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Review of *Eisenhower: A Life*

By Paul Johnson. New York: Penguin, 2015. Reprint edition. ISBN-13: 978-0143127390

As one of only five men in American history to earn the distinction of being a five-star general in the Army, General Dwight D. Eisenhower's prowess as a military commander has never been doubted by military historians. His record as the 34th President of the United States, however, has been heavily debated among political historians. Immediately following his departure from office in 1961, the histories of Eisenhower's presidency framed him as simpleminded, lazy, and his West Wing as having been run by associates, with the President himself taking a secondary role. Later histories of his presidency, beginning around the 1980s, reassessed Eisenhower's role, casting him as an intelligent, strategic leader with an impressive work ethic. Subsequently, Eisenhower has been consistently rated as one of the ten best presidents in the history of the United States by professional historians and political scientists alike.¹

This trend in the secondary literature to uphold Eisenhower as not only a great military leader but also a great political leader is continued by Paul Johnson in his 2015 biography entitled *Eisenhower: A Life*. In this short yet rich volume, Johnson, a journalist and popular historian who has written more than fifty books, intends to illuminate the characteristics that allowed Eisenhower to succeed as a student, military officer, college administrator, and, ultimately, politician. Also, Johnson aims to demonstrate the active role Eisenhower played in the success of his administration.

¹ For a summary of the debate on the Eisenhower Administration, see: Mary S. McAuliffe's "Eisenhower, the President." *The Journal of American History* 68, no. 3 (1981): 625. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1901942>.

To prove his argument, Johnson follows a traditional biographical model telling the story of Eisenhower's life chronologically. In Part One, Johnson overviews Eisenhower's life from his boyhood in Kansas up until 1941. Parts Two and Three focus on Eisenhower's role as a top military official during World War II and the influential contribution of Eisenhower to the rebuilding of Europe after the Allies' victory. Then, in Part Four, Johnson turns his attention to Eisenhower's tenure as president of Columbia University from 1948 - 1953. The final three parts of *Eisenhower: A Life* are dedicated to the political career of the thirty-fourth President, with Part Five centering on the 1952 presidential election, Part Six on his first term in office (1953-1957) and Part Seven on his second term (1957-1961). Each part is structured to prove Johnson's evaluation of Eisenhower as a smart and diligent man, heavily involved in the political successes of his administration.

Johnson's short biography excels in its ultimate goal of proving to the reader that Eisenhower was more than the original secondary analysis of him indicated. For one, he successfully demonstrates the intellect of the thirty-fourth President. In his discussion of the future President's youth, Johnson highlights Eisenhower's impressive standardized test scores, illuminating the future cadet's wits as well as the author's deft analysis of quantitative data. Also, Johnson repeatedly mentions Eisenhower's 6:00 A.M. wakeup time and 11:00 P.M. end to the working day throughout his professional career (4, 51, 92). He uses this piece of information as evidence of his strong work ethic, which contrasts with the earlier depictions of Eisenhower as a lazy man. He uses Eisenhower's own diary to substantiate this understanding, which is a particularly useful source as it provides a first-hand account of Eisenhower's work schedule. Finally, Johnson successfully portrays Eisenhower as the key decision-maker in his administration. Previous accounts of the Eisenhower Administration painted Secretary of State

John Foster Dulles as the leader in foreign affairs. Johnson refutes this assertion with an excerpt from an interview Johnson had with Dulles himself, in which the latter described himself making a decision without Eisenhower's approval as a "very rare event" (93). Overall, Johnson accomplishes the task at hand by demonstrating, with evidence, the intellect and diligent work ethic of Eisenhower, while also showing the substantive role Eisenhower played in his own administration.

Johnson's work is also impressive for the variety of primary sources he uses to make his argument. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, Johnson utilizes interviews and discussions the author had with various historical figures as evidence. In addition to his discussion with John Foster Dulles, Johnson's conversations with Eisenhower's vice president Richard Nixon provide important insight into the inner workings of the administration (6). Johnson also utilizes the diaries of key figures from Eisenhower's life — including Eisenhower himself — to tell his historical narrative. In sum, Johnson's use of first-hand interviews and diaries are strong primary sources that provide understanding of the Eisenhower Administration and Dwight Eisenhower himself.

While Johnson's work excels in argument development and his choice of primary sources, the author could have made his argument stronger by utilizing previous secondary scholarship to substantiate his analysis. *Eisenhower: A Life* only uses other secondary works to describe the shift in how historians have viewed Eisenhower over time, but Johnson does not use them in his analysis of important historical events. The lack of secondary source utilization by Johnson may be due to the fact that he is a popular historian writing for the general public. Regardless, Johnson's argument could have been more convincing if he employed some of the

existing scholarship on the thirty-fourth President given the legitimacy provided by the use of previous scholarly works.

Although Johnson does not utilize secondary sources to corroborate his argument, his thesis is still quite persuasive and substantiated by excellent analysis of the primary source material. The book is highly-readable and leaves the reader with a much better understanding of Dwight D. Eisenhower as well as the surrounding historical context. All in all, Paul Johnson's short biography provides a succinct overview of Eisenhower's life with critical analysis that leaves one in awe of the statesmanship of General Dwight D. Eisenhower.

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About author

Matthew Chopp is a senior history major at Occidental College in Los Angeles, CA. He enjoys studying history and political philosophy inside the classroom and is an avid Pittsburgh sports fan outside of the classroom. After graduation, Matthew will study for a Master's in Political Theory at the London School of Economics and eventually attend law school.