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# Eisenhower

## and the Origins of Unified Command

By DAVID JABLONSKY

**P**resident Dwight Eisenhower outlined his proposal for defense reorganization in 1958. Concerned about unity of command at the highest levels, he focused on unified commands, multi-service combatant structures which divide responsibilities among theaters around the world. Based on his experience in directing complex military operations, Eisenhower thought it unrealistic that the United States could institute a perfect system to address all its security requirements. However he insisted

on a command plan that remained true to the doctrine of unity, clarifying the authority of commanders in chief (CINCs) of unified commands over component commanders and by the President and Secretary of Defense over CINCs.

For over two decades, from his initial assignment in the War Department to his election as President, and as CINC of unified and combined commands, Chief of Staff of the Army, acting Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, or Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces, Eisenhower sustained a consistent approach. "Separate ground, sea, and air warfare is gone forever," he recorded in his 1958 proposal. "If ever again we should be involved in war, we will fight it . . . with all services, as one single concentrated effort."<sup>1</sup> Jointness, he argued, was the key to achieving unity.

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## The Eisenhower Experience

The issue of unity of command over theater operations had its origins in the interwar years when the Joint Board of the Army and Navy prescribed that the fundamental method of interservice coordination was *mutual cooperation*, the one in effect when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. After that disaster, the investigating committee noted, "The inherent and intolerable weaknesses of command by mutual cooperation were exposed."<sup>2</sup> As a result, shortly after Colonel Eisenhower arrived in the War Plans Division at the War Department in 1941, a general consensus existed on the need for unity in the field. Thus Eisenhower soon found himself involved in all aspects of the operations of unified commands.

By the end of World War II no senior officer on either side had more unified and combined command experience than Eisenhower. It is easy to forget today how unique his background was. Before that conflict no American had ever led a vast unified body consisting of armies, navies, and air forces; and none had ever directed an allied command. While unified and combined operations were conducted in other theaters, Eisenhower had the largest and most complex responsibilities.

Between 1945 and 1953 when he assumed the Presidency, Eisenhower served in a number of positions that maintained his focus on unity of command. He garnered experience in far more complicated and less malleable jobs than that of Supreme Commander, Allied Expeditionary Force. During his tenure as the Chief of Staff of the U.S. Army from December 1945 to February 1948, for instance, he engaged in many political-military conflicts as head of a service, an interested party who despite the prestige of being a chief was only one among equals in power. It was a period of frustration. Shortly after assuming this new assignment, he wrote to his son that the position "was a sorry place to light after having commanded a theater of war."<sup>3</sup> Partway through his tenure he observed, "My own method worked well for me when I was a little czar in my own sector. I find it difficult to readjust to the demands of this city."<sup>4</sup>

Eisenhower's unease about his role as a chief of staff largely derived from seeking unity at all levels. In the field, despite agreement on the unified system in peacetime, the Army and Navy disagreed over various areas in the Pacific. Moreover, Eisenhower expanded the debate by arguing for a global structure to achieve "sound unified command arrangements at the earliest possible

time . . . [in] areas in the world where . . . the situation is at least as acute as in the Pacific."<sup>5</sup>

In September 1946 he sent a global unified command plan to the Joint Chiefs of Staff outlining their roles as well as those of unified and component commanders. By early December, an increasingly impatient Eisenhower kept his proposal alive through concessions to make his plan acceptable to the other services. This experience differed from those heady wartime days when as a staff officer he singlehandedly wrote the directive on command of a major Pacific theater of operations.

President Harry Truman approved the first unified command plan in December 1946. Importantly, it retained Eisenhower's proposals on the role of commanders in a global unified plan. Unified commands would consist of two or more components, each led by an officer authorized to communicate directly with service headquarters on administration, logistics, and training matters. Such commands would operate with joint staffs. Finally, the Joint Chiefs would exercise strategic direction as they had in time of war, assigning forces and stipulating missions. They would also follow the practice of designating one chief as executive agent to oversee operations conducted by unified commands. All in all, the first plan was a tremendous accomplishment for Eisenhower and the result of conciliation, compromise, and an ability to overcome service parochialism.<sup>6</sup>

The debate over this plan reflected a question of defense unification that had been festering since early in World War II. Eisenhower's success made a compelling argument for unification at the highest levels with clear and accountable authority down to the unified commanders in the field. "I am convinced," he told Congress in November 1945, "that unless we have unity of direction in Washington through the years of peace that be ahead, we may enter another emergency, in a time to come, as we did in Pearl Harbor." He favored the proposal to unify the services under a single, cabinet-level head, a Secretary of National Defense and single Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces. The Navy, on the other hand, proposed maintaining a committee system to adjust activities of the services and integrate military policies with overall domestic and international requirements.

