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## Center Stage

### Like Ike? A reviewer names his Eisenhower favorites



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UT-Dallas professor [Clay Reynolds](#) is a regular reviewer of books here at *The Dallas Morning News*, covering everything from Don Graham's *State of Mind: Texas Culture & Its Discontents*, to the Civil War omnibus *Hearts Touched by Fire*. He's also published several books, most recently the Ned Buntline collection *The Hero of a Hundred Fights: Collected Stories from the Dime Novel King, from Buffalo Bill to Wild Bill Hickok*.

His most recent review, *Eisenhower in War and Peace*, by [Jean Edward Smith](#), drew a query from a reader looking for advice on the top two books about Eisenhower. His information-packed response is attached below.

To his insight, I will add only that [Kasey S. Pipes](#), another regular contributor to our pages, did write his own well-received Eisenhower book: *Ike's Final Battle: The Road to Little Rock and the Challenge of Equality*. Kasey's most recent reviews were of *Honor in the Dust: Theodore Roosevelt, War in the Philippines and the Rise and Fall of America's Imperial Dream*, by Gregg Jones, and this fine roundup of [three new books on World War II in the Pacific](#).

As for the Eisenhower recommendations, Clay writes:

I have to say, by way of disclaimer, than I'm no expert on Dwight Eisenhower, although I grew up in the Eisenhower era. I have read widely and deeply in World War II history and literature, however; I routinely teach courses in it. In light of that, let me say that I have read Steve Ambrose's biography, *Eisenhower: Soldier and President*, although it was back when it came out in the early 1990s. I happened to meet Ambrose about that time, and we talked briefly about the volume, which created quite a stir. My impression of the book was reinforced by our conversation, in which he expressed an almost devout admiration for Eisenhower. That was fine, as it's good for a writer to feel passionately about his subject; and when I read the book, my most lasting

impression was that Ambrose found Eisenhower to be very nearly the perfect general and president, both; that, also, was fine, although it contradicted the impression I always had as a child of a rock-ribbed “Yellow-Dog Democrat” and combat veteran of the European Theater, my father. Dad always said that Eisenhower was about the most “just OK” guy he’d ever heard of. But that was my father’s impression, and while he was often wise, he was not well educated or ever afraid to express his opinions.

Some years later, I read Kay Summersby’s *Past Forgetting*, her autobiographical “kiss and tell” story about her affair with Eisenhower, something that Ambrose actively discounted publicly, although he stepped softly around it in his own book. There was always the impression that Summersby, who certainly did not need the money as she inherited very well, wrote the book for her own aggrandizement; that may or may not be true. Certainly, a lot of Eisenhower fans and enthusiasts at the time, most especially Ted Kennedy, made statements that suggested that the volume was largely made up; it may have been the only thing Kennedy and Barry Goldwater ever agreed on. But since that time, historians and scholars have examined a lot of material that has been made public, and the consensus is that Ike and Kay were most definitely lovers. Smith upholds this notion, pretty much, although he stops short of speculation on tawdry details; he makes the point that most of the American general officers and colonels in England and, later, France, had girlfriends and lovers as a regular part of their entourages, and the press, at the time, just looked the other way. (Patton, by the way, was a notable exception to the rule.)

The personal facts of Ike’s life, though, are only one area where I now am convinced, particularly after reading Smith’s volume, where Ambrose chose to shade or shadow the less savory elements of Eisenhower’s career and life. Smith makes the point, though somewhat gently, that Eisenhower was pretty much convinced that MacArthur was thoroughly corrupt if not marginally insane when he served under him in the mid-1930s—something else Ambrose chooses not to reveal, although he had Eisenhower’s journals and letters to Maime at his disposal—and that tens of thousands of American lives were sacrificed to satisfy “Dugout Doug’s” ego. That is still hotly debated, although British historians pretty much agree with it. Ambrose also soft-pedals Eisenhower’s tactical ineptitude, something that almost every historian writing today agrees was nearly disastrous during Operation Torch and at Salerno and Anzio and Cassino (where my father, by the way, was involved). Smith focuses on Churchill’s dominant role in the last of these, and that’s fair, particularly since Churchill was largely responsible for allowing the German army to escape, intact, from Sicily. The fact is that many Allied commanders made horrendous blunders that cost their troops dearly, something that is seldom discussed in popular histories of the war. Ambrose also mostly ignores the friction between Eisenhower and Brooke, the British high commander, as well as with others on the British General Staff, almost all of whom regarded Ike as a rank amateur and poor strategist. Smith deals with this more directly but less harshly than other historians. None of this is to say that Smith is negative about Ike; on the contrary. But he is frank and, for the most part, more objective than Ambrose.

Where Ambrose probably missed the mark mostly was in his refusal to reveal much critical about Eisenhower. He tends to “wax eloquent” in praise of Ike, and he also ignores the facts he had at hand if they contradicted his opinion. More often, though, he would manage rhetorically to

“spin” or, to use Ike’s own word, “recalibrate” the facts to fit the image that was most flattering. Eisenhower kept a frank journal and often committed material to letter or cablegram that was damaging, then he spent a lot of energy trying to recover these documents later on if they put him in a less-than-favorable light. One such series of cables was an issue between him and Harry Truman (regarding Summersby, George Marshall, and Ike and Mamie), something that caused them to be estranged for more than a decade.

But I think it’s fair to say that Ambrose (like Carl Sandburg writing about Abraham Lincoln — Gore Vidal famously said, “Two really bad things happened to Abraham Lincoln. One was that John Wilkes Booth shot him; the other was that Carl Sandburg wrote his biography.”) was such an admirer of Eisenhower that he simply couldn’t be objective. But it’s important to remember that Ambrose — like Smith — was a “popular” historian, which is to say, he never did have the respect of scholars and academic historians, even when they agreed with him. He was writing for a popular audience, one that would include a lot of veterans who shared his devotion to Eisenhower as their commander if not their president, and he was savvy enough to know his audience’s tolerance for criticism of their most cherished icon.

I fear I have not read widely in the political era of Eisenhower’s presidency. I learned a great deal about it from the Smith volume, and it reinforced what knowledge I do have. There are several excellent volumes on specific issues such as the Cold War and on the Space Program, both of which dominated Eisenhower’s two terms. There’re also some excellent volumes on the McCarthy Era and the “red-baiting” that went on at the time, something that Eisenhower (who was himself accused of being a Communist) had no tolerance for. In terms of World War II, though, I can recommend *The Storm of War*, a thoroughly excellent treatment of the whole of World War II by British historian, Andrew Roberts. This is a new volume and may be the best thing published on the war since Liddel-Hart’s study some years ago. His treatment of Eisenhower is particularly objective and insightful, and it complements Smith’s read on Ike as a general very, very well.

I hope this information is somewhat helpful. I very much appreciate your writing.

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