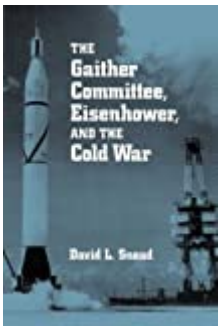
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



David L. Snead. *The Gaither Committee, Eisenhower, and the Cold War.* Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1999. x + 286 pp. $50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8142-5005-1.

Reviewed by Richard H. Immerman (Department of History, Temple University)

Published on H-Diplo (November, 2000)

DUCK and COVER

DUCK and COVER

Examinations of the foreign policies of President Dwight D. Eisenhower – revisionist, postrevisionist, whatever-ist – have over the past several decades consumed an ever-expanding proportion of the available book-shelf space of historians of U.S. foreign relations and international history. Recently, these examinations have increasingly focused on assessments of national security policy writ large, a sub-sub-field which of course includes although is not limited to defense policy and nuclear strategy.[1] As always, in substantial part the progressive release of pertinent archives explains this greater attention to security questions. But I think there is much more to it. Because examining the formulation of national security policy requires assessing the advising and decision-making apparatus, this "genre" addresses the ambiguous relationship between process and product in the Eisenhower administration that bedevils both historians and political scientists – and frequently divides them. Likewise, whereas security policy in the 1950s once appeared so inflexible compared to what followed, each new study seemed to uncover another layer of complexity. The impulse to dig deeper can be irresistible, especially for younger scholars. And then there is the impetus generated by the implosion of the former Soviet Union. Even if produced by ahistorical thinking, the disconnect between revelations about Soviet feebleness and images of American school children engaged in duck and cover exercises begs explication. Can we make sense of the 1950s?

No doubt all these considerations influenced David Snead's decision to write *The Gaither Committee, Eisenhower, and the Cold War.* Because this study originated as his dissertation, Snead's two initial reasons were almost certainly: 1) notwithstanding the significance previous scholars have attributed to the Gaither Report in terms of the nuclear policy and civil defense programs of both Eisenhower and Kennedy, an archivally-based study of its production and consequences remained to be written; and 2) it was now possible to access the archives in order to write this study. Snead makes explicit, however, that he also had more conceptual purposes. First, he hoped to provide additional evidence of the intricacies and effectiveness of Eisenhower's advisory process, particularly

by underscoring the president's formal inclusion of civilian experts. Secondly, Snead sought to demonstrate that, despite something akin to the conventional wisdom, the Gaither Report did in fact have a significant impact on Eisenhower's nuclear policy. Snead achieves his initial goals more successfully than his conceptual ones.

Snead stumbles a bit at the start by introducing his subject in a background chapter entitled "Eisenhower's Core Values and Decision-Making Systems." Not only does this chapter present material that will be extremely familiar to virtually any reader of a book with this title, the effort to compress so much time and information into so few pages produces distortions and even misinformation. Precisely what Snead defines as a "core value" remains obscure, and his tendency to conflate Eisenhower's "core values" with what the National Security Council (a monolith?) "believed" exacerbates this ambiguity. In this regard Eisenhower's strategic thinking, in fundamental respects surely derived from his "core values," receives short shrift. To continue in this vein, the significant attention Snead pays to the Project Solarium juxtaposed with his truncated discussion of the exercise itself and exaggerated estimate of its role in the formulation of NSC 162/2 distorts both the policy-making and decision-making process (a distinction that Snead neglects to draw). By glossing over the production and adoption of NSC 149/2 (Basic National Security Policies and Programs in Relation to Their Costs), Snead both sacrifices an opportunity to assess the influence of Eisenhower's fiscal conservatism on security policy (which in my opinion he overstates) and neglects a precedent-setting use of civilian advisors, a phenomenon central to this examination. What Snead attempts to accomplish in this brief chapter, in short, is to encapsulate Eisenhower's "core values," describe the administration's policy- and decision-making processes, and to provide the historical context necessary to evaluate the Gaither report by identifying way stations leading up to the Commission's establishment. This order is too tall to fill.

