was the dominant voice of the *New York Times* in the early 1960s instead of Arthur Krock. Even if Reston was not a


Kennedy enthusiast on the order of a Joseph Alsop, Reston was nothing if not fair. Reston’s end of the year “political check-up” judged Kennedy “good but could be better.” The President’s expectations had outrun reality at the beginning of the year, but he had since learned that he could merely “navigate” the “stream of history.” Reston thought this change represented real progress. Kennedy had learned he could handle the tough times and disappointments. Every group—allies, neutrals, intellectuals—had let him down. Only one person, Khrushchev, had lived up to his billing as a blowhard of the highest order, and Reston thought this a “cruel disappointment.” Kennedy, like every President before him, had undergone a period of adjustment, since “every President has to swallow a lot of his own campaign baloney.” In his transition from legislator to chief executive, Kennedy had shown his “quick intelligence,” “great flexibility,” and resilience. The campaign, Cuba, and Khrushchev had tested the young President well. His domestic agenda had stalled, but the economy was humming along.33 The world remained dangerous, with Germany divided and Laos and South Vietnam teetering on the brink of a Communist takeover. Reston thought Kennedy could take some comfort that Khrushchev had had a rough year also. Reston’s most damning criticism of Kennedy, though, was that despite, or perhaps even because of, his challenging year, the President seemed to operate in an ad hoc manner. Ribbing Kennedy, Reston wrote that Kennedy’s sore back was not as troubling as his “long range vision. He looks good but he doesn’t

33 By the late summer of 1961, the economy was in a period of “vigorous” expansion and growth, without inflation. Dallek, An Unfinished Life, 480. The stock market did finally lose ground in December 1961. Parmet, JFK, 237.
look far.” The President was too skeptical of grand designs and bored with big plans: “He is a tactician, more interested in political manipulation than in public education….”

On the occasion of Kennedy’s forty-fifth birthday, Reston offered his assessment that Kennedy was “old enough to be a little disillusioned but not yet old enough to be either discouraged or serene.” Kennedy, unlike Franklin Roosevelt, was still “not vindictive,” but he had aged more than a year in the past twelve months “and he is tougher as a result of the experience.” In the following weeks, Reston mocked the Washington press corps for blaming Kennedy for every problem in the world: “At his press conference today he was questioned as if he were personally responsible for the Wall Street slump, the cold war, the population explosion, and all the troubles of Asia, Africa and Latin America.” Kennedy could not be blamed for everything, but he had been focusing on foreign affairs and avoiding a serious debate over domestic economic issues while stories about his family dominated the society pages.

Walter Lippmann’s assessment of Kennedy during the summer of 1962 was similar to Reston’s of six months earlier. Kennedy had managed to overcome the deficiencies that led to the Bay of Pigs failure, the shock of the Vienna meetings with Khrushchev, and the building of the Berlin Wall. Kennedy had done a good job reassessing his political, economic, and military goals, and of course, “the style has been very good.” Lippmann even used a similar metaphor to describe Kennedy’s leadership, but instead of “navigating” the “streams of history,” Lippmann’s water metaphor claimed that “the tide is favorable, and Kennedy is proving… a very admirable mariner, a

navigator in that kind of sea.” Unlike so many other world leaders, Kennedy truly understood power and how to use it wisely. He did not threaten others unnecessarily in order to “make himself tougher.” Instead, Kennedy knew how to jockey for position, since “he knows that there’s no such thing as victory in a nuclear war, and so he doesn’t talk about it, and doesn’t try to act as if he thought it was possible, so on that side it’s very good.”

Although Reston and Lippmann were close to coordinating their water metaphors, Reston reported the beginning of a moment of “hesitation and doubt” for the Kennedy administration. This moment was not provoked by a lack of public support, since Kennedy’s approval ratings remained remarkably steady and good (sixty six percent in July). But Reston worried about growing opposition coalescing around any number of issues. Kennedy had made enemies during his confrontation with the steel industry in April, and some businessmen had begun speaking of Kennedy’s hostility towards commerce. Uncharacteristically, Kennedy had not responded well to the challenge: “In the other major battles of his political career he has been at his best when the going was tough.” Reston then proceeded to give a rough outline of the highlights of Kennedy’s career, and in recounting Kennedy’s past battles, Reston gave a good indication of where conventional wisdom stood on the major events of the Kennedy presidency thus far. Whereas Truman, Johnson, and Hubert Humphrey had given him trouble in the primaries, Kennedy turned them into allies. In a tight contest with Richard Nixon,

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37 Walter Lippmann, *Conversations With Lippmann*, 113.
Kennedy hit his stride at just the right moment. When Khrushchev threatened Kennedy at Vienna, Kennedy had responded with resolve.40

Yet, now Kennedy seemed adrift. The squabbles with Congress grew shrill. The stock market slumped. For the first time, Kennedy looked as though he was “afraid to use the Presidential power he talked about so much in the campaign.” Reston thought Kennedy had good reasons for his lack of action: “Where Franklin Roosevelt gloried in the struggle with Congressional and business interests, Kennedy’s tendency is to pull back and reason with the opposition whenever his moves provoke their antagonism.” Kennedy was not politically or philosophically inclined to do otherwise. The President, according to Reston, wanted to occupy the middle ground, listen to advice from all sides, and “devour the writings of his critics and supporters alike” in order to find a compromise. The problem with such a path was that it did not satisfy either his supporters or his opponents, and it gave the “impression that he is preoccupied with political tactics rather than with the substance of a really effective program.” Reston guessed that Kennedy was still trapped in the mindset of a Senator, instead of a President. Kennedy was used to compromise, and “maneuvering within the establishment.” Reston argued that these were not necessarily unattractive qualities, but they were quite different from the ones Kennedy had advocated on the campaign trail.41 For the first time, the complaints about Kennedy began to seem rather humdrum, but another crisis soon jolted all of the elite journalists back into their crisis mode.

In early October 1962, Kennedy dined at the home of Joseph Alsop. Through the traditional four courses of the meal, Kennedy hardly spoke. Joe thought the after-dinner

40 Ibid.
41 Ibid.
conversation to be somewhat forced—strange for Kennedy—until the President announced, “Of course, if you think simply about the chances in history, you have to quote the odds as somewhere near even that we shall see an H-bomb war within the next ten years.” The party broke up awkwardly, and Alsop found out the next day that Kennedy had known of the Soviet missiles in Cuba since the beginning of the week.42 In the crisis that followed—as they had done in the campaign, inauguration, Bay of Pigs crisis, and the Vienna summit—the pundits rallied behind Kennedy.