Both services outlined their proposals before the Senate in October 1945. The War Department plan as presented by General J. Lawton Collins was confusing, particularly the dual relationship of service chiefs as the hierarchical subordinates to the Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces but

**no senior officer on either side had more unified and combined command experience than Eisenhower**

equal to him as members of an advisory JCS. In addition, the command line on the chart which Collins drew showed theater commanders directly under the Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces, implying that he alone would direct operations conducted by CINCs. Collins took great pains to emphasize that a single chief of staff would not have a large staff and that service chiefs would be executive agents for the Joint Chiefs to carry out their directives with operational staffs of their own services. But before the same committee in the Senate some two weeks later, Eisenhower was drawn to the solid command line on the organizational chart. The Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces, he said, should be removed from the chain running from the Secretary to both the service chiefs and theater commanders and depicted in the advisory JCS organizational box as the main adviser to the civilian head. He was sure that was the original intent because, as he told the Senate Committee on Military Affairs, "by drawing him as he appears on the chart, it looks like he is the fabulous man on horseback that we are always talking about."

On December 19, 1945 President Truman delivered a unification message to Congress that clearly favored the single department proposed in

the Collins Plan. Nevertheless, Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal was optimistic as the new year began because the new Army Chief of Staff and his counterpart, Admiral Chester Nimitz, had already begun negotiations that ap-

peared likely to settle what the Secretary called the unification lawsuit. "Eisenhower is a good practical Dutchman and so is Nimitz," Forrestal noted, "and between them I believe we will make progress."<sup>7</sup> Another year would pass, however, before both chiefs and service secretaries arrived at a draft proposal for unification, and even then presidential action was needed on several intractable points. Eisenhower was committed throughout the process to overall unity of command under a civilian secretary. The compromise proposal emerged from Congress on July 26, 1947 as the National Security Act, which created a coordinated defense establishment not unlike that in the Navy model, an organization which Eisenhower characterized as "little more than a weak confederation of sovereign military units."<sup>8</sup> The compromise was notable for the powers provided to the Secretary of Defense, who instead of presiding over a single executive branch department was to head a National Military Establishment consisting of three executive departments, one for each service, under cabinet level secretaries. The services, which now included the Air Force,

retained their essential autonomy as well as roles and missions that had emerged from the war. Importantly, the act made JCS a permanent organization served by a joint staff (limited to 100 officers) with equal numbers from each military department. The Joint Chiefs were given statutory authorization to continue their wartime roles to act as the principal military advisers to both the President and Secretary, prepare strategic plans and provide for the strategic direction of the Armed Forces, and "establish unified commands in strategic areas when such unified commands are in the interest of national security."

Despite his support for a compromise, Eisenhower had reservations over the new national security blueprint. The idea that JCS would continue as a collaborative coordinated body bothered him. As he told a congressional committee, "There is weakness in any council running a war. . . . In war you must have a decision." The point with committees was that "when you get three, you finally get none." One solution was a single chief of staff, a preference that he admitted might be too disruptive.

Meanwhile, Eisenhower argued for joint culture. "When you have kept services apart and you wait until men are fifty before they begin to meet and know much about each other, it is pretty difficult to develop the kind of team play that applies on one of the Knute Rockne football teams." A year later, Eisenhower returned to the theme in a farewell memorandum to Secretary Forrestal. "Someday it will be possible to give to selected officers of the several services 'combined arms' commissions that will transcend in prestige and in public regard anything they could hold of comparable rank in one of the individual services." The memo was also a reminder of the need for an evolutionary approach to the National Security Act. "There should be no hesitancy in using the 'trial and error' method so long as these proceed from minor innovation toward larger and more radical objectives in final result."<sup>9</sup>

Forrestal later asked Eisenhower to serve as his adviser and informal JCS Chairman. From December 1948 to July 1949, Eisenhower was President of Columbia University and Chairman during increasingly tense sessions with the chiefs. As he later recalled, "I was an umpire between disputing services; sometimes a hatchet man on what Fox Conner used to call fool schemes."<sup>10</sup> Forrestal's aim was to use Eisenhower as a senior military adviser interacting with JCS to obtain an amendment to the National Security Act to provide for a permanent Chairman. "With Ike here for sixty days," he

### **Forrestal asked Eisenhower to serve as informal JCS Chairman during tense sessions with the chiefs**





Accepting unconditional  
surrender—May 7, 1945.

