



Be like Ike

Eisenhower's approach to building the interstate system offers lessons

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Nineteen months into his first term, President Dwight Eisenhower, quoting an unnamed "former college president," advised a public audience: "I have two kinds of problems, the urgent and the important. The urgent are not important, and the important are never urgent."

In warning his successors that they've "got one year" to get their program through Congress, President Lyndon Johnson was making a case for the urgency of the important. Eisenhower distinguished the urgent from the important. He was noted for his calm in the face of urgent demands. Richard Nixon recalled that Eisenhower was always "the coolest man in the room." Unlike Johnson, Eisenhower pursued his most important objectives with little sense of urgency.

But from both Allied headquarters and the White House, Eisenhower preceded the pursuit with meticulous planning, beginning early. Hence Eisenhower and Johnson fundamentally agreed: The first year is of unique and decisive importance. But there is more than one way to get the first year right.

Eisenhower's greatest domestic policy achievement came in his fourth year. The Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956 launched the most ambitious infrastructure project ever undertaken. As his administration's most enduring legacy, in 1990 the highway network was named the Dwight D. Eisenhower National System of Interstate and Defense Highways. Success in 1956, however, depended on a White House strategy Eisenhower began implementing soon after his electoral triumph of November 4, 1952.

Over the next four years, Eisenhower showed how a president can use the first year to achieve legislative success later in the first term, at a time that will best contribute to reelection, even when the opposing party has majorities in both houses of Congress.

- Year 1: Organize a strategy led by trusted insiders who command respect in and out of the White House
- Year 2: Use these leaders to build coalitions of business groups and governors and unite them behind a plan
- Year 3: Present the united plan to Congress, negotiating to find common interests that cross party lines
- Year 4: Reap the legislative yield

Although an extraordinary achievement by any standard, the interstate highways—especially their urban segments—were and remain controversial. In private, Eisenhower agreed with critics who warned the urban interstates would tear cities' social fabric. This experience and others like it taught the president lessons he saved for the largest audience he could reach, in the most important speech of his career. In his farewell address of January 17, 1961, he presented the hard-earned lessons of eight years in the White House. The message was not only a caution to the American people; it was sound advice for future presidents. Together, Eisenhower's private reservations about the urban segments of the interstates and his public cautions about undue business influence on public policy suggest that if he could have repeated his first year, he would have made one important change: To maintain control over the policy agenda and keep the weeds of opportunism from crowding the crops of policy, the president's advisors must report important changes in the plan during the coalition-building process.

The general

Eisenhower's years as an Army officer taught him the value of three virtues: organization, planning, and patience. In his first year in the White House, Eisenhower institutionalized them, and they served him well.

Eisenhower was an organizer. Following his election, the new president, in his own words, was determined to "organize the White House for efficiency." He admitted that "organization cannot make a genius out of an incompetent," but "on the other hand, disorganization can scarcely fail to result in inefficiency and can easily lead to disaster." He organized his White House accordingly. A relatively lean and durable staff, many of them former military officers (including six generals) who had known Eisenhower for years, maintained close working relationships with members of Congress. To Eisenhower, organization was the necessary preparation for successful planning.

Eisenhower was a planner. As supreme commander of the Allied Expeditionary Force, he famously restrained his more aggressive and less risk-averse colleagues, Field Marshall Montgomery and General Patton. Such restraint was evident in 1953 as well. Although interstate highways were among Eisenhower's highest domestic political priorities, he gave them little attention in his first year. Lieutenant Colonel Bryce Harlow, a congressional liaison for the Eisenhower White House, explained: "A president cannot have too many congressional issues

that are ‘presidential’ at one time. Otherwise none of them are presidential, and all of them suffer.” To Eisenhower, success required a sustainable pace, executed in accordance with a plan.

Eisenhower was patient. Privately, Eisenhower feared “the inability of men to forego immediate gain for a long time good.” Both as supreme commander and as a civilian commander in chief, he earned a reputation for caution, and for preparing carefully before acting. D-Day followed more than a year of planning. Eisenhower did little to further his infrastructure agenda in his first year. His priorities lay elsewhere—particularly in foreign affairs, and above all in Korea. But Eisenhower invested the time into organizing and planning. The strategy paid off.

Year 1: The team

To Eisenhower, success required a disciplined White House organization of trusted insiders to whom he could delegate assignments. They worked outside of cabinet departments, so were not subject to Senate confirmation. They built coalitions with powerful business groups, governors, and segments of the general public. Once these alliances were in place, the president could then take his agenda to Congress from a position of strength. This gave him sufficient support among Democrats to offset his own party’s minority standing and Republican opponents.