During the summer of 1962, the Soviets and the Cubans had secretly agreed to deploy a total of eighty nuclear-armed ballistic missiles capable of hitting the United States and construct twenty-four surface-to-air missile batteries to defend the island. The first rumors of a Soviet buildup on Cuba came in early September, and Reston did his best to run interference for the administration. Referring to some suggestions that he thought might provoke war, his column of September 16 called for a “blockade on nonsense.” Kennedy’s opposition and the American people were calling on Kennedy to do something about the Soviet arms and men building up on the island, but Reston reminded readers that a blockade was an act of war, not some “kind of military America’s Cup race.” A blockade would, in Reston’s view, constitute nothing more than a “cheap way to relieve… frustrations.” Whatever Kennedy’s ultimate decision, it would not be easy, and the President’s opponents were being irresponsible to imply otherwise. Kennedy’s attempt to keep Cuba out of the midterm elections, though, was “about as sensible as trying to keep boys from kissing girls. The thing can’t and shouldn’t be done.” Reston thought Cuba to be a “mess,” and probably a “dangerous mess” with

42 Joseph Alsop, I’ve Seen the Best of It, 447-448.
Kennedy partly to blame. As such, the subject of Cuba was a legitimate topic for
discussion. What Reston worried about was that the “do something” crowd would
provoke action leading to an even larger and more dangerous set of circumstances.43 But
Kennedy had to do something.

Subsequent American U-2 reconnaissance flights discovered the construction
projects on October 14, and CIA analysis predicted that the missiles would be operational
very soon. Kennedy responded by organizing an Executive Committee, or ExComm, to
debate how America should respond. Reston wrote the front-page story for the New York
Times that announced Kennedy’s decision to stop Soviet ships en route to Cuba, and his
account was written as much for the Soviets as it was for the American people. Reston
gave the “official interpretation” of the Kennedy announcement, which was approved by
“the highest authority”—an old journalists’ code word indicating the source was
probably the President himself. Reston described the rules of engagement and what the
American response would be if the Soviets made any moves in Cuba, Berlin, or West
Germany. Kennedy’s announcement and resolve would be tested, as the Soviets had
ships steaming toward Cuba—on their way to something that the administration called a
quarantine “and everybody else call[ed] a blockade.” In a meeting the previous week,
Soviet Foreign minister Andrei Gromyko had lied to Kennedy, and this deception had
convinced the President to take a harder line. Since Sunday, October 14, the President
had confirmation of Soviet medium and intermediate range missiles on the island. The
Kennedy administration understood that it was asking the Soviets to abandon their
offensive support of Castro, and that this abandonment represented a serious blow to

Soviet prestige, not to mention Castro. But, Reston reported, Kennedy was firm in his position. The United States military was on high alert all over the world. Reston also reported that Kennedy had rejected the calls for an invasion of Cuba. Three times, Reston wrote that Kennedy was trying to avoid attacking Soviet troops directly.\(^{44}\)

In Reston’s regular column, published the next day, he argued that Khrushchev had badly misjudged President Kennedy’s character and the resolve of the American people. He called this inclination a “common European habit, reaching from George III… to Adolf Hitler.” Khrushchev, Reston argued, had never understood what Kennedy was trying to do in Cuba. The Soviet Premier had mistaken Kennedy’s lack of commitment during the Bay of Pigs invasion for weakness and had been repeating this analysis to “almost every Western visitor to the Soviet Union since then.” The Soviets had wrongly concluded that the United States would not fight to defend its vital interests, and planned accordingly in order to gain a foothold in the Western hemisphere and potential bargaining chips for the future. Reston described Kennedy’s response as “the middle course,” neither plunging into Cuba nor ignoring the problem. The world seemed to be rallying behind Kennedy’s plan, and Reston suggested that Khrushchev needed to “pause and re-examine the assumptions of his policy” of confrontation.\(^{45}\)

Reston had to walk a very fine line during the crisis. Just as Eisenhower’s Press Secretary James Hagerty had lamented years before, the Soviets considered the \textit{New York Times} generally, and Reston specifically, to be more or less the official organ of the United States government. Reston’s columns could communicate points that Kennedy wanted emphasized, such as America’s commitment not to invade Cuba or indications of

firmness. Because of this heightened responsibility, Reston was careful to be deliberate and conciliatory. He wrote about how Kennedy’s diplomacy was a “new style,” very personal and national. He did not allow his antagonist a quiet way out of the conflict. After listening to objections, he followed the course he had already decided upon. He did not consult with allies as much as he merely informed them of his intentions. Reston thought this course of action to be right and proper considering Khrushchev’s gamble. Kennedy was responding to Khrushchev’s power play with a power play of his own. The world had to wait to see if Kennedy’s diplomacy would work, since it was time for the “chess players in Moscow” to “make their counter-move.”

After the Soviets withdrew what the Kennedy administration considered a reasonable offer, Reston explained the confusion in the White House.

After the crisis passed, Reston tried to sweeten the bitter pill the Soviets had to swallow by writing of the “honorable accommodation” the two countries had reached. The Russians had not lost their beachhead in the Western Hemisphere. They withdrew from one area, but Kennedy was under no illusions that they would do so elsewhere. Kennedy had rejected the conclusion of the “hard-liners” in his administration “that the way to deal with Moscow everywhere in the world” was to be “tough, as in Cuba.” The President would not draw any general conclusions from this “special case” in Cuba about dealing with the Soviets in the future.

But even if Kennedy would not draw any conclusions about the experience, Reston would. He guessed that the Soviets must be behind in modern weaponry, or they would not have taken such a gamble in Cuba. It was a major success for Kennedy that he

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had challenged the Soviets directly without starting a shooting war. Kennedy had proven to the Soviets at long last that he would fight, and that reduced the chances of further miscalculations from Khrushchev. The United States had scored some propaganda points worldwide. And even though, as Reston pointed out, it had been almost forgotten, Kennedy had probably improved his chances of getting a friendly Congress in the upcoming elections. Finally, Reston thought the Cuban crisis was important psychologically for the members of the Kennedy administration who were directly involved in the Bay of Pigs operation. They shook off some demons and proved themselves. Communists around the world would be disappointed, but Reston held out hope that “the cold war might even turn down rather than up after Cuba.”\(^{48}\) As Kennedy and Khrushchev exchanged friendly notes to wind up the details, Reston reported that he was happy that this conflict had ended in “mutual congratulations.”\(^{49}\) When critics began to complain of the minor deceptions of the Kennedy administration committed while “saving the human race,” Reston knew that Washington was back to normal.\(^{50}\)

At the height of the crisis, Marquis Childs went to the movies with his family and thought of nothing but the seemingly inevitable nuclear exchange to come: “It was like being at the bottom of a deep well with one’s eyes constantly strained to see whether the dark had closed in or whether a little light was still visible. I wondered then, as I have often since, how clearly the fear and the tension were communicated to the people of the country outside the closed circle of the capital.” Childs had a good source inside the


Kennedy White House. Major General Ted Clifton, Kennedy’s military aide, fed Childs information during the Bay of Pigs invasion and the Cuban missile crisis. In his memoirs, Childs remembered how Clifton served “as a friend, he was for me an unfailing source of hour-by-hour information.” Upon reflection, Childs believed Kennedy had acted “with calm, careful wisdom.”

In the aftermath of the Cuban Missile Crisis, Marquis Childs argued in his column that Kennedy’s wide public support proved that domestic subversion consisted of “a few of the tired old hacks” who showed up on college campuses with just enough regularity to throw Americans “into a spasm of denunciation and protest.” Oddly enough, Childs found himself agreeing with President Eisenhower’s retirement rhetoric, warning of the dangers of “conformism—a conformist America moving as a submissive herd.”