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wrote in his diary, “I think we can get the pattern set and prove its workability by pragmatic experience.”<sup>11</sup> But at first Eisenhower favored majority rule, whereby if the chiefs failed three times to reach unanimity the majority view would prevail. But after adjudicating bitter disputes, he changed his mind. “The JCS need a Chairman at the very least—and by that I mean a fourth member who can divorce himself from his service background.”<sup>12</sup>

By that time, Eisenhower was heavily involved in all aspects of the proposed changes to the law. The Chairman, he suggested, should take precedence over all others but be a nonvoting member to “allay suspicions that the man was going to be an arbitrary boss.”<sup>13</sup> Nor should there be any fixed ceiling on the size of the Joint Staff.

On August 10, Truman signed the National Security Amendments of 1949, transforming the

National Military Establishment into the Department of Defense. These amendments, reflecting congressional modifications, remained basically concerned with two issues for which Eisenhower had provided input: increases in the formal authority of the Secretary and the scope of the authority of the Chairman. With regard to the Secretary, the qualifying term *general* was removed from the description of his “direction, authority, and control.” Equally important, the service secretaries lost significant power with their removal from the National Security Council and loss of cabinet status, although they retained the statutory obligation to separately administer military departments.

As for the recommendation that the Chairman head JCS and act as principal adviser to the President and Secretary, Congress agreed that he would preside as a nonvoting member. But the Joint Chiefs and not the Chairman would be the principal advisers and as such would be supported by a Joint Staff with a strength of 210. In addition, although the service secretaries and military chiefs would no longer deal directly with the President or budget director as Eisenhower recommended, they could, after informing the Secretary, take to Congress “any recommendations relating to the Department of Defense.”

Finally, the law prohibited the major combat functions of military departments from being transferred, reassigned, abolished, or consolidated, a provision that reflected continued sensitivity to service roles and missions, a point deliberately not addressed in detail in 1947. This matter had ostensibly been settled by the so-called Key West Agreement negotiated by Forrestal and the chiefs in April 1948, two months after Eisenhower had left as Army Chief of Staff. In fact, the accord reflected growing tension between service component commanders and unified commanders. The overwhelming interest of the chiefs at that conference was protecting service integrity in operational commands involving more than one service. Moreover, the agreement perpetuated the practice of designating one JCS member as executive agent for each unified command.

Compounding the Key West Agreement, the amendments not only forbade the Secretary to interfere with the combat functions of the forces being assigned to unified commands but increased the power of the chiefs as it diminished that of the service secretaries. The chiefs remained individually responsible to their secretaries. Collectively the Joint Chiefs were the principal military advisers of the Secretary of Defense; and because they were the only service departmental representatives given a statutory role in the departmental policy process, they became the spokesmen for their services as they had been during World War II.

Eisenhower saw further evidence of the trend to entrench the power of the chiefs as the first Supreme Allied Commander Europe in 1951. Much of his frustration focused on the Joint Chiefs, who complicated efforts to build a unified structure through rivalry with NATO, refusing to share intelligence, withholding information on atomic weapons, and resisting the transfer of operational control of American units to the Alliance.

### The Presidency

Eisenhower's concern over unity of command virtually assured that defense reorganization would be an immediate priority when he became President in January 1953. It was still a

Eisenhower incorporated this compromise in a message forwarding his reorganization plan. JCS could not effectively plan joint matters while fulfilling responsibilities to service secretaries for efficiency and readiness. One way to further strategic planning and advice by overworked chiefs was to make the Chairman solely responsible for managing the Joint Staff. Moreover, assignment of officers to that staff should be subject to approval by the Chairman.

Eisenhower also wanted to clarify civilian authority. He told Congress that could be done without legislative changes, but rather by altering that part of the Key West Agreement involving executive agency over the unified commands. This practice had led to "considerable confusion and misunderstanding" over the relationship between JCS and the Secretary of Defense and between the service chiefs and their secretaries. As a result he intended to direct the Secretary to revise the Key West Agreement and designate a military department as executive agent for each command. "The channel of responsibility and authority to a commander . . . will unmistakably be from the President to the Secretary of Defense to the designated civilian secretary of a military department." In October 1953 the Secretary issued an executive order that revised the arrangement in accordance with the President's message to Congress.

However, organizational tension continued into Eisenhower's second term, fueled by rising costs coupled with fixed budgets. Moreover, the Soviet launch of Sputnik in October 1957 led to public debate over defense and alarming predictions by independent studies. The President formed several advisory groups on the subject, primarily to reinforce his ideas on unity of command. He also gave DOD reorganization a top priority in his State of the Union address on January 9, 1958.