Eisenhower sometimes resented Senate review of his appointments. A week before he took office, he chose Nebraska’s Val Peterson to serve as ambassador to India, and got the Indian government’s blessing for the choice. But to his dismay, Nebraska’s two Republican senators publicly announced they would try to block Senate confirmation, on grounds that the choice was “personally obnoxious” to them. Eisenhower was offended, but withdrew the nomination to spare Peterson the snub. For the new president, who was already uneasy about dealing with Congress, the affront reinforced his distaste for working through Congress, particularly on executive matters. Eisenhower recalled: “This seemed indefensible to me.” He told both Nebraska senators that he “emphatically disapproved of their attitude.”

Eisenhower preferred to work with people the Senate could not review. The most important players were his trusted personal advisors. Over its eight years, Eisenhower’s White House staff included six generals. Typical members of Eisenhower’s staff had longevity; 12 of them served through both terms.

Eisenhower did not ignore Congress in his first year. To the contrary, he believed relations with key congressmen and senators had to be cultivated before he could depend on them. D-Day was not just Day One of the invasion; it was also the final day of many months of meticulous preparation. Similarly, Eisenhower did not land major legislative proposals on the shores of Congress until he had organized the operation and prepared the objective. This was the responsibility of his White House congressional liaison staff, led by General Wilton Persons. Eisenhower had known “Jerry” Persons for more than 20 years and they were close; indeed, Eisenhower painted Persons’s portrait as a gift to him. Through the congressional liaisons Persons managed, the Eisenhower Administration negotiated with Congress discreetly and almost continuously, without undue pressure on the president himself. He thereby avoided open confrontations with a Congress his party did not control.

Year 2: The coalition

Eisenhower opposed “New Dealism,” distrusted politicians and bureaucrats, and demanded executive control. These values guided him in his coalition-building effort, and led him to depart from the strategies of his predecessors.

Federal aid for paved interstate motor roads dates to 1916. Responsibility lay in the Bureau of Public Roads, housed usually in the Commerce Department. Its dynamic chief, Thomas H. MacDonald, was a zealous advocate of good roads and adept at building business support for his agency. Consistent with most of the interest groups behind interstate roads, MacDonald opposed tolls, preferring “free” (toll-free) roads. Under Roosevelt, MacDonald’s agency proposed an ambitious network of toll-free interstate highways. The bureau’s major reports went directly to Congress. Through the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1944, Congress approved a bureau proposal for an interstate network and authorized funds, but actual appropriations were slow in coming. Meanwhile, as rail and transit systems were neglected and suburbs proliferated, prohighway interest groups cited the popularity of the automobile, traffic congestion, and traffic fatalities as evidence that more highways were urgently needed.

Eisenhower had taken a personal interest in better roads when he crossed the country in an Army road convoy in 1919, witnessing poor conditions firsthand. As a candidate in 1952, Eisenhower told the Hearst newspapers: “The obsolescence of the nation’s highways presents an appalling problem of waste, danger and death.”

But an interstate system would have to be funded, and any funding method would compete with states’ mechanisms for funding their own roads. Most governors were suspicious of such federal intrusion. Unlike MacDonald, Eisenhower, who ran in 1952 on a platform of spending cuts and tax reduction, favored toll roads where possible. Other interstates would be funded through bond issues. To shield the national debt, gasoline tax revenues would go into a special off-budget fund that would continuously pay off the bonds.

Thus, Eisenhower abandoned precedents set by Roosevelt and Truman, who had let MacDonald direct the federal-aid road effort. MacDonald left the Bureau of Public Roads two months after Eisenhower was sworn into office. Eisenhower’s interstate highway effort would be led from the White House, would be less bureaucratic, and would consider tolls. But some powerful prohighway groups opposed tolls, fiscal conservatives saw the proposed highway fund as an accountant’s trick to conceal debt, and many governors did not want federal gas taxes competing with their own state gas taxes. Despite broad interest in highways, such divisive matters threatened any particular program.

Before Eisenhower could go to Congress with a program, therefore, he had to build a strong coalition. He began with the states. In July 1954, he sent Vice President Richard Nixon to the annual governors’ conference to deliver the president’s appeal to “recommend to me the cooperative action you think the federal government and the 48 states should take . . . so that I can submit positive proposals to the next session of Congress.” To coordinate governors’ advice and to secure business support, Eisenhower—consistent with his usual methods—put a trusted military friend in charge of a special committee. As chairman of the President’s Advisory

Committee on a National Highway Program, General Lucius Clay put together a plan for federal bond issues that would be paid off by gas tax revenues.

Year 3: Congress

Eisenhower faced a Congress he could not count on. Even in 1953 and 1954, when the Republicans held slim majorities in both houses, he faced significant Republican opposition to his agenda. For all eight years, Eisenhower depended on bipartisan support for the success of his programs. In 1953 he wrote privately: "The particular legislators who are most often opposing Administration views are of the *majority* party."