The valuable contribution of this book begins to emerge with the second chapter. From here on Snead carefully and systematically presents the immediate antecedents to the establishment of the Gaither committee, discusses in unparalleled detail its membership and recommendations (documentation on its deliberations remain inaccessible), and explicitly assesses the consequences and implications of its report. By doing so, Snead adds an important dimension to the ever-more complete narrative concerning the controversy over the "Missile Gap" and the evolution of nuclear strategy and security policy under Kennedy and Johnson. [2]

The basic outlines of the story are readily summarized. By the start of Eisenhower's second term in office, his administration's emphasis on the role of nuclear weapons as the most effective deterrent to Soviet adventurism and, consequently, the world's best hope for avoiding general war while promoting security had been subject to intense criticism. Members of Congress and the military, journalists, scholars, and others charged Eisenhower (or more often than not the president's lightning rod, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles) with an unconscionable failure to appreciate adequately the strategic challenges of the nuclear age, thereby exposing the United States to the risk of both attack and blackmail even as the vulnerability of U.S. allies and neutrals increased. In at least partial response, Eisenhower set up in the spring of 1957 a panel of civilian experts to examine the adequacy of the existing civil defense programs. James Killian, MIT president and a member of the recently established Science Advisory Committee, recommended that H. Rowan Gaither, Jr., a leading light at the RAND Corporation and Ford Foundation, head up the panel. Gaither apparently received authority to select the soon-to-be-called Gaither committee's membership. Among those he chose were Killian, Robert Sprague, William Foster, James Doolittle, George Lincoln, and Paul Nitze. Lincoln and Nitze ultimately did most of the report's writing.

While none of the above committee members will be strangers to most readers of Snead's book, the short biographies of each that he provides are nevertheless useful. What he does not provide, however, is an evaluation of the process and criteria used to select them. This oversight is unfortunate, because it bears directly on the outcome. Snead *may* be right, although frankly I have my suspicions, that "As a group they [members of the committee] did not enter the Gaither study with a set agenda. . . ." He is *certainly* right when he writes in his next sentence that they ". . . did share a concern for U.S. national security that went beyond their support for Eisenhower or his policies." (p.11) In fact, phrased less euphemistically, the Gaither committee was composed overwhelmingly of alarmist critics of the Eisenhower administration who considered his policies and programs complacent and penurious to the point of folly. Within this environment they could operate in the absence of virtually any buffers.

Hence, at least in hindsight it was highly predictable not only that the committee would exceed its man-

date, but also that its conclusions and recommendations would rapidly leak to the public. Nitze, the primary author of the report, argued from the inception that the ". . . Gaither committee [should] view its report as a unique opportunity to offer an alternative national security strategy to the president's policies." (p.113) As fate would have it in light of its members' predisposition toward Armageddon-type scenarios, the Gaither committee submitted its report to the NSC in November 1957, only days after the second of the infamous Sputnik launches and weeks before the humiliating explosion on take-off of a Vanguard missile. For Nitze and the others, this timing could not have been more appropriate. The report lambasted the Eisenhower civil and continental defense programs as inadequate. Their inadequacy placed America's population in grave danger of annihilation. No less imperiled were America's strategic forces, and thus the second strike capability on which effective deterrence depended. Accordingly, the report urged that the administration immediately undertake programs to strengthen America's defensive and offensive capabilities. Specifically, the United States must enlarge its nuclear missile and delivery systems, enhance its ability to wage "limited war," reorganize its defense establishment, and finance the construction of a comprehensive network of civilian fall-out shelters. No expense should be spared. The estimated cost of implementing the report's recommendations between 1959 and 1963 was close to $45 billion. This was a price America could and should pay; its very survival hung in the balance.

The report became public a little more than a month later. The headline of Chalmers Robert's front-page story in the *Washington Post* on December 20, 1958 read, "SECRET REPORT SEES U.S. IN GRAVE PERIL." (p.139). Snead, who underplays politics throughout this study, neglects to mention that it was Roberts who received during the Dienbienphu crisis of 1954 the "leak" that credited the Democrats for "The Day We Didn't go to War." Still, it takes little effort to connect the Gaither Report to allegations of a Missile Gap during the 1960 campaign to the victorious Democrats' military programs which provided substance to Kennedy's promise to "bear any burden."

Snead's evident perseverance in locating archival material is impressive. He tells the story like no one has before him. His analysis of this story, however, suffers from serious problems. To begin with, his effort to use the Gaither committee and report to enhance our evaluations of Eisenhower's advisory system is flawed. Snead's primary emphasis is on the value Eisenhower placed in soliciting the input of civilian experts. Eisenhower unquestionably valued civilian input. But why he did so is less clear. A closer examination than Snead provides of Eisenhower's prior use of civilian advisors reveals that the president tended to select civilians with whom he disagreed to participate formally in the advisory process, and then reject their advice. It is very possible, therefore, and I would argue very probable, that Eisenhower invited this input as much to co-opt his critics as to benefit from their recommendations. He could claim publicly that his mind was not closed to informed suggestions, that he solicited different points of view – bipartisan points of view – but their arguments proved unpersuasive. By allowing critics to contribute to his decision making process, Eisenhower made them complicit in the decisions that he eventually made.