Americans had backed Kennedy during the recent crisis. There were no saboteurs or incidents of domestic terrorism. Childs guessed that the Kremlin had to notice.

Like Childs, Reston thought it best to emphasize how the Kennedy administration had matured tremendously during the crisis. He engaged in a bit of gallows humor when he noted that “human beings can adjust to almost anything except hanging, but they never know it until they are tested.” Kennedy and his advisors had become the “instruments of the American spirit” during the crisis. They had moved with “remarkable sensitivity, accuracy, and skill” to understand what America wanted from them. They could not rely on tradition to understand how to handle this unprecedented crisis, but when under pressure they had instinctively reached a consensus about Soviet intentions—and

51 Childs, *Witness to Power*, 175.
52 Ibid., 176.
whether and how to face them. The crisis had steeled Kennedy and his advisors, and Reston told his readers that “this is no longer a collection of amateurs in Washington, but a far more confident Government, not divided department from department, or party from party, but a much more united instrument of the spirit and purpose of the nation.” In this sense, thought Reston, Khrushchev had actually done the United States a favor by reminding Americans of their common interests and ideals.54

Lippmann was generally pleased with Kennedy’s performance, but he worried about Soviet reaction. He guessed that the results of the crisis would cause a “shake-up” and internal conflict for the Soviets. The Soviets were blocked and contained. If they took the “short view” of the situation, they could make mischief to gain lost prestige. In the longer view, Lippmann hoped it might force them to “make peace in Europe and with the West, and to speak indiscreetly, to recognize that the containment of Red China is becoming much more important than any other Soviet interest” like Cuba and Europe.55

Drew Pearson agreed with Lippmann and wrote in his column that he believed the results of the Cuban crisis added up to “very material and important gains for peace.”56 Pearson also noted that success in the crisis would not hurt Kennedy in the upcoming elections, either. Pearson was correct. In the midterm elections of 1962, the Democrats preserved their majorities in the House and the Senate. In an election that many observers had looked to for its symbolism, the President’s younger brother Edward M.

“Ted” Kennedy defeated Republican George Cabot Lodge to become the junior Senator from Massachusetts.57

The election results confirmed what public opinion polls had indicated throughout the crisis. According to contemporary poll data, the public welcomed the end of their brush with nuclear war, or at least they did not hold Kennedy accountable for it. Kennedy's poll numbers went up by 12 points during the crisis. One study looked at the reactions of college undergraduates to the crisis and found a phenomenon that the researchers called "superpatriotism." Students turned on dissenters and rallied to the President. Some typical quotations from students included such statements such as "I felt like we should be willing to go to war," or "I felt much exhilarated. At least we were getting off our behinds," and "I felt we were going to have a real doozie of a war."58

Lippmann took the midterm elections as a vindication of Kennedy’s leadership. The Cuban crisis had demonstrated Kennedy’s skill, but in the broader picture, Lippmann believed, Kennedy “now is a man of the center, [and] entitled to feel that he represents and reflects a great centrist majority.” Kennedy was “at once conservative, liberal, and progressive.” Further, Lippmann believed that the elections had proved that the Democrats remained the majority party. Lippmann doubted whether Kennedy could translate the victory at the ballot box into legislative success—too many factors could intervene to muck up the process, and there was no popular will to undertake novelty in

57 George Cabot Lodge was the son of Henry Cabot Lodge, Jr., whom J.F.K. had defeated for the same seat in 1952. Henry Cabot Lodge, Sr., defeated J.F.K.’s grandfather, John F. (“Honey Fitz”) Fitzgerald, in the Senate race for the same seat in 1916.

58 Mark Chesler and Richard Schmuck, "Student Reactions to the Cuban Missile Crisis and Public Dissent," Public Opinion Quarterly, 28 (Autumn, 1964), 467-482. Students varied in their reactions according to factors such as the education and occupation of their parents.
domestic programs at home. In foreign affairs, however, Kennedy had proved yet again
that he could count on tremendous support from the American people.59

Joseph Alsop was more optimistic and called the midterm election a “remarkable”
victory, which might indeed reverse Kennedy’s fortunes on domestic issues that thus far
“had lighted no bonfires among the voters.” Only after the period of drift had passed
would Alsop admit that such a period had ever existed, and then only because the Cuban
missile crisis had wiped the slate clean, since, “[i]n a moment of grave danger, he also
acted prudently but firmly, bravely but very adroitly.” Alsop was under no illusions
about the relative importance of the Cuban crisis compared to the Democratic platform of
1962. He argued that “the Democrats most emphatically did not” win because of
Presidential stumping on domestic issues like health care. It was not that those issues
were unimportant, but now, finally free of the mindset that feared an economic
depression at every turn, “the American voters mainly judge a national administration by
its performance in the fields of foreign and defense policy.”

American society was finally in step with Joseph Alsop, and Kennedy was the
President who had brought them together. Of course, Kennedy had not planned on a
foreign policy crisis that would help his party maintain its majority: “It is contemptible
and silly to suggest that the President was even thinking about domestic politics when he
took action risking an H-bomb war, and took this action too, only in the desperate, final
nick of time.”60 The circumstances could not have been more perfect for Alsop. A
dramatic foreign policy crisis proving Soviet belligerence, recklessness, and aggression

59 Walter Lippmann, “The Dominant American Majority,” Washington Post, 8 November 1962,
A25.

had ended in a victory for the United States, placing the West in a better position to win the Cold War. The outcome had influenced an American election, and his friend John Kennedy was the one to bring it off. It was as close to heaven as Alsop would ever experience on earth.61

Marquis Childs thought some Democrats might push Kennedy to move more boldly after the midterm victory. Childs cautioned that Kennedy’s “restraint and innate caution” would prevent him from moving on more than a few key pieces of legislation, but the President had found reserves of leadership that would translate into a more aggressive and focused domestic agenda: “Once the decision had been taken on Cuba, those qualities were apparent,” he wrote, “That promises to be the tone of the next two years with his confidence reinforced.”62

By the end of 1962, Reston was back to commenting on Kennedy’s style. Kennedy had ushered in a new age of informality. Presidential pronouncements were often informal, in response to questions posed by the press. Kennedy often overlooked formal diplomatic channels to communicate directly with foreign leaders. This “general gabbiness” had encouraged the flow of ideas and widened discussions on difficult issues. The untidiness of the new style bothered traditionalists, but Reston found that “on the whole it is a good thing.” The more technical or complicated the issue, the more critical it was that the President have access to the best ideas possible, from the soldiers in South Vietnam to the lonely corridors of unnamed bureaucrats in the State Department or the


Pentagon. The value of discussion, dissent, and debate far outweighed mere tidiness or formality.63