Eisenhower compensated by exploiting his popularity. "Eisenhower was so popular," Lyndon Johnson said, that "whoever was supporting him would be on the popular side." In retirement, Nixon confirmed Johnson's assessment. But Eisenhower could not depend on his popularity alone. By the time his highway agenda reached Congress, the Clay plan was in trouble. Prohighway groups saw it as a grab for more gas tax money with no guarantee that the revenues would be committed solely to highways. Fiscal conservatives saw it as an expansion of the federal budget and tax power. In summer 1955, the first proposed highway bills died, and negotiations foundered.

Over the next year friends of the interstate highway program worked together to find another way. To appease fiscal conservatives, there would be no bonds. Instead, gas tax revenues would be spent directly on roads on a "pay as you go" basis through a "Highway Trust Fund." The federal share for interstate highways would rise from 50 percent to 90 percent, overcoming states' reluctance to accept a greater federal role by reducing their costs. And to appease the critics of tolls, the interstate system would permit tolls only on those built segments of the network that were already toll roads, and even then, only if a toll-free alternative route existed. Meanwhile the Bureau of Public Roads published a book of maps plotting promised urban interstates in the cities in 42 states, distributing it to all members of Congress. The compromises worked, and the 1956 highway bill won broad bipartisan support. On June 29, Eisenhower signed the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956.

The hazards of success

Eisenhower's practice of delegating authority to trusted associates worked well for him, but there was a cost. His well-organized White House system could run so smoothly that he did not have to monitor it closely. Left on its own, however, it could take a course the president disapproved of, forming alliances of expediency that shifted authority away from the president. The president's displeasure at such losses of control is implicit in his farewell address. In condemning the "military-industrial complex," Eisenhower was also admitting the limits of the president's power and recognizing competing sources of leadership. Privately, Eisenhower held similar misgivings about the loss of control of the highway program, and his White House's responsibility for it.

The president's advisors had his confidence to such an extent that they sometimes acted on his behalf without consulting him. To Eisenhower, such initiative was a valuable benefit of

delegation. It was not only a practical convenience; the president's health emergencies, and particularly his prolonged convalescence following his 1955 heart attack, made it a necessity.

But Eisenhower was sometimes angered to discover that his subordinates, to win the support they needed, had made decisions in his name that he opposed. This problem may have been compounded by Eisenhower's preference for strict organization. One Eisenhower staffer recalled: "Our White House was so compartmentalized, and we were so intent on not minding our colleagues' business." Surprises included the proposal for Alaska statehood, which Eisenhower personally opposed. By the time he learned his staff had accepted statehood, he was too late to stop it.

Eisenhower had a similar unwelcome surprise about the interstates. In 1955 the president's own Bureau of Public Roads drafted urban interstate routes that would cut through dozens of cities. They were expensive, disruptive, and controversial. Many were very destructive. But the president was apparently unaware of the urban highway plans. Once the demolitions to make way for these routes began, many local residents, intellectuals, and the popular press were outraged.

In 1959, Eisenhower put yet another general in charge of a committee to look into the matter. The committee chair, General John Bragdon, warned the president that the urban interstates served local more than national needs and were too expensive. Eisenhower agreed. Bragdon took the matter up with the Bureau of Public Roads, where his recommendations were not well received. The controversy simmered unconstructively. Finally, in April 1960, the president met with General Bragdon and Bureau leaders. The imprecise minutes indicate that Eisenhower was angry about the urban segments, but it was too late to thwart them.

Eisenhower repeatedly condemned "the unbearable selfishness of vested interest." In private and in public, in his diaries, letters, and speeches, he expressed alarm at such "concentration of power" from "selfish pressure groups," which, "when allowed to dominate," are "fully capable of destroying individual freedom." This conviction endured. In his farewell address, Eisenhower warned that concentrations of power tend to disrupt "balance," using the word nine times in under 16 minutes. By then, "imbalance" was one of the most common accusations against the urban interstates. Blame was typically attributed to the influence of "vested interests," and the usual prescription was "balance." At least privately, Eisenhower's doubts about the "military-industrial complex" applied also to the interstates, where coalitions of industry groups forged alliances of convenience with legislators and government agencies. In the 1960s and 1970s, presidents and Congress took small and belated steps to implement such balance (the word proliferated) in urban transportation.

The Eisenhower corollary to the Johnson first-year doctrine

Eisenhower's administration confirms the validity of Johnson's dictum: a new president has just one year in which to make an administration a success. But Eisenhower and Johnson were among the most dissimilar leaders ever to serve as presidents. Johnson was a partisan politician, a legislative leader, and a demanding negotiator. Eisenhower was a general with an aversion to partisan politics, a managerial executive, and a