Liking Ike: Eisenhower, Advertising, and the Rise of Celebrity Politics

Review Number: 2107

Publish date: Thursday, 18 May, 2017

Author: David Haven Blake

ISBN: 9780190278182

Date of Publication: 2016

Price: £22.99

Pages: 304pp.

Publisher: Oxford University Press

Publisher url: <https://global.oup.com/academic/product/liking-ike-9780190278182?cc=gb&lang=en&>

Place of Publication: Oxford

Reviewer: Thomas Tunstall Allcock

Dwight D. Eisenhower, famous military leader turned reluctant, moderate president, is not the first name that springs to mind when thinking of politicians who harnessed the power of advertising and celebrity culture in their successful electoral campaigns. Yet in this lively and entertaining chronicle of the intersection of politics, advertising and celebrity in the 1950s, David Haven Blake argues that it was the General from Abilene, not his more glamorous successor from Massachusetts, that first truly understood the power of television and the importance of celebrity culture in influencing the voting public, harnessing them to run two electoral campaigns that transformed American politics for ever. In Blake's telling, by the time Richard Nixon won the presidency in 1968, it was widely accepted that 'political candidates are celebrities ... right along with Johnny Carson and Batman' (p. 205), a situation that remains more true than ever today. An ambitious mix of political and cultural history that focuses on several presidents and their shifting relationships with the American public as well as exploring changes in US society and the growing influence of Madison Avenue advertising agencies, *Liking Ike* at times feels a little unfocused, wandering into interesting but somewhat tangential digressions, yet still succeeds in providing a fresh perspective on our understanding of Eisenhower a political figure and the development of modern campaigning.

Perhaps Blake's central contention regarding Eisenhower should not be so surprising; after all, in 'I Like Ike' he possesses one of the most famous and successful campaign slogans of all time. Originally part of a song from an Irving Berlin musical, Berlin adapted the lyrics for Eisenhower's first presidential run, and its central refrain would be chanted by supporters and adorn campaign paraphernalia as well as occupying a lasting place in the American cultural psyche. As Blake points out, however, in comparison to the more obvious 'celebrity' presidents like John F. Kennedy or Ronald Reagan, Eisenhower's image remains largely that of a 'humble plainsman, a soldier-citizen, a steadfast and grandfatherly head of state' (p. 2) who reluctantly took on the great burden of the presidency with the same patient and firm leadership he had displayed during wartime. Hence the first chapters of *Liking Ike* are dedicated to establishing an alternative vision of America's 34th president, most notably through an extended exploration of 'Ike Day,' a star-studded and precisely stage-managed celebration of the president's birthday, nationally broadcast on 13 October 1956. Blake uses 'Ike Day,' hosted by Jimmy Stewart with his 'virtuous, everyman persona' (p. 34) in full force and featuring shots of the Eisenhower family gathered round the television in the White House

Library, as a crucial framing device, arguing that it demonstrated 'a moment when the gathering forces of stardom, television, and advertising began to form an increasingly dominant alliance, one in which the unifying power of images could strategically supplant political dialogue and debate' (p. 24).

In many ways 'Ike Day' and even 'I Like Ike' appear quaint and somewhat naïve to modern audiences, but Blake does an impressive job of establishing the degree of planning and strategy that went into the televised birthday celebration, and backs up his contention regarding its significance by exploring the degree to which it reflected a departure from previous campaigns. In order to do so, chapter two notes the long history of celebrity endorsements of presidential candidates, notably Al Jolson's famous pilgrimage to visit Warren Harding on his front porch in 1920. Of more immediate relevance to the narrative are the annual fundraising balls thrown by Franklin Roosevelt, and the 1940 NBC radio broadcast 'A Salute to Roosevelt' that featured celebrity performances and endorsements of the president's campaign for a historic third term. Blake succeeds in delineating the extent to which Eisenhower's campaigns diverged from these precedents, not least through a fascinating exploration of the increasingly prevalent influence of advertising agencies like Batten, Barton, Durstine & Osborn, and celebrity consultants such as actor Robert Montgomery. The growing use of celebrity endorsements to create televisual spectacles as well as the candidate's surprising openness to media training and performance coaching marks Eisenhower's presidency as strikingly modern in comparison to both his predecessors and political rivals. Indeed, for Blake the 1952 Republican convention was essentially a competition between the traditional approach of party stalwart Robert A. Taft and Eisenhower the celebrity's team of advertising executives (p. 67).

