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Ike's Leadership Lessons for New President

Abstract

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The issue, as he later related, was the demand of conservative Republican legislative leaders that Eisenhower "balance the budget immediately and cut taxes no matter what the result." [*excerpt*]

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Ike's leadership lessons for new president

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by **Michael J. Birkner**

Just days into his presidency in the winter of 1953, Dwight Eisenhower met with his advisers and discussed a challenge from within the majority Republican caucus. If mishandled, it could have endangered his program for a stronger America.

The issue, as he later related, was the demand of conservative Republican legislative leaders that Eisenhower "balance the budget immediately and cut taxes no matter what the result."

In a circumstance similar to that faced by President Trump on the repeal and replacement of the Affordable Care Act, Eisenhower listened, reflected - and, unlike Trump, chose not to embrace Republican leaders' demands. "I could never approve a plan to slash necessary defense spending just to contrast Republican economy with Democratic fiscal irresponsibility," Ike observed in his memoirs.

And he didn't.

Although Eisenhower was waging different battles with Republican conservatives on other fronts, including the assault, led by Sen. Joseph R. McCarthy, on Charles Bohlen's nomination as ambassador to the Soviet Union, he continued to battle the "tax choppers and budget balancers." In his first months in office Ike cut the federal budget, but not nearly as severely as the conservative leadership sought. He also kept Harry Truman's excess profits tax in place in order to keep the nation's balance sheet from dripping red ink. As Ike observed in a speech to a business group, of course tax reform was important, "but you must never lower revenues."

Ultimately Eisenhower's middle-way policies proved popular, as evidenced by consistently high poll numbers and a smashing reelection in 1956. Historians were slow to appreciate Eisenhower's virtues, but in the recently released C-Span poll, Eisenhower ranked fifth among the nation's presidents.

How did he do it?

Eisenhower rejected what he called "table-pounding" approaches to governance. He met regularly with the Democratic opposition leadership, including informal sessions over drinks

with Sam Rayburn and Lyndon Johnson. He never demonized the opposition, nor did he operate on the basis that he had to win a complete victory on any given battle. His mantra was: "Give me 60 or 70 percent of what I'm seeking and I can be satisfied for the time being."

Eisenhower respected the separation of powers and congressional prerogatives. In dealing with Congress his approach was always, as his aide Bryce Harlow once put it, "more to induce than demand."

Eisenhower's era, admittedly, was markedly different from the polarized political world Trump operates in. There was a national consensus about waging a Cold War against the Soviet Union. Domestically, with the exception of racial matters, the major argument was not whether federal intervention was good or bad, but how much or little federal intervention was necessary to keep the economy humming and assist those Americans most in need.

It helped that Eisenhower was popular, from start to finish of his eight years in the White House - so popular that for the first five years of his presidency, Lyndon Johnson told his top aides he would never cross the president for fear that criticizing him would only harm the Democrats.

Even granting that the political environment of 2017 little resembles that of the mid-1950s, the so-called Ike Age, the way Eisenhower conducted business offers leadership lessons for today.

For Eisenhower, talking directly with members of Congress across a broad ideological spectrum was educational as well as an opportunity to explain why he favored a particular course. He was, according to one aide, "an eyeball-to-eyeball kind of fellow." In many instances Eisenhower's meetings with political critics brought results. In one patient tutorial, for example, crusty New Hampshire Sen. Styles Bridges started as a fierce opponent of foreign aid but left the Oval Office at least a partial convert on the subject, and no longer a foe of Eisenhower's budget request. Such stories were commonplace during Ike's tenure.

Eisenhower's willingness to share credit for legislative accomplishments characterized his approach to governing. So did his refusal to denounce publicly legislators he believed were either misinformed, stupid, or, as in the case of McCarthy, malign. As he put it, praise in public, criticize in private.

Eisenhower worked behind the scenes to kneecap the senator from Wisconsin, as David Nichols demonstrates in a new book, *Ike and McCarthy*. The president repeatedly relegated negative opinions of political knaves and fools to his diary or to mordant comments uttered in private conversations. McCarthy, for example, he viewed as "a pimple on the path of progress," but such a wisecrack was strictly for internal consumption within the White House.

Whether working with a Republican Congress (1953-54) or a Democratic-dominated one (1955-61), Eisenhower forged a remarkable record enacting the measures his administration proposed. He kept the country's economy by far the world's strongest. He kept the peace. And he maintained the dignity of the presidential office.

In the end, Ike did it with tools in his presidential politicking box that Trump would be wise to consider. Here are five:

Keep your ego in check. Let the other fellow take credit, so long as the goal you seek is accomplished; and take responsibility when things go wrong.

Be candid with the American people.

Keep your word.

Do what your conscience tells you is right for America.

And finally: Plan, plan, and plan again. "Plans may mean nothing," he said, "but planning is everything."

It worked for the nation's 34th president. It could work for the 45th.

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