

Ike's Bluff: President Eisenhower's Secret Battle to Save the World

Evan Thomas (Little, Brown, 2012), 484pp., endnotes, index.

Reviewed by Nicholas Dujmovic

Historians are wary of history written by professional journalists because the result too often is substantively thin, badly researched, tendentious, and breathless.¹ On the CIA History Staff, however, we recognize good work in the field of intelligence history regardless of its source. Among the journalists whose historical work we endorse is John Ranelagh, whose book *The Agency* (1986) remains one of the most reliable and balanced CIA histories ever published. Another favorite is Evan Thomas, now a former journalist who teaches journalism and writing at Princeton University.

Thomas is a prolific and well-known author of several books that focus on the role of individuals in history. One of his best early books, cowritten with historian Walter Isaacson, was a brilliant study of the architects of postwar US foreign policy, *The Wise Men* (1986, revised edition 2012). For CIA officers and intelligence historians, Thomas's greatest contribution is his groundbreaking book about early CIA leaders, *The Very Best Men* (1995), which relied on Thomas's unprecedented access to internal CIA histories (an experiment that regrettably has never been replicated). Thomas has shown he can write important history in an easy-to-read narrative style.

Quite unfortunately, *Ike's Bluff*, Thomas's latest historical work, is a mixed bag and overall, in my judgment, fails to meet his previous standard for serious history. I would recommend it, however, as a valuable psychological study and period piece that evokes the uncertainty and fears of the early Cold War.

Thomas is at his best when he describes one of two extremes of scope—the activities and psychology of Eisenhower in dealing with the Cold War on the one hand, and on the other, the activities and cultural mindset of American society during Ike's presidency. The central thesis is that Eisenhower kept the Cold War cold and avoided nuclear war by credibly implying he might use nuclear weapons in a conflict with the Soviet Union (a doctrine called "Massive Retaliation" or "Assured Destruction" before Soviet nuclear parity made it mutual). This is the "bluff" of the title, in Thomas's words, "a bluff of epic proportions,"(17) though whether Ike was really bluffing remains unknown.

The book treats a fascinating, critical time in modern US history—the first decade or so of the Cold War, which Thomas rightly portrays as the most dangerous years (the overstated case for the Cuban Missile Crisis notwithstanding). He eloquently describes Americans' fear of the unknown during this period, which we either have largely forgotten today or tend to dismiss as unfounded. He also helps put to rest the myth that President Dwight Eisenhower was a caretaker president uninvolved in policy. For example, Thomas details (216–34) Eisenhower's handling of the "Dual Crises" of 1956—the Suez Crisis and the Hungarian uprising—and includes a surprising (at least to me) analysis of Eisenhower's considerable health problems at the same time he was campaigning for reelection. Moreover, the author's gift for compelling storytelling has not failed him, and he includes much juicy gossip.

¹ See, for example, my taking exception to *New York Times* journalist Tim Weiner's *Legacy of Ashes*, "Elegy of Slashes," *Studies in Intelligence* 51, No. 3 (September 2007): 33–43.

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There are also some useful myth-busting vignettes here. Thomas shows as false the old proto-Marxist canard that CIA's 1954 regime change operation in Guatemala was intended to benefit the United Fruit corporation (137–39); citing former CIA historian Nicholas Cullather's history of PBSUCCESS as authoritative, Thomas demonstrates that, rightly or wrongly, the Eisenhower administration responded to what it saw as a communist threat in that country. Eisenhower, while approving various covert actions, nevertheless retained realistic expectations of what covert action could do. (238) Contrary to what some historians have written, Thomas finds that Eisenhower did not try to hype the Soviet nuclear threat to the American public, though he did little to allay its fears of possible apocalypse. (359–61)

Positive aspects aside, there's not a lot of original research (though we get often tedious details of Ike's health gleaned from his doctor's diary²), nor are there major revelations in this book. The biggest problem is that Thomas cannot resist the journalist's temptation to dismiss complex situations in a well phrased *bon mot*. For example, his characterization of notorious red-baiter Joseph McCarthy as someone who "drank his lunch and imagined his facts" (53) accurately captures the man's alcoholism and hyperbole but fails to acknowledge the historical fact that there really were communists at the State Department and elsewhere in the US government.