There is much to like in these fascinating and revealing early chapters. Eisenhower's presidency has long been a case-study in the power of sustained historical research, combined with the ongoing declassification of government documents, to transform the reputation of a national figure. J. K. Galbraith's famous 1958 assessment of Ike's leadership as 'the bland leading the bland' reflected the dominant perspective for many years, with the genial, golf-playing president considered too 'hands-off' to be credited with any great level of achievement. The opening of presidential archives subsequently enabled historians to discover a very different president, one who actively encouraged his *laissez faire* public reputation, while privately maintaining tight control over the running of his administration's foreign and domestic policy.⁽¹⁾ *Liking Ike* makes an important contribution to this process, revealing the degree to which Eisenhower and his advisors were controlling his image by employing new research on public relations and voting patterns, and embracing cutting edge technology. While Blake makes sure to stress Eisenhower's occasional ambivalence regarding the process, particularly the role of celebrity culture, this is nonetheless a vision of a very modern presidency that further buries those early accounts of an uninterested, grandfatherly presence.

The book also covers a lot of ground thematically, although this can result in some sections feeling a little rushed and several interesting points remaining underdeveloped. For instance, while discussing Eisenhower's victory over Taft in the 1952 primary, Blake hints at the anger of the more conservative faction of the Republican Party, and quotes right-wing activist Phyllis Schlafly's raging against the 'kingmakers' and New York elites who have stolen the nomination from their candidate (p. 70). This appeared to be the beginning of a consideration of how Eisenhower's brand of polished, moderate Republicanism contributed to party divisions that would eventually see the nomination of Barry Goldwater in 1964 and ultimately the domination of the party by its more conservative wing in the 1980s and beyond, yet this is a thread that largely remains unexplored. Similarly, the consideration of the different ways in which 'spectacle' is employed by the administration feels somewhat truncated, mostly limited to a pair of election oriented events. While the explorations of these grand shows at Madison Square Garden are wonderfully brought to life, I was left wondering about other forms of spectacle that would have occurred more regularly throughout a presidency. White House events, for instance state dinners for visiting foreign leaders, would have featured entertainers and been well covered by the media – was the same degree of planning and consideration put into these as well? Just how far did the influence of the advertising agencies and the consultants like Montgomery reach?

These questions reflect probably my biggest concern regarding *Liking Ike*, which is that a surprisingly

substantial amount of the book is not about Eisenhower at all, and indeed often seems in quite a rush to move on from considering his administration. A notable feature of the book is its non-chronological structure, which often works well, such as in the opening chapter on 'Ike Day' followed by an exploration of pre-Eisenhower presidential advertising in chapter two, but also contributes to a sense of later chapters losing their focus when they move on to often tangentially connected topics. In fact, of the book's eight chapters only three are directly about Eisenhower and his administration. The impact of this on the Eisenhower chapters is that key points sometimes feel glossed over, particularly the nuts and bolts of the political history. In chapter three's consideration of the 1952 Republican convention for instance, we are told that while neither candidate initially held a clear lead, Taft was the 'clear choice of professional Republicans' (p. 67). After a brief anecdote recounting how some of Eisenhower's team helped to bolster the numbers of Ike supporters in the convention hall, he suddenly has the nomination and we move on (p. 69). Was the voting close? What impact did the trickery of his team actually have on the voting? These may be the prosaic questions of a political historian, but the answers could have added weight to the claims that Eisenhower's new methods made a difference to political outcomes, bolstering the most unique contributions of the book, and an expansion of these chapters would have been welcome.