When asked in a television interview if Kennedy was more concerned with style over substance, Lippmann replied that he thought there was “some merit” in such charges. Kennedy did not force measures through; he tried to “work it out politically.” Kennedy enjoyed being “one of the boys.” He thought Kennedy to be too cautious about pushing the tax cut. But Kennedy’s caution had its place. More specifically, Lippmann thought Kennedy wise to avoid divisive fights over issues that would do nothing more than “split the two ends of Pennsylvania Avenue from each other.” While there was merit in such a course, Lippmann did think Kennedy was missing out on some valuable “bloody noses” from an occasional fight with Congress: “All the others, the Roosevelts, and even Truman, and so on, they’ve always at some point got into a real struggle, and he doesn’t—he avoids that.” Lippmann dismissed the charge that Kennedy was managing the news to an unprecedented extent. He claimed that Eisenhower Press Secretary James Hagerty had controlled the news coming out of the White House in a much more stifling manner. Kennedy was not the worst offender, Lippmann predicted, nor would he be the last.64 Taken together, Lippmann believed these traits made Kennedy a conservative:

A conservative is not a man who wants to repeal everything that’s happened in the last twenty years, but a man who wants to conserve it and make it grow, and have it develop, and the idea that a man cannot be liberal and progressive, can be liberal and not conservative, is a mistake. Good conservatives are liberal about how laws are executed, and they’re progressive about adapting them to changing conditions, and the idea that

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64 Lippmann, Conversations with Walter Lippmann, 145-147. From a conversation on May 1, 1963.
one man’s conservative but not a liberal, an another man is liberal but not conservative, is just misunderstanding of terms.65

Lippmann’s pronouncement on Kennedy’s conservatism described another Kennedy trait that helped explain the President’s popularity with the public, contemporary commentators, and later chroniclers. When people looked at Kennedy, they saw what they wanted to see. Lippmann was correct in his characterization of Kennedy’s conservatism and the nature of American conservatism, but Kennedy was the last President with both the will and the ability to demonstrate the remarkable unity between liberalism and conservatism in the United States. Crises had always reminded Americans of their common beliefs, and Kennedy’s crisis-filled years in office provided enough drama to cover over some of the ideological differences among Americans.

The most notable exception to this unity, and the issue which would eventually prove divisive, was civil rights for black Americans. Throughout the summer of 1963, civil rights issues dominated the headlines, but few pundits called for dramatic action from the Kennedy White House. They might grouse at Kennedy’s lack of leadership, but this was usually followed by explanations of the delicacy and political implications of any actions. Most columns dealt either with civil rights or Kennedy, but not both. On balance, most pundits believed Kennedy when he told them that he was taking the most moderate, sensible, and decent course of action on all issues, race relations included. Most pundits believed Kennedy’s argument that scenes and news accounts of black Americans being denied their civil rights were hurting America’s moral authority at a dangerous time in the Cold War.

65 Lippmann, Conversations with Lippmann. 155-156.
The pundits were most influential when they were in agreement with one another and with the administration in power, and when they could rely on precedent. Civil rights, an issue requiring moral clarity, left them somewhat adrift. Lippmann thought southern liberals (particularly his good friend Senator William Fulbright of Arkansas) should take the lead in resolving racial problems in that troubled region. Krock continued to be more worried about the growth of federal power instead of the rights of African Americans. Joseph and Stewart Alsop, though generally sympathetic to the cause of civil rights for black Americans, only focused on the issue after Lyndon Johnson took office and made it one of the centerpieces of his administration. Reston and Pearson were generally decent on the issue but not forceful advocates for change. Marquis Childs was more aggressive, but he had fewer connections within official Washington.

Despite the early plaudits and his successful handling of the Cuban Missile Crisis, in the late summer of 1963, there were signs that the Cold War was entering a new, critical phase. By September of 1963, Reston was openly critical and disillusioned with Kennedy’s diplomacy, especially in regards to South Vietnam. He mocked Kennedy’s diplomacy as comparable to the fashionable dresses of Dior: “They disclose more than they conceal.” Reston called it “naked diplomacy.” If the South Vietnamese regime led by Ngo Dinh Diem displeased President Kennedy, the President would simply go on television and talk about his displeasure.

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67 Krock, *In the Nation*, 332-354.
68 Merry, *Taking On The World*, 411-413.
Reston longed for the old diplomacy of precise language, discussed in private. Kennedy seemed determined to lean on his strength—public relations: “Diplomacy was the application of intelligence and, above all, tact to the conduct of relations between nations…. Above everything, the old diplomacy avoided involving the prestige or self-esteem of another country and always sought to give the other side a graceful escape from an embarrassing position.” Kennedy had tossed aside this tradition as “old hat.” Kennedy had publicly called Diem’s repression of the Buddhists “very unwise” and his government “out of touch.” Kennedy publicly asked for Diem to reform and said the war could not be won without changes, yet reaffirmed America’s commitment to the government of South Vietnam. Reston found this terribly crude: “Under the old diplomacy, the United States would have expressed its views and complaints privately, and left it to Diem to wonder whether he could both reject American advice and count on continued American aid.” Kennedy though, had “both threatened and reassured Diem. He said: ‘Change or we’ll string you along anyway.’” Kennedy had put Diem in a terrible position. If Diem reformed, critics would charge he had done so because of American pressure; if Diem did not reform, Kennedy would be backing a hopeless policy.

Reston found Vietnam “a mess recommending silence” and wished Kennedy would agree. Perhaps the President’s ability to sell himself had masked a lack of long-term strategic thinking. Worse, though, was how this deficiency affected what the administration required of Diem. Namely, Diem would have to “turn on his brother and sister-in-law.” Reston concluded: “It was like the head of a foreign government
announcing publicly that President Kennedy was pursuing a losing policy, was out of touch with the American people, but might make amends by firing Bobby."69

On November 3, 1963, James Reston’s column in the New York Times discussed the question of what American policy should be in South Vietnam in light of the recent overthrow and assassination of Ngo Dinh Diem. The situation was not yet stable, but Reston was optimistic. He hoped the leaders of the coup would release political prisoners from jail and ease up on the Buddhists. He predicted that failure to liberalize would provide the Communists in South Vietnam with “unnecessary assistance.” Reston hoped Kennedy would clarify American goals in Vietnam. Were we there to win some kind of unconditional surrender? Were we there to help them until they could resist Communist aggression themselves? Reston thought that the overthrow of Diem had opened up a “new and more hopeful phase of the war” with new opportunities for clearing up American aims and limitations.70 Reston was clearly going in a new direction with his criticism of Kennedy.

After Lee Oswald, a disgruntled Marxist loner, assassinated President Kennedy on November 22, 1963, Reston wrote a front-page tribute to Kennedy, attempting to make sense of the tragedy. He wrote that America wept for itself as much as it did for the death of their young President. The President’s violent death seemed to indicate that “in the nation itself, some strain of madness and violence” had taken over and “destroyed the highest symbol of law and order.” Reston found irony in how Kennedy had met death. According to Reston, Kennedy had devoted almost all of his time during his short

69 James Reston, Sketches In The Sand, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967), 254-256. From the article “How to Make Things Worse Than They Really Are,” originally published 4 September 1963,
administration to curbing the “streak of violence in the American character.” Reston predicted that when historians assessed Kennedy’s tenure, they would be most impressed with his efforts to restrain the violence of the Cold War abroad and the “racial war at home.” Even Kennedy’s visit to Texas, where he was killed, was an attempt “to pacify the violent politics of that state.” Reston believed that Kennedy had never been able to reconcile his ideals with the practical needs of political reality. Kennedy wanted to move boldly, with an “intellectual approach to the office” based on Richard Neustadt’s *Presidential Power*, but Kennedy found the powers of the office too limited and the decisions to be more difficult than he imagined. Reston believed that Kennedy did leave the world safer than he found it. Even to his enemies, Kennedy was “a wonderfully attractive human being.” The people who knew him best liked him the most. He was rational, smart, a deft crisis-manager who was “at his best when the going was tough.”

