



Ike at 125

After a Rapid Rise in the Army, He Is Coaxed into the White House

The eastbound train that stopped in Abilene, Kansas, on a June afternoon in 1911 took on a very important passenger.

A young man was leaving his parents and five brothers, embarking on his first trip east. His destination: the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, where he would join the new class of cadets, the Class of 1915.

His final destination, however, would not be West Point, or any of the many cities and countries he would visit over his 78 years. His final destination—with help along the way from powerful and influential mentors—would be the history books.

At West Point, “Ike” (a childhood moniker that stuck with him all his life) graduated 61st in the Class of 1915—known as “the class the stars fell on” because 59 of the 164 graduates would become general officers.

During his long career, Dwight David Eisenhower witnessed, participated in, and influenced or determined the outcome of some of the most important events of the 20th century.

But in June 1911, all that was well in the future.

Ike and his brothers grew up in a modest house that still sits on the grounds of the Eisenhower Presidential Library and Museum in Abilene, on the vast Kansas prairie about 160 miles west of Kansas City.

Money for college was scarce in the Eisenhower family, so Ike took the exam for West Point, where he could get a free education. He scored well and was admitted. Upon

graduation, however, he drew postings that kept him far from the action in World War I.

The postwar era, with the active Army dramatically scaled back and few opportunities for advancements, was nonetheless an important period for Eisenhower. He worked for and with some of the most influential men in the Army and impressed them all: General of the Armies John J. Pershing; Gen. Fox Conner, one of the Army's leading strategic thinkers; and a young officer with stars in *his* future named George C. Marshall.

They all played roles in advancing Eisenhower's Army career—by ensuring his acceptance into the Army's prestigious officer training schools and securing important postings that would enhance his credentials. He even spent several years as an aide to Gen. Douglas MacArthur.

But in the 1930s, war clouds formed over Europe and the Pacific. When the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor in 1941, Eisenhower, by then a brigadier general, was summoned to Washington, reporting to George C. Marshall, who had risen to become Army chief of staff.

His job under Marshall: Create plans to defeat Germany and Japan. Soon Marshall sent him to Europe and North Africa. There, he assumed increasing responsibilities commanding Allied troops, even though he had no prior experience commanding troops in combat.

In his new role, he put to use those political skills that Pershing, Conner, and Marshall had seen in him. They were essential in his dealings as Supreme Allied Commander with such dominant personalities as Franklin Roosevelt, Winston Churchill, Bernard Montgomery, Charles de Gaulle, and Joseph Stalin.

As America's industries began tooling up to produce tanks, artillery, and other war materiel in 1942 and 1943, Allied troops did what they could to push the Germans out of North Africa and Italy. But Eisenhower knew that he had to get a lot of well-supplied troops on the ground in western Europe to defeat the Nazis.

That time finally came on June 6, 1944: the D-day invasion of western Europe. Roosevelt had chosen him over Marshall to head Operation Overlord, the biggest invasion with the biggest army in history. It was all his show, and he knew it. He even wrote a note, saying that if it failed, "the fault is mine and mine alone."

But it didn't fail, and despite setbacks as the Allies drove toward and into Germany. Within a year, the Third Reich collapsed and the Germans surrendered.

Now a five-star general, Eisenhower returned home as a hero, his place in history already secured. He took

Marshall's place as Army chief of staff. In 1948, he resisted pressure to run for President and instead accepted the presidency of Columbia University until 1951, when President Harry S. Truman called on him to be the first supreme commander of NATO troops.

But that didn't stop the clamor to put Eisenhower in the White House. So finally in 1952 he said yes, agreeing to run with Senator Richard Nixon as his running mate. They beat the Democratic ticket, led by Illinois Governor Adlai Stevenson, and even pulled in a GOP-controlled Congress eager to dismantle the New Deal.

But Eisenhower, a moderate conservative, refused to dismantle the New Deal programs instituted by Roosevelt and continued by Truman. Instead, he wrapped many of them up in a new Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. He even expanded Social Security.

But the Soviets' launching of their Sputnik satellite pointed to another need: national defense. In the name of national defense, he began what is now the system of Interstate highways; established a research program at the Pentagon that eventually led to the Internet; set up the National Defense Education Act, which included student loans; and put a new emphasis on nuclear deterrence.

After two decades of depression and war, Americans were eager for peace and prosperity, and Eisenhower was their man. He brought the Korean War to an end with an armistice in 1953 and warned against U.S. involvement in Asian conflicts.

The 1950s, with Eisenhower in the White House, are often thought of as a sleepy decade when nothing happened. Not so.

The Eisenhower years witnessed events emerging from serious challenges that would explode in the 1960s: Race relations and civil rights. Space exploration. Communist aggression in Southeast Asia. Opposition at home to U.S. participation in wars. A continuation of the Cold War.

Eisenhower and his wife, Mamie, retired to their farm in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, where he worked on his presidential memoirs and from which he traveled to play golf. At his request, Congress and President John Kennedy restored the five-star rank he gave up to become President.

He is buried on the grounds of his library in Abilene, in his "Ike jacket" uniform with the only decorations being the symbol of his rank and the three favorite ribbons of the 75 he was authorized to wear.

The three articles that follow examine how Eisenhower's vision of the frontier changed, how his reputation among historians is evolving, and how he worked covertly to bring down Senator Joseph McCarthy.