Given that Eisenhower's strategic thinking was so much at odds with the essentials of the Gaither report, and given that one could be quite confident that because of the biases of the committee's membership the report would be at odds with Eisenhower's thinking, it is difficult to imagine that Eisenhower's decision to establish the committee was not at a minimum somewhat influenced by this tactic. If this was the case, several critical questions need to be addressed. Did Eisenhower really believe that an explosive report like the one the Gaither committee was sure to produce could be kept a secret? Was he naive, or was he misled by the Solarium precedent? Or, either because of his health or other demands on his time and attention, did Eisenhower and his close advisors drop the ball by failing to monitor the selection of the committee members? Whatever the cause, from Eisenhower's perspective the Gaither "process" seemed to have spun out of his control. That it did should give pause to some of the Eisenhower revisionists, like myself, who applaud Eisenhower's process. Snead appears to recognize this by cryptically referring in his conclusion to the Eisenhower model of leadership praised by Fred Greenstein. Yet not only does Snead leave his argument undeveloped, but he also mischaracterizes Greenstein's. Greenstein wrote of Eisenhower's "hidden-hand" approach, not "hands-off," as Snead suggests. (191) The connotations of "hands-off" and "hidden-hand" are very different connotations.[3]

Snead also comes up short in his effort to challenge conventional wisdom by demonstrating that the Gaither report *did* influence Eisenhower's security policy. The basis of the argument is that Eisenhower to a greater or lesser extent – mostly greater –adopted all of the recommendations except for those concerning the construction of fall-out shelters and the expansion of limited

war-fighting capabilities. He did increase defense spending, he did more rapidly bring on line the various missile systems that were in varying stages of development (Thor and Jupiter IRBMs; Atlas and Titan ICBMs; Polaris SLBMs); he did approve initiatives intended to safeguard the U.S. second-strike capability by building early warning radar systems and dispersing missile sites. Thus, Snead concludes, the Gaither committee significantly affected Eisenhower's policies as well as Kennedy's.

I am not convinced, and not simply because the gaps in the available archival record prevent Snead from directly connecting the Gaither recommendations to Eisenhower's decisions. Of more consequence, those aspects of the Gaither report that Eisehower "accepted" all concerned deterrence – the heart of his existing policy. To Eisenhower, nothing was more vital than the security of the second strike capability. Perhaps the report to a small degree intensified the administration's urgency in implementing some programs, but Eisenhower's policy and strategy remained unchanged. Unlike Kennedy, he continued to believe that measures designed to provide for a "flexible response" were an invitation to aggression and general war. And to build fall-out shelters to survive a general war betrayed a woeful misunderstanding of the nuclear predicament. The Gaither report was an irritant to Eisenhower as opposed to a variable in his strategic equation.

Shortcomings aside, *The Gaither Committee, Eisenhower, and the Cold War* demands a wide readership. It is a book that had to be written. Snead warrants our gratitude for writing it.

Notes

[1]. For example, see Saki Dockrill, *Eisenhower's New Look National Security Policy, 1953-1961* (NY: St. Martin's Press, 1996); Robert R. Bowie and Richard H. Immerman, *Waging Peace: How Eisenhower Shaped an Enduring Cold War Strategy* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1998); Campbell Craig, *Destroying the Village: Eisenhower and Thermonuclear War* (NY: Columbia University Press, 1998).

[2]. Recent contributions to this narrative include Peter J. Roman, *Eisenhower and the Missile Gap* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995); Andreas Wenger, *Living with Peril: Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Nuclear Weapons* (NY: Rowman and Littlefield, 1997; Meena Bose, *Shaping and Signaling Presidential Policy: The National Security Decision Making of Eisenhower and Kennedy* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 1998).

[3]. Fred I. Greenstein, *The Hidden-Hand Presidency: Eisenhower as Leader* (NY: Basic Books, 1982.

Citation: Richard H. Immerman. Review of Snead, David L., *The Gaither Committee, Eisenhower, and the Cold War.* H-Diplo, H-Net Reviews. November, 2000.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=4712