In the days after Kennedy’s death, Reston made the case that history taught its lessons cruelly, through irony and tragedy. He summarized the Presidents he had covered over the past generation and discovered that “all our assumptions, even about human ability and mortality, are subject to error.” Franklin Roosevelt was destined to be a peacemaker, yet he died before the end of the war. Harry Truman was destined for obscurity, yet came to “organize the greatest coalition of nations in history.” Dwight Eisenhower, who became President at a ripe age, who “was stricken twice in office and counted out, lived on to be the oldest President in the long story of the nation. Kennedy, the vanguard of a new generation, was dead at forty-six.

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Reston predicted that Johnson would struggle under Kennedy’s shadow just as Truman had struggled under Franklin Roosevelt. Like Roosevelt, Kennedy had remade the office in his own image. Kennedy ran his administration personally and directly. Kennedy was a “reader, an analyzer and a catalyst” with strong views on foreign and domestic policy. He had gifts of “grace, wit and knowledge” that Johnson did not. Johnson was not a student of foreign affairs, a reader, or a patient thinker. The “brilliant intellectuals” brought into government by Kennedy would drift away.72

Reston argued that every American needed to share in the guilt for Kennedy’s assassination. Violence, anarchy, sorrow, humiliation, and anxiety seemed to run through a society overwhelmed by its own brutality. “Thoughtful men,” believed Reston, would not be satisfied until society explored the question of both public and private guilt for the deaths of John Kennedy and Lee Oswald (who had been killed after his capture). Reston begged for decency in civilized society.73

For his part, Arthur Krock wrote in his Memoirs that Kennedy would have been re-elected in 1964 with wide margins, kept the nation from experiencing the excesses of Lyndon Johnson’s character, and “not allowed himself to become as deeply entrapped as his successor is in a public record of unrealistic international and domestic programs and pronouncements; by the conclusion of a second term, Kennedy would have established himself in history as a ‘strong’ President, if not a ‘great’ one.”74 The world would never know if Kennedy would have “risen to the heights of history that he plainly was

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74 Krock, Memoirs, 368.
ascending.” 75 Krock’s column of 25 November 1963 explained that Kennedy had died because hatred had not been driven from the human heart. He lamented how some elegists had blamed Kennedy’s death on a climate of violent political differences. Other Presidents had been assassinated, “hence there is no merit in the implication of some of the orators that Mr. Kennedy’s murder should be related to the area where it occurred because of the intensity there of the controversy over his policies.” Further, Krock pointed out that Oswald was a Communist, not an example of the “Right Wing extremists” whom he had heard members of the Administration blame. He worried about how such charges would become “grist to Moscow’s [propaganda] mill.” 76

Paul Sheatsky and Jacob Feldman conducted a thorough and responsible study of public opinion in the days following the assassination, demonstrating how quickly the news spread and how profoundly Kennedy’s death affected Americans. The actual planning for the study began the day after the assassination. They found that the most important reasons for the how the public felt about the death of Kennedy were the way in which the news of the assassination spread throughout society, the personality of the President, and the swiftness of the event. The only event that came close to being as shocking in the popular imagination was the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Although this sort of thing is difficult to quantify, they concluded that the Kennedy assassination was a greater shock because of the seemingly random nature of the event. When the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, at least the idea of war was being discussed.

The news spread fast and the memory was made quickly. According to the Sheatsky and Feldman study, in the thirty minutes between when the President was shot

75 Ibid., 380.
and when he was pronounced dead, almost two-thirds of Americans were aware of the event. Within two hours, 92% were aware. By six in the evening, 99.8% of those polled knew of the assassination. About half of Americans heard the news from media sources and the rest heard from friends or associates, either in person or over the telephone. It was both a personal and a community event. Less than one-third of Americans heard the news while they were alone. The assassination stunned the nation. Over half of Americans did not continue with their normal daily activities after they heard about the President's death, and only one third continued with their day "pretty much as usual.” The memory was also unique to most people. Most people could not recall an emotion similar to how the assassination made them feel. Of those who related it to an incident in their own lives, most compared it to the loss of a close relative or friend. Only 8% compared it to Pearl Harbor. A few days after the assassination, only about half of America thought the killing was the work of an individual. Much feeling had to do with the volatile political atmosphere in Dallas. The nation was shocked not just because they had lost a President, but because of what Kennedy had come to represent to them. Kennedy represented an image of youthful energy and vigor, connected to the national sense of purpose.77

For the political pundits, Kennedy’s death marked the end of their heyday. Kennedy’s assassination also marked the coming of age for television news. Lyndon Johnson and the Vietnam War discredited the Cold War consensus and insider journalism in the eyes of many. By the time of the Nixon administration and the Watergate scandals,

journalism—and particularly opinion journalism—had changed forever. Only after the complete fragmentation of media outlets and the rise of the Internet would punditry gain traction again. But then, it would take the form of intellectual interest groups who argue their cases in magazines or online and make no pretense to speak for or to all Americans. The illusion of objectivity is gone forever.

Kennedy’s image survives.

When television journalist Eric Sevareid asked Lippmann why Kennedy fascinated people, Lippmann responded: “His looks, and his way of dealing with the thing, and the fact that he was a new kind of American politician. I’m not sure how much the country was at home with this new kind, but he was new and a whole new generation sort of pinned their hopes on his success.”

In his life, Joseph Alsop only wept for two Presidents: John Kennedy and Franklin Roosevelt. It was not until after Kennedy’s death that Alsop realized he had just lived the best years of his life, and that he had loved the President. Unlike President Roosevelt, who in Alsop’s judgment, could command the love of millions from afar without achieving the same result with intimates, the people who served Kennedy loved him. Alsop found Washington “littered with male widows” after Kennedy’s death. The sense of loss was so overpowering that Alsop could never quite make sense of it. “What is more, from Vienna to the Cuban missile crisis, President Kennedy, like FDR, showed a unique ability to learn from past decisions and mistakes, and, like FDR, he never ceased to grow in both stature and in confidence as his presidency moved

78 Lippmann, Conversations with Walter Lippmann, 177-178.
79 Joseph Alsop, I’ve Seen the Best of It, 452.
80 Ibid, 463.
81 Ibid., 464-465.
Joseph Alsop, when writing his memoirs years later, did not bother to write about his life after Kennedy’s death. He entitled his memoirs *I’ve Seen the Best of It*. Kennedy’s presidency was “the best of it.” There was no point in writing about anything further. In a 1965 letter to Jackie Kennedy, Joe wrote that the President’s death, “broke [my] life in half. While he was here, somehow, the sunlight gilded ever distant hill, and one could hardly wait to get there, in order to see if it was as exciting as it promised to be. Now nothing seems worth doing.”