Another example of tendentious storytelling occurs when Thomas, relying on declassified National Security Council (NSC) minutes, portrays "Operation Alert"—a 1960 relocation exercise for senior US leaders to a North Carolina secure facility—as a "dark comedy of errors" (374):

CIA director Dulles's car broke down; Defense Secretary Tom Gates forgot his ID and was barred at the gate by a marine; General Twining, chairman of the Joint Chiefs, did not show up at all.

Reading the actual NSC minutes, however, gives one a different impression.³ They record that Eisenhower thought positively about the drill and that the President's national security advisor "felt the exercise indicated that a meeting of the [NSC] could be assembled [at a remote site] on rather short notice." The CIA director's car did break down, but only in the first 100 yards (allowing him to find another). The defense secretary was initially challenged—in Washington, before boarding the evacuation helicopter—but then was let through. The minutes acknowledge that the JCS chairman "had been left in Washington"—but is silent on whether that was by design. The episode is a passing vignette, to be sure, but Thomas's slanted characterization of it makes me wonder where else he might have gone for the critical jab rather than a fair examination of events.

Regarding the CIA, moreover, significant caveats are warranted. The idea that Eisenhower "could not control" the CIA and its operations (17, 92) is belied by the reality that Ike pressed the CIA to undertake covert warfare as part of his "New Look" strategy of fighting the Cold War without either bankrupting the United States or precipitating nuclear war. Students of the Cold War will be surprised to learn that Voice of America was a "CIA radio." (145) Thomas's treatment of Allen Dulles (302–307) is unbalanced and overly harsh, emphasizing the man's flaws but not the attributes that Eisenhower found so valuable.

Paradoxically for someone who has written insightfully on the 1950s-era CIA based on original research, in this book Thomas most misconstrues CIA history when he is relying on secondary sources—in particular, as it happens, on histories written by journalists.

Thomas provides a succinct account of the "bomber gap" issue but (citing Neil Sheehan's *A Fiery Peace in a Cold War*) wrongly suggests CIA was clueless in 1955 that the Soviets were developing ICBMs. The CIA, he says, "had been worrying about the wrong gap" (182). In fact, National Intelligence Estimates (NIEs) in 1953 and 1954 had specifically warned of

² The reader is subjected to the same story—a stressed Eisenhower throwing his golf club at his doctor—no less than three times.

³ National Security Council, "Discussion at the 443rd Meeting of the National Security Council, Thursday, May 5, 1960," 5 May 1960, NSC Series, Box 12, Eisenhower Papers, 1953-1961 (Ann Whitman File), Dwight D. Eisenhower Library, Abilene, Kansas, accessed at <http://history.nasa.gov/sputnik/may60.html> on 9 September 2013.

Soviet ICBM development: “We have many indications that the USSR is devoting great effort to its program of development of guided missiles.”⁴

In covering the Soviets’ brutal suppression of revolution in Hungary in 1956, Thomas parrots Tim Weiner’s discredited assertion from *Legacy of Ashes* that CIA’s Radio Free Europe (RFE) encouraged Hungarian revolutionaries to fight Soviet tanks with Molotov cocktails. No RFE Hungarian broadcasts did so.⁵

Even with the book’s shortcomings, Thomas has produced a valuable character study of Dwight Eisenhower and argues persuasively and eloquently that Ike was the indispensable man of his era. As an introduction to the high stakes and stresses of the Cold War in the 1950s, *Ike’s Bluff* would be a good choice for the general reader.



⁴ See, for example, the November 1953 NIE “Soviet Capabilities and Intentions” and the June 1954 NIE “Soviet Capabilities and Main Lines of Policy Through Mid-1959,” reproduced as documents 17 and 21 in Scott Koch, ed., *Selected Estimates on the Soviet Union, 1950-1959* (Washington, D.C.: CIA History Staff, 1993). Available on www.cia.gov.

⁵ “Elegy of Slashes,” 40. A. Ross Johnson, *Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty: The CIA Years and Beyond* (Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2010), 93.