

Eisenhower at Columbia

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Few college presidents have risen to the heights of becoming the nation's chief executive. Woodrow Wilson managed to do that for the Democrats, and Dwight David Eisenhower pleased many Republicans with a similar transition. But there were differences: Wilson was widely known for his accomplishments at Princeton; Eisenhower was less well known for his academic leadership at Columbia. In fact, Eisenhower's tenure as President at Morningside Heights was widely seen as controversial and abbreviated, and his reputation was overshadowed by his political ambition and his military success.

Eisenhower at Columbia is a study worth reading—somewhat flawed, perhaps a little too close in its focus, but very informing. Jacobs was able to make very good use of personal interviews, Oral History Project Interviews at Columbia, and the Dwight D. Eisenhower Library to develop this biography. Jacobs, a senior history professor at Middlebury College, traces Eisenhower's triumphant return to the United States and his hesitant entry into the academic world. Jacobs explores the problems confronting Columbia University with the end of World War II, including the limitations created by Nicholas Murray Butler's extended tenure as Columbia's seemingly permanent president, and the subsequent painful and uncertain quest for Butler's successor. As James Conant of Harvard observed, the presidency of Columbia was "a difficult job to handle on account of Dr. Butler really not handling it for some ten years." Several college presidents improved their salaries by pretending an interest in Butler's position. Eisenhower at one time was genuinely interested in a leadership offer with the Boy Scouts, a situation he later regretted passing up. However, this was the same Eisenhower who insisted that he was not the best qualified in his family (compared with brother Milton, for example) to be a college president. In any case, he confessed he would prefer "a small school in a rural setting." New York City hardly met that requirement. Furthermore, Columbia was in a serious fiscal plight, and as the new president, Eisenhower hated fund raising. Butler, on the other hand, had known success raising money, but he died in 1947, having never met Eisenhower.

Eisenhower began his Columbia presidency in May 1948. The trustees had high expectations that Eisenhower would bring major fund-raising success, a notion not shared by the new president. Both were somewhat naive. The faculty did not feel consulted before or after the installation that took place the following October. Eisenhower did not anticipate the many demands of his appointment, but he did work hard to cultivate the Columbia football program and its coach, Lou Little. He visited

with the History faculty, but even so, this star-studded faculty group preferred Adlai Stevenson for President in 1952.

Eisenhower's growing flirtation with Washington and national politics came at the expense of his college administrative duties, but not at the expense of his travels or his golf game. He failed to understand the total commitment that Columbia needed from its President. And so, by 1951 he was already on official leave from Columbia, serving as Commander in Chief for NATO, and by 1952 his return to national politics was complete. Jacobs believes that while Eisenhower did not take the Columbia position with the Presidency of the United States in mind, the years on Morningside Heights helped prepare him for the White House. He remarked, "I found the work fun—or would have if only I could have concentrated without the distraction of other demands."

His brother, Milton, who served as President of three universities—Kansas State, Penn State, and Johns Hopkins—took the opportunity to make Hopkins the beneficiary and recipient of Dwight D. Eisenhower's papers. The final and twenty-first volume will appear soon. Ironically, Milton had to remark that while his brother had sound educational values, he was "without experience with faculty, students, and a university. His influence on the total educational effort was not substantial." But, as Jacobs observes, Dwight Eisenhower's appointment "had a dramatic impact on Columbia and it was a publicity coup."

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