The Kennedy assassination froze the memory of the fallen President among the public and pundits alike. In the period when an administration would normally be settling in to absorb new criticism, the Cuban Missile crisis delayed that criticism. The assassination ensured that any meaningful criticism of the Kennedy administration would have to come from historians. When historians finally had their say, they would struggle against some powerful public perceptions.

The conventional wisdom of the Kennedy administration, as created by the pundits, said that Kennedy had brought a new style and sophistication into the White House, along with a nimble, sophisticated mind capable of creative innovation and change. The successful resolution of the Cuban Missile crisis wiped away any lingering doubts about his leadership arising from the Bay of Pigs fiasco. The Missile crisis also settled any private doubts of the pundits who knew how rough the Vienna summit had been. Reduced to one sentence, the conventional wisdom on Kennedy was that he had been confronted with a series of dramatic crises and had responded to each with cool

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82 Ibid., 465.
pragmatism and steely resolve, protecting American ideals at home and abroad with style and grace.
Chapter 9

The End of Consensus

The news was perfectly managed. Well, that’s inevitable; and it’s naïve, it’s very innocent to pretend that news isn’t managed, and to talk as if there were such thing as one absolutely perfect true version of the facts and that’s the only fact—there is no such thing. All the news gets managed by the White House, by the Defense Department, by the managing editor, by the correspondent, by the columnist, by everybody.¹

John Kennedy’s death ended the pundits’ absolute reign over conventional wisdom and presidential reputation. During Kennedy’s presidency, the elite political journalists were at the height of their power and influence. Although they often disagreed about the significance or proper interpretation of events, they had been remarkably united through the three administrations that followed the death of Franklin Roosevelt. Kennedy’s death shattered the pundits both professionally, as a class, and personally, as individuals. The consensus created by the end of the second World War would not survive the great civil rights crises, the Great Society, the Vietnam War, and Watergate.

When the pundits tried to explain events in terms of the Cold War, World War II, or Franklin Roosevelt, they seemed out of touch. The rise of television news gave events an immediacy that took precedence over perspective. Dramatic images—whether of riots at home or the war in Vietnam—seemed to require no filter, explanation, or perspective. The viewer could depend on his or her own feelings to understand the significance of any particular event. It seemed as if the American people no longer needed a Walter Lippmann to describe why a battle, law, or presidential action fit into the broader strategy of waging the Cold War, preserving an alliance, or protecting American national security.

¹ Walter Lippmann, *Conversations with Lippmann*, 147.
Those concerns seemed passé during the Johnson and Nixon years, as cynicism took the place of criticism.

The pundits’ source of influence during the Kennedy years—their proximity to power—became a liability as American power and world leadership fell out of favor in the wake of the Vietnam War and Watergate scandals. In the 1950s and early 1960s, Joseph Alsop had no problem holding back information on C.I.A. operations in Iran, Guatemala, and Cuba. After all, democratically elected leaders had made the decision that “all the risks and perils of a major covert operation” were “required to further the interest of the United States.” To Alsop, it was not up to the individual reporter to put his own interests ahead of the national interest.² A new generation of newspaper journalists, far to the left and disillusioned with liberalism, rose in the ranks and were skeptical of American leadership, the lessons of the World War II, and the value of even waging the Cold War. Even as the shadow of F.D.R. faded, members of the older generation of political journalists either would not or could not unlearn the hard-learned lessons of their formative days. The pundits were growing old: one by one the critical interpreters who had explained and interpreted the events in the critical years since Franklin Roosevelt’s death lost their ability to shape opinion.

In 1966 Arthur Krock was the first of the pundits to exit the public stage. He did so believing that Truman, Eisenhower, and Kennedy were, on balance, good presidents. In his eyes, Truman had been overmatched by certain events and too fond of the New Deal, but a good man. He still looked upon his exclusive interview with Truman as a

² Joseph Alsop, *I’ve Seen the Best of It*, 443.
point of pride and had warm feelings toward the Missourian. Krock likewise felt that the American people would “be deeply indebted to Dwight D. Eisenhower” for as long as the United States remained, “a world power and the locus of a free, privileged society.” In Krock’s view, Ike’s critics had “gleefully seized” on his mistakes to “lampoon him as an old fogy and caricature him as something resembling a duck that was an unusually dim-witted member of the species.” Krock never shook the belief that Dulles had been the formulator of American foreign policy during his term as Secretary of State, and he believed that many of Eisenhower’s problems were due to the President not doing his “homework.” His view of Kennedy was more subtle than most of his contemporaries. He appreciated Kennedy’s style but thought that while the young President’s “gifts of nature” were responsible for much success, they also, “explain why he was celebrated for some capacities of leadership and statesmanship he did not possess, and criticized as lacking some he did.” On balance, Krock found Kennedy to be ready for the challenges of his day. Krock was the most conservative of the pundits, becoming a critic of liberalism during the early New Deal years:

Historians will differ on whether the political philosophy and the economic and military direction of any nation have changed more fundamentally than those of the United States in a comparable period of time—1933—1967. But as an eyewitness of the governmental and other public action throughout these years, I formed the opinion that the United States merits the dubious distinction of having discarded its past and its meaning in one of the briefest spans in modern history.

With such beliefs, Krock had perhaps the shortest legacy. His most powerful claim came from his longevity, and Lippmann even bested him in this category. After

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3 Arthur Krock, *In the Nation*, 115.
4 Ibid., 215.
5 Ibid., 323-325.
Kennedy’s death, Lippmann had supported the Vietnam War and Lyndon Johnson, only to denounce both later. When Lippmann finally broke with the Johnson administration, the President did something that no leader had dared to do for more than a half century—he ridiculed Lippmann. Johnson referred to him as a “political commentator of yesteryear” and had aides dig up mistakes Lippmann had made in columns over the years. Other commentators started referring to Johnson’s “War on Walter Lippmann.”  

Lippmann was, in fact, getting old, and he finally decided to end the column.

When Walter Lippmann announced that he was leaving Washington in May of 1967, it was the end of an era. Reston’s column announcing Lippmann’s departure referred to Lippmann as the “greatest journalist of the present age” who “gave us a model of what newspaper political criticism should be, because he cut through the trivial to the important, because as the title of this column—‘Today and Tomorrow’—indicated, he put the day’s events in the perspective of history, and because he was a gentleman who loved truth and reason and kept in touch with the coming age.” Referring to “Lyndon Johnson’s vicious vendetta,” Reston found it an insult to discuss Lippmann’s career in the context of how the White House had treated the veteran pundits in the last few years. Still, Lippmann was “going away sad, for his belief in reason in the world is not prevailing.” And most journalists were sorry to see Lippmann go. Joseph Alsop would not be so lucky as to merely be sad.

Alsop left the profession angry, and most younger American reporters in Vietnam hated Joseph Alsop. They thought he was an elitist who was too close to the top military leaders.

