



# President Dwight Eisenhower, Responsibility, and Restraint of American Power

## Handout A: Narrative

### BACKGROUND

Dwight Eisenhower was the Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces in World War II and had the responsibility of ordering the D-Day invasion in German-occupied Normandy on June 6, 1944. This event led to the massive offensive that pushed Nazi troops out of France and Belgium and back into Germany. Although he was proud of his achievement in helping lead Allied forces over totalitarian armies, Eisenhower had the awful responsibility of seeing hundreds of thousands of men wounded and killed under his command. He knew what he had done was right, but Eisenhower also understood the consequences of going to war.

After the war, Eisenhower served as the president of Columbia University and the commander of NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization in Western Europe) before being elected President of the United States in 1952 and re-elected in 1956. President Eisenhower recognized U.S. global responsibilities as one of the world's superpowers and embraced the Cold War idea of "containment," which meant resisting Soviet expansion around the globe. Eisenhower also authorized the exercise of American power and intervention in countries around the world, especially the covert action of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). However, in several major crises, President Eisenhower restrained from intervening with American military might, even when allies and members of his administration pressured him to do so. In the Korean War, the French fight against the Vietnamese at Dien Bien Phu, the Suez Canal Crisis, and the Chinese bombing of Taiwanese islands, Eisenhower chose not to send American troops into action and accepted the responsibility of those decisions.

### NARRATIVE

In the spring of 1953, President Dwight D. Eisenhower listened impatiently as his Secretary of State John Foster Dulles urged him to win points at the negotiating table with China over the stalemated Korean War. Dulles was proposing using the threat of force or employing actual force in escalating the war. Dulles wanted China to accept American demands concerning American prisoners of war. The president finally sighed and said to Dulles, "It will be impossible to call off the armistice and go to war again. The American people will never stand such a move." The case was closed, and Americans continued to negotiate and won most of their goals. Eisenhower told another advisor, "Sometimes Foster is too worried about being accused of sounding like [Democratic President Harry] Truman and [Secretary of State Dean] Acheson. I think he worried too much about it." When discussing the signed armistice a few weeks later, Eisenhower expressed the belief of many American parents whose children were stationed in Korea when he stated, "The war is over. I hope my son is going to come home soon."

## NARRATIVE

In the fall of 1953, the French General Henri Navarre deployed 15,000 troops in northern Vietnam to the remote mountainous jungle of Dien Bien Phu. Navarre wanted to draw in the Viet Minh guerrilla army and engage them in a set-piece battle (a battle where armies are arranged in formation) in which the French could use their overwhelming firepower. Eisenhower instructed the State and Defense Departments to communicate his concern about the French position for their troops. By stationing their forces in the bottom of the bowl-shaped terrain surrounded by hills and mountains, they ceded the high ground to the enemy.

The Viet Minh took the bait and, contrary to French expectations, were able to haul their artillery pieces up-hill on bikes and the backs of animals before reassembling them atop the hills. They lobbed shells into the surrounded French army and used light anti-aircraft guns to shoot down the lumbering French planes that airlifted supplies. The beleaguered French desperately appealed to Eisenhower and the Americans to send more planes and crews. The president reluctantly sent less than half the number of supply planes the French requested. Senator John Stennis of Alabama complained about Eisenhower's move. "First we send them planes. Then we send them men. We are going to war inch by inch." However, Eisenhower had no such plan.

The French begged Eisenhower to intervene militarily, but he told his staff, "The United States just can't throw its forces against the teeming millions of Asia." Eisenhower ignored the increasingly loud chorus of voices in Congress, the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), and the National Security Council (NSC) calling for intervention by March 1954. Eisenhower refused to act, requesting that Congress declare war before committing troops to the fight. The Dien Bien Phu garrison fell on May 7, and the combatants began a peace conference the next day in Geneva. Although Eisenhower would send money and military supplies to the newly-created South Vietnam, he refused to send American men to fight to save the French colony. Again, Eisenhower exercised restraint in the use of American power. As he said, "To go in unilaterally in Indochina or other areas of the world which were endangered, amounted to an attempt to police the entire world."

In early 1956, Eisenhower faced yet another international crisis that invited American intervention and use of power. Egyptian leader Gamal Abdul Nasser had used more than \$250 million from the United States and Great Britain to build the Aswan Dam along the Nile River. When Nasser decided to buy arms from the Soviet satellite nation Czechoslovakia in March 1956, President Eisenhower was furious. "[Nasser] cannot cooperate as he is doing with the Soviet Union and at the same time enjoy most-favored-nation treatment by the United States," he stated. Congress, for its part, balked on its financial pledge for the dam in May because of Nasser's actions.

Consequently, in July, Nasser seized the Suez Canal that linked the shipping lanes of the Mediterranean and the Red Sea. The British had built, owned, and operated the canal, and were humiliated when Nasser turned it over to the Russians. British Prime Minister Anthony Eden, Eisenhower's old friend, told his country, "We are all agreed that we cannot afford to allow Nasser to seize control of the Canal in this way...We ought in the first instance to bring maximum pressure on Egypt. [But] my colleagues and I are concerned that we must be ready in the last resort to use force to bring Nasser to his senses."

## NARRATIVE

Eisenhower disagreed with using the threat of force and told Eden that, “Initial military successes might be easy, but the eventual price might become far too heavy.” He warned against “the unwisdom even of contemplating the use of military force at the moment.” Nevertheless, the British and French built up their military forces in the Mediterranean and Middle East and also armed Israel to help with the impending invasion of Egypt, which occurred on October 29. Eisenhower told Dulles, “Foster...you tell them we’re going to the United Nations. We’re going to do everything that there is so we can stop this thing.” Eisenhower could not comprehend how easily his allies went to war. “I just don’t know what got into these people,” he complained. Meanwhile, Eden pressed for American intervention and support. Within the administration, Eden had the support of Dulles and the Joint Chiefs who pressured Eisenhower to send U.S. forces. Eisenhower bluntly refused and said, “This we know above all: There are some principles that cannot bend—They can only break. And we shall not break ours.” Without American support, the allies reluctantly withdrew their armies, and the crisis was peacefully resolved.

In 1955 and again in 1958, mainland Communist China fired on the islands of Quemoy and Matsu along the China coast. These islands belonged to the nationalist forces on Taiwan that the United States recognized as the legitimate government of China. In the first crisis, Dulles again suggested that Eisenhower put U.S. power “into the scales” to turn the tide. Characteristically, Eisenhower again refused. Although he went to Congress for an authorization of force and received it by an overwhelming majority, he played a diplomatic game that left the Chinese to wonder what American intentions were. In the end, the crisis was defused without involving American troops in the conflict.

Eisenhower exercised a remarkable amount of restraint in the use of American military power, unlike many other post-World War II U.S. presidents. The United States was a strong nation that represented the free world in the Cold War during his administration, but Eisenhower used military force with a great deal of prudence. As he stated, “I don’t see the point of getting into a fight to which there can be no satisfactory end, and in which the whole world believes you are playing the part of the bully and you do not even have the firm backing of your entire people.” For eight years, Dwight Eisenhower was a responsible president with American foreign policy and military power.