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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

Ike’s Other Warning

By MAX BLUMENTHAL

In this summer of town hall disruptions and birth-certificate controversies, a summer when it seemed as if the Republican Party had been captured by its extremist wing, it is worth recalling a now-obscure letter from President Dwight D. Eisenhower.

Although Eisenhower is commonly remembered for a farewell address that raised concerns about the “military-industrial complex,” his letter offers an equally important — and relevant — warning: to beware the danger posed by those seeking freedom from the “mental stress and burden” of democracy.

The story began in 1958, when Eisenhower received a letter from Robert Biggs, a terminally ill World War II veteran. Biggs told the president that he “felt from your recent speeches the feeling of hedging and a little uncertainty.” He added, “We wait for someone to speak for us and back him completely if the statement is made in truth.”

Eisenhower could have discarded Biggs’s note or sent a canned response. But he didn’t. He composed a thoughtful reply. After enduring Senator Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin, who had smeared his old colleague Gen. George C. Marshall as a Communist sympathizer, and having guarded the Republican Party against the newly emergent radical right John Birch Society, which labeled him and much of his cabinet Soviet agents, the president perhaps welcomed the opportunity to expound on his vision of the open society.

“I doubt that citizens like yourself could ever, under our democratic system, be provided with the universal degree of certainty, the confidence in their understanding of our problems, and the clear guidance from higher authority that you believe needed,” Eisenhower wrote on Feb. 10, 1959. “Such unity is not only logical but indeed indispensable in a successful military organization, but in a democracy debate is the breath of life.”

Eisenhower also recommended a short book — “The True Believer” by Eric Hoffer, a self-educated itinerant longshoreman who earned the nickname “the stevedore philosopher.” “Faith in a holy cause,” Hoffer wrote, “is to a considerable extent a substitute for the lost faith in ourselves.”

Though Eisenhower was criticized for lacking an intellectual framework or even an interest in ideas, he was drawn to Hoffer’s insights. He explained to Biggs that Hoffer “points out that dictatorial systems make one contribution to their people which leads them to tend to support such systems — freedom from the necessity of informing themselves and making up their own minds concerning these tremendous complex and difficult questions.” The authoritarian follower, Eisenhower suggested, desired nothing more than insulation from the pressures of a free society.
Alluding to Senator McCarthy and his allies, Eisenhower pointed out that cold war fears were distorted and exploited for political advantage. “It is difficult indeed to maintain a reasoned and accurately informed understanding of our defense situation on the part of our citizenry when many prominent officials, possessing no standing or expertness as they themselves claim it, attempt to further their own ideas or interests by resorting to statements more distinguished by stridency than by accuracy.”

It is worth noting, of course, that these Cold War exaggerations weren’t just a Republican specialty: John F. Kennedy was making a supposed “missile gap” between the United States and the Soviet Union a key element of his presidential campaign.

In closing his letter, Eisenhower praised Biggs for his “fortitude in pondering these problems despite your deep personal adversity.” Perhaps it was the president’s sense of solidarity with a fellow soldier that prompted him to respond to Biggs with such care; and perhaps it was his experience as supreme commander of Allied forces in Europe that taught him that the rise of extreme movements and authoritarianism could take root anywhere — even in a democracy.

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