It appears that in building the book around the Eisenhower presidency Blake may have run into an issue familiar to plenty of other historians, which is that despite the increase in available documentation, on some issues at least Ike himself remains something of an enigma.⁽²⁾ The strengths of the early chapters of *Liking Ike* are in the exploration of the unconventional network of advisors surrounding the president, and the shifting relationship between politicians and the public within a decade of rapid change in media and entertainment. The president himself only rarely appears to be an active participant in this narrative though; at times these developments appear to be going on around him rather than being driven by him. Blake offers an insight into why this may be, when a diary entry written after having seen a film of a Madison Square Garden rally endorsing his candidacy is described as 'the only time Eisenhower wrote in his diary about the primary, the convention, or the fall campaign' (p. 62). There are certainly some revealing comments from the man himself scattered throughout the chapters, but not enough to get a detailed sense of his engagement with these important processes, and possibly not enough to support further chapters on his administration.

Perhaps then Eisenhower's opaqueness contributed to the decision to focus less and less on his presidency in later chapters, with some mixed results. Chapter five provides an important consideration of contemporary criticisms of the increasingly close relationship between Madison Avenue and Pennsylvania Avenue, before chapter six positions Ike's opponent in both his electoral victories, Adlai Stevenson, as a revealing counterpoint, a man who failed to create a winning image or harness the power of new techniques and technologies and was twice soundly beaten. These chapters add depth and richness to the central themes and arguments of the book, something that I am not entirely convinced can be said of the last two chapters, with their focus on Ronald Reagan and John F. Kennedy. Both chapters are entertaining, containing vivid vignettes and revealing details about two of the country's most engaging politicians, but coming after two other chapters that had not focused directly on Eisenhower I could not help but feel the like some of the book's focus was lost. The Reagan chapter in particular read like a self-contained essay, with occasional and largely unconvincing references to Eisenhower scattered throughout. The final chapter on Kennedy spoke to the core concerns of the book more directly, but offered far less that was new or revealing than the earlier chapters on Eisenhower had.⁽³⁾

It should be said that even though I felt some of the later chapters to lose focus a little, this was in part a result of a book that takes a risk in being wide-ranging and ambitious. It is also a reflection of how much I enjoyed the contributions of the book's earlier chapters that I would have liked elements of them to be explored in greater depth. Taken as a whole, *Liking Ike* makes an important contribution to our understanding of how modern politics has developed, particularly through the commodification of the presidency itself and the changing nature of Americans' relationship to the concept of celebrity.

In this sense the book is also a timely contribution. Other presidents have been considered 'celebrities' whether due to their style, charisma, and social circles like Kennedy or Bill Clinton, or through a previous

career such as Reagan, but none have been elected with so little political experience and a public profile based almost entirely on their celebrity status as the current incumbent of the Oval Office. It is therefore impossible to avoid reading parts of *Liking Ike* without considering its resonance for current politics. In exploring the criticisms that Ike's celebrity galas and Madison Avenue advisers attracted at the time, and in his own conclusions, Blake considers the increasing importance of image and personality over more substantive issues during elections, as well as the fuelling of political divisions by a narrative-seeking media. While much of the contemporary criticism Blake outlines comes across as pompous and unwilling to acknowledge the role that personality, image, and colourful narrative has always played in American politics, it can also feel prescient and insightful, with concerns about the ways in which independent voters were being targeted echoing current discussions about voter behaviour (p. 115). Similarly, in a time of ongoing concerns over 'fake news' and potential Russian electoral interference, understanding the ways in which political campaigns have developed and the willingness of candidates to exploit new technologies and techniques to influence voters by any means possible seems more important than ever. David Haven Blake has succeeded in producing a book that stands on its own terms as a significant piece of historical research, while also prompting the reader to consider how we choose our political leaders and the means by which the foundations of presidential images are created.

Notes

1. For more on this process see, Stephen Rabe, 'Eisenhower revisionism: a decade of scholarship', *Diplomatic History*, 17, 1 (Summer 1993); Charles Robertson, 'Eisenhower, then and now', *Reviews in American History*, 41, 2 (June 2013).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. For instance, see, Jean Edward Smith. *Eisenhower in War and Peace*. (New York, NY, 2012) p. 766. [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. See, Mark White, *Kennedy: A Cultural History of an American Icon* (London, 2013).[Back to \(3\)](#)

Source URL:<https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/2107>

Links

[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/254501>