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7 Steel, *Walter Lippmann and the American Century*, 570-574.
brass. Joe’s arrogance, along with his willingness to attack the motives of reporters who disagreed with him, won him few friends. Joe returned the animosity. He thought the younger reporters almost treasonous in their willingness to file stories hurtful to the war effort. He flew into rages when he read pessimistic dispatches from the war, even going so far as to complain to James Reston about the war coverage in the *New York Times*. Reston replied to Joe’s complaints with a series of polite letters. Joe supported the Vietnam War and the Johnson administration to their ends. One 1968 piece in the *New Republic* referred to Alsop as, “the super-hawk of American journalism” and “the Pentagon’s best friend….“ By 1968, Joseph Alsop less of a power broker, and frequently a punch-line. After Nixon’s election, Joe befriended Henry Kissinger, and was close to Secretary of State William Rogers and C.I.A. director Richard Helms.

There were occasional indignities, such as a 1970 play called *Sheep on the Runway*. Penned by humorist Art Buchwald, the play depicted a thinly disguised character based on Joe called “Joe Mayflower” with WASPish mannerisms and fine suits, who frets about communism in a third world country and gins up support for a war. Joe threatened to sue.

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10 When Johnson first came to office, he accused Richard Helms of being too close to Alsop, and leaking information to him. Helms recalled in his memoirs that Johnson should have loved Alsop, since Alsop was utterly and entirely convinced that the United States would win the Vietnam War. Helms remembered how, when discussing Vietnam, (the only thing Alsop ever wanted to talk about) Alsop would not allow anyone else to speak or express an opinion. Helms, *A Look Over My Shoulder*, 292-293.
12 Helms watched out for Alsop. Alsop had worried about the KGB photographs of his homosexual tryst with a Russian agent in 1957, and the Russians had threatened Alsop with blackmail more than once over the years. Alsop grew tired of these threats and considered making the matter public. Helms told Alsop not to worry about it, and instructed a C.I.A. agent to inform the KGB that if they did not stop trying to blackmail Alsop, the C.I.A. would “respond in kind, and with enough data to compromise serveral KGB officers. Helms, *A Look Over My Shoulder*, 151.
Even Joseph’s friends agreed that his columns were no longer up to snuff. It is fair to say that Joseph Aslop was obsessed with Vietnam. By his own estimation, if one were to add up the time he spent in Vietnam over the years, it would add up to something close to two and a half years.\textsuperscript{14} He focused on too few issues, and, if possible, he grew even more strident and polemical with age. His personal life unraveled in the early 1970s. He separated from his wife; his mother died; Stewart fell ill.

Joseph Alsop found himself so disconnected from his fellow journalists that he—the most pretentious member of the old elite—actually turned on his class. A man who once refused to eat at restaurants near train stations (the vibrations damaged the wine) now charged that elites were never right about anything except “subjects like the correct manufacture of soufflés.” In his memoirs, he described how it was vitally important for reporters to do their jobs well, so that the American people would continue to make correct decisions and overrule the chattering classes. Reporters would not always be successful, of course, especially if “the ghastly groves of academe are talking unanimous, rancid twaddle, for instance.”\textsuperscript{15} Joe could not understand the world that had produced the Watergate scandal. His contract was due to expire in 1975. When both the \textit{Washington Post} and \textit{Los Angeles Times} syndicates balked at extending the generous terms of his 1965 contract, Alsop could see the end was near. Joe did not even write a column about Nixon’s resignation when it finally came in August of 1974, turning his attention and

\textsuperscript{14} Joseph Alsop, \textit{I've Seen the Best of It}, 454.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 480.
writing instead to the subject of art collection.\textsuperscript{16} Joseph Alsop died in August 1989, after a two-year battle with lung cancer.

He defended his brand of journalism until the end of his life, even the most controversial aspect of it—the danger of becoming too close to centers of power or becoming personally involved in the story. He even defended his decisions not to report what he knew of CIA operations in Iran, Guatemala, and Cuba. He realized that his “journalistic discretion—or complicity, if one prefers that word,” would be bitterly criticized by most journalists after the 1970s. He had chosen to keep secrets on patriotic grounds. He believed that “if the leaders of the U.S. government decide that all the risks and perils of a major covert operation are required to further the interest of the United States, it is not the business of the individual newspapermen to put professional gain over that of country.”\textsuperscript{17}

Stewart Alsop had ceased to be in the first rank of Washington journalists since the split with his brother, and his choice to write for the floundering \textit{Saturday Evening Post} meant that his readership, while respectable, would never be as important as his “Matter of Fact” columns had been. Unlike Joe, Stewart was pessimistic about Lyndon Johnson and the Vietnam War. His trips to Vietnam throughout the 1960s left him skeptical about any chances for American success in Southeast Asia. An interview with Johnson in July 1967 convinced Stewart that American policy was disorganized.\textsuperscript{18} His take on the Vietnam War would have put him in the mainstream of editorial opinion by

\textsuperscript{16} Joseph Alsop did still have good contacts contacts in each administration, and strong political opinions. When one Carter administration official, while dining at the Alsop home, said that unemployment would be more important over the next four years than inflation, Joe pounded the table and exclaimed, “Balls! Balls, balls, balls, balls, balls.” Merry, \textit{Taking On The World}, 535.

\textsuperscript{17} Joseph Alsop, \textit{I’ve Seen the Best of It}, 443.

\textsuperscript{18} Merry, \textit{Taking On The World}, 453.
this time, and he regained a measure of his old influence in 1968 when he replaced the retiring Walter Lippmann, writing the column on the back page of the ascendant *Newsweek* magazine.\(^{19}\)

But two factors kept Stewart Alsop from taking his place among the trend-setting journalists. First, he was as hostile to the radicalism of the New Left as his brother once scribbling in his notebook that they seemed to be a “Generation of jerks,” but he was more polite than his brother, and made fewer enemies.\(^{20}\) Unlike the younger reporters, Stewart was coolly supportive of Nixon in his first years in office, and like Joe, he enjoyed having access to Kissinger, who continued to feed stories to both brothers. Second, in the summer of 1971, at the age of 57, Stewart Alsop discovered he had leukemia; his doctors told him he would probably die within two or three years. Stewart wrote about his illness in his columns for *Newsweek* and a memoir, *Stay of Execution*, but his health deteriorated. Stewart Alsop died nine days after his 60th birthday, on May 26, 1974.\(^{21}\)

Marquis Childs survived the turmoil of the Vietnam and Watergate eras with his reputation intact. He had always been more critical of powerful leaders than his fellow pundits, and in 1969 he was rewarded with the first Pulitzer Prize ever given for commentary in 1969. Throughout his remarkably long career (he wrote his last column in early 1989), Childs worried that he had been tainted by the same corrupting power that had touched so many of the politicians he had covered for decades: “We have a kind of  

\(^{19}\) The *Saturday Evening Post* finally folded in 1969. Stewart had written 126 full length articles and 147 columns for the magazine. Stewart blamed television as a “menace” to society, “which threatens to engulf the written word, like a blob from outer space in one of television’s own idiot-pleasers.” Merry, *Taking On The World*, 481.