Eisenhower believed that much remained to be done. War could no longer be waged under separate service efforts. But in the 1947 reorganization, "the lessons were lost, tradition won." In 1949 and 1953 the reforms led to increased centralization and authority on the part of the Secretary of Defense—necessary given the new technology and the Cold War requirements for readiness and deterrence. The process was slowed, however, by predictions of service unification and threats to institutions by a military leader serving as the principal military adviser to the civilian leader.

The theme of Eisenhower's next round of proposals was that unity of command must run from the highest level to theater commands. "The need for greater unity today is most acute at two points—in the Office of the Secretary of Defense and in the major operational commands responsible for actual combat. . . ." In terms of the

question of organizational evolution, as he believed since agreeing to the 1947 compromise. Lessons had been learned through six years of trial by experience. Still Eisenhower had concerns about the lack of full centralized civilian control. Even as the status of the secretaries had declined in the wake of the 1949 act, during the Korean War JCS had returned to its dominant position of World War II, running combat operations and dealing directly with the President over U.N. directives. The new President believed he must reduce the role and political power of JCS, which had already begun to deadlock on reduced budgetary allocations as the Korean War ended.

In February 1953, the President established the Rockefeller Committee to develop specific recommendations on DOD reorganization. Its report continued the general tenor of Eisenhower's criticism, concluding that for the Joint Chiefs "to rise above the particular views of their respective services," they must be removed from command channels and serve only as a planning and advisory staff. But this solution posed a dilemma. Some believed that the only way the Joint Chiefs would transcend parochial interests was to end their service relationships and recommended a hierarchical general staff model that would terminate a dual hat role. Acting solely in a staff capacity for the Secretary, the chiefs would turn naturally to offering national advice. Others opposed a complete separation between operational and planning responsibilities. One compromise was strengthening the Chairman by reorienting the chiefs and their subordinate structures, which stressed a staff role for the Secretary and deemphasized the role of the chiefs as service representatives—but did not end it.

## Eisenhower specifically addressed deficiencies of unified commands that limited the authority over component commands

Discussing Indochina  
with General Ely and  
Admiral Radford, 1954.



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operational level, he specifically addressed the deficiencies of unified commands that limited the authority of CINCs over component commands, their influence on resources, and their ability to promote greater unity of effort in their commands. The solution was to build on the World War II experience and organize forces into truly unified commands as the cutting edge of the entire defense organization.

The key to reform in the field was to clarify command lines from the President to CINCs to avoid confusion of authority and diffusion of responsibility. The existing chain of command from the 1953 reorganization had expanded from the service secretaries to the point that "ultimately the chief of an individual service issues in the name of the Secretary of Defense, orders to a unified commander." That the staff was taking over line responsibilities was self-evident because the role of JCS should be furnishing professional advice and staff assistance to the Secretary. Toward this end, he directed the Secretary to discontinue the use of military departments as executive agents for unified commands. "I consider

this chain of command cumbersome and unreliable in time of peace and not usable in time of war. . . . Clearly, secretaries of military departments and chiefs of individual services should be removed from the command channel."

The result was an operational chain "running from the Commander in Chief and Secretary of Defense directly to unified commands." At the same time, Eisenhower planned to maintain the support channel to CINCs through the military departments which, once relieved of responsibility for operations, could focus on administration, training, and logistics of service forces assigned to unified commands.

Eisenhower recognized that his proposals would require JCS to change. For that body to help the Secretary direct the unified commands, he asked Congress to raise or remove the statutory limit of 210 officers on the Joint Staff and authorize the Chairman to assign duties to that staff and appoint its director. He also proposed that the law



With Admiral Burke  
aboard *USS Saratoga*,  
1957.



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should emphasize that chiefs were authorized to delegate service responsibilities to their vice chiefs, making their JCS role a primary duty. Finally, the President wanted to replace the Joint Staff committee with a new system, creating an integrated operations division with joint directorates that made it easier for the Joint Staff (as it assumed the duties performed by service staffs) to work with similar structures in unified commands.

Hearings on Capitol Hill on modifying the legislation lasted from May to July. Eisenhower met with key leaders and contacted influential persons to marshal support in Congress. The result was a compromise bill that favored the administration position. It granted the President's request for authority concerning service combatant functions but also provided Congress 70 days to reject any transfer or abolition of such functions by simple majority. Eisenhower considered the latter provision "a small hole in the doughnut" because he was authorized to transfer major combatant functions without consulting Congress in an emergency.

There was a similar compromise with the authorization of the Chairman to vote in JCS and

manage the Joint Staff. He was authorized to select that staff (but only *in consultation* with JCS) and manage it (but only *on behalf* of the corporate body). Moreover, the chiefs retained the right to assign duties to the Joint Staff. And there was no way for the President to ignore what he called "legalized insubordination" in the law which authorized service secretaries and chiefs to go directly to Congress with recommendations "they might deem proper." Still, Eisenhower consoled himself with President Grant's reaction to similar circumstances: "I cannot make the comptroller general change his mind, but I can get a new comptroller general."<sup>14</sup>

Balanced against such compromises were the authorization for the Chairman to vote in JCS deliberations, for chiefs to delegate responsibilities to vice chiefs, and for the Joint Staff to expand to 400 officers. Moreover, in terms of the military departments, the term *separately administered* was replaced with the specification that each would be *separately organized* under its secretary with all services functioning under the "direction, authority, and control of the Secretary of Defense." More important for Eisenhower, the law passed in 1958 authorized him, acting through the Secretary of Defense and with the advice of JCS, to establish unified commands, assign their missions,



and determine their force structure. In turn, CINCs were responsible to the President and Secretary for implementing assigned missions. Accordingly, the law gave CINCs full operational command over assigned forces that could only be transferred with presidential approval. At the same time, the respective departments retained responsibility for the administration, training, and support of those component forces. Finally, under a separate executive action, the Secretary discontinued the practice of executive agents for unified commands. Henceforth the chain of command would run from the President through the Secretary of Defense to CINCs.

When he signed the Defense Reorganization Act on August 6, 1958, Eisenhower's positive reaction was understandable because it represented a major shift from the idea of coordination that triumphed in 1947 toward his vision of centralized civilian authority. That authority extended to CINCs in a direct operational line on one hand and in an administrative and support line through the military departments on the other. In theory, both lines were brought together for the Secretary within the JCS advisory system. The Chairman would lead the effort, thus approaching the status of the Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces outlined years earlier by Eisenhower in his interpretation of the Collins Plan. The chiefs would offer expertise on service capabilities to the joint arena while emerging from JCS deliberations with much broader perspectives on national defense in order to discharge their responsibilities. Moreover, the law granted sweeping authority to CINCs.

These changes, however, were deceptive. The military departments and services exercised residual de facto power out of proportion to their new statutory duties. The Office of the Secretary of Defense was still not organized for full integration of service capabilities into the forces required for the missions of unified commands. Nor could the Joint Chiefs, the principal staff contact for CINCs, make meaningful programmatic inputs. As a result, commanders planned missions with assets provided by the services through a process defended by the same services. That left unified commanders with limited influence over assigned forces, leaving the services and thus components with primary control over the structure and readiness of forces for which CINCs were responsible.

The strength and independence of component commands would in many ways ensure that the executive agent role would persist. These problems continued until passage of the Goldwater Nichols Act, a development that Eisenhower

would have understood after his 17-year involvement with unity of command on the national and theater levels. At the signing of the reorganization act in August 1958, he stated that "the law was just another step toward what the majority of experienced military men knew was necessary."<sup>15</sup> JFQ

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Alice C. Cole et al., editors, *The Department of Defense: Documents on Establishment and Organization, 1944–1978* (Washington: U.S. Department of Defense, Historical Office, 1978), p. 175.

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Congress, Joint Committee on the Investigation of the Pearl Harbor Attack, *Report to Congress* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1946), p. 245.

<sup>3</sup> Louis Galambos, editor, *The Papers of Dwight David Eisenhower, Chief of Staff* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1970), vol. 7, no. 552, p. 637.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 8, no. 1465, p. 1683.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 1108, p. 1297. See also no. 1074, p. 1258.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1299; Ronald H. Cole et al., *The History of the Unified Command Plan, 1946–1993* (Washington: Joint Chiefs of Staff, Joint History Office, 1995), p. 13.

<sup>7</sup> Jeffery M. Dorwart, *Eberstadt and Forrestal: A National Security Partnership, 1909–1949* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1991), p. 131.

<sup>8</sup> Cole et al., *Documents*, p. 177.

<sup>9</sup> Galambos, *Papers*, vol. 9, no. 2055, p. 2243. See also Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Final Report of the Chief of Staff United States Army* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1948), p. 20.

<sup>10</sup> Dwight D. Eisenhower, *At Ease: Stories I Tell to Friends* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1967), p. 352.

<sup>11</sup> Walter Millis, editor, *The Forrestal Diaries* (New York: The Viking Press, 1951), p. 540.

<sup>12</sup> Galambos, *Papers*, vol 10, no. 313, note 5, p. 399.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 327, p. 433 and no. 288, p. 358.

<sup>14</sup> Dwight D. Eisenhower, *The White House Years, Waging Peace, 1956–1961* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1965), p. 251.

<sup>15</sup> Cole et al., *Documents*, p. 253.