\(^{20}\) Ibid., 470.

\(^{21}\) Ibid., 528-529.
intimacy based on the premise that we are observers beyond the rules of the game.” But Childs was too wise to be sucked into that fiction. He understood how he and his fellow journalists had occasionally convinced themselves “that our superior knowledge, our intuitive understanding” entitled them to “play a direct part with our identity only thinly disguised.” He wrote, “I know what this temptation is and what it means to succumb to it. It is, I have come to feel, a dangerous illusion.” Unlike Alsop, Childs continued to worry about how one’s proximity to power could endanger the “integrity, the independence” of journalists. He also understood how tempting it could be to insert oneself into the public debate, since “demonstrable clods” had risen to power, almost inviting “beneficent intervention.”22 He hoped that reporters would be cautious and humble, realizing that all men are mortal.23

Just as Joseph Alsop had ended his memoirs at the death of John Kennedy, believing Kennedy’s death marked the end of an era, Childs ended his memoirs with the death of Walter Lippmann in 1974.24 For Childs, the era of the towering pundit ended with the death of their leader. He was less impressed with the end of Joseph Alsop’s career. Alsop had been a man of “remarkable authority” as a “half eccentric, half scholar” who had made friendships as legendary as his rivalries. Childs found Alsop’s later criticisms of the “advocacy journalists” at the New York Times to be ironic. On balance, Childs found Alsop more of an “advocate, and a powerful advocate, rather than a reporter-commentator.” By the end of Alsop’s career, Childs believed him to be a conservative and a reactionary one at that, since “in his jeremiads at the end of his career,

22 Marquis Childs, Witness to Power, 268.
23 Ibid., 269.
24 Ibid., 263.
he blasted the weakness, the slackness, of an America undermined by the liberals and the left.”

Childs was happy that Reston soldiered on, thinking him to be the “inheritor of the discipline of privilege and responsibility” in the model of Walter Lippmann. Childs praised Reston’s “pleasant way with people,” which “won him not only influence but a broad company of friends.”

Reston himself survived the Vietnam War and Watergate, even if his brand of journalism did not. He was exactly the kind of writer who could not be as successful after Watergate and Vietnam changed the relationship between journalists and politicians.

His biographer, John F. Stacks, described his access to presidents as “unimaginable” today. At the same time, Stacks, a former managing editor at Time magazine, realized that “the relationship between journalists and politicians in America is today most often a distant and hostile one, marked by distrust and anger and cynicism.” Reston was not distant or hostile. And politicians could trust him. Reston died in December of 1995.

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25 Ibid., 267. In fact, Alsop did want to correct part of the historical record with regards to the influence of liberals in John Kennedy’s administration. That is, he wanted to correct the impression that John Kennedy had ever listened to the liberals in his administration—at least in foreign policy matters that he observed. He advised reading Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.’s account of the Kennedy administration, A Thousand Days, with “cynical care.” He found that throughout Schlesinger’s narrative, “a body Arthur refers to as ‘the liberals’ keeps cropping up with good advice on foreign policy.” As Alsop remembered it, “the fact is that the advice offered by these liberals was almost never taken.” He was particular skeptical of any account of Kennedy taking the advice of Professor John Kenneth Galbraith, the Ambassador to India. Alsop was, “prepared to bet any amount of money that the president replied to these letters in ways that caused Professor Galbraith to flush with pleasure, for he is a man with an easy response to flattery.” But Alsop remembered how Kennedy would read Galbraith’s letters aloud at dinners “with comic emphasis” as “samples of the sort of thing presidents have to put up with.” Joseph Alsop, I’ve Seen the Best of It, 449.

26 Ibid., 267-268.

27 This was the conclusion of R.W. Apple of The New York Times in an interview by Charlayne Hunter Gault on the PBS new program Newshour on December 7, 1995. The transcript of the interview can be found at http://pbs.org/newshour/bb/remember_12-7.html.

28 John F. Stacks, Scotty, 5-6.
Drew Pearson died in 1969, after handing most of his reporting duties off to his right-hand-man Jack Anderson. Pearson had declined in influence in almost direct proportion to the rise of television and the escalation of the Vietnam War. Pearson was close to President Johnson, and his reputation suffered accordingly as the War dragged on in the late 1960s. His style of journalism seemed ill-equipped to handle a story like the Vietnam War. He still reveled in defending himself against the occasional libel suit, but he was too close to Johnson. As Johnson fell from grace, so did Pearson.

After the pundits stopped playing active roles in the creation of the reputations of Truman, Eisenhower, and Kennedy, the conventional wisdom concerning those three men hardened. Truman became known as the scrappy, honest, blunt, Missourian who put a sign on his desk proclaiming “the buck stops here” and dropped two atomic bombs. Eisenhower was the golfing President who presided over a decade when nothing happened, except for those things in which he should have participated, but did not. Kennedy was the glamorous, tragic, figure cut down in the prime of his health (until revelations about his health came to light) and youth who could have prevented the terrible events of the 1960s from taking place. The stereotypes created out of the public memory of the past were simplifications, really—perfectly understandable—but simplifications nonetheless. Truman was no simpleton; Eisenhower no lazy bobblehead; Kennedy no savior.

The pundits themselves (save Reston and Childs) did not survive the shocks of the 1960s and 1970s professionally, but the conventional wisdom of Truman, Eisenhower,

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29 Joseph Alsop went so far as to write a letter of apology to Truman for the “inexperience and bad judgment which led [him] to underrate [Truman’s] leadership.” Looking back, Alsop thought Truman’s years in office to be a “truly heroic period.” Merry, *Taking On The World*, 442.
and Kennedy that they had created lasted for at least two generations. Many leaders and politicians have been anxious to associate themselves with the Truman legacy, especially if they were down in the polls, facing tough opposition, or being battered by the press. Despite two decades of revisionism, the image of the 1950s as a placid, uneventful decade persists. Even with thirty years of debunking, Kennedy remains wildly popular with the American people. Conventional wisdom, once wed with the powers of mass culture, is an almost unstoppable force. Perceptions, once fed, reinforced, and filtered through stereotypes created by an almost-forgotten group of journalists, have proven remarkably unshakable.

But there was a final irony.

What held these pundits together, aside from their ability to write, was their naked, unabashed patriotism; yet they created the conditions for our more cynical culture of the twenty-first century. They each had a different vision of what America’s historic mission should be, but they each believed in an American mission in the world. Yet, they were too critical of Eisenhower and Truman when they thought those Presidents failed to achieve greatness; they were too quick to praise Kennedy, who left so many promises unfulfilled. When America lost its sense of national direction, and as age caught up with them, they could no longer make sense of their times. The best of their work—in technique and belief—is considered passé, while their worst sins—interpretive, advocacy journalism and the distortion of America’s public memory—have the longest legacy. These patriotic, high priests of politics created many of the conditions that led to their own irrelevance. Their proximity to power was both the source of their influence and one of the reasons for their downfall. Their patriotism produced cynics who distrusted
government and believed that crooks and buffoons led the nation—and stereotypes that historians would confront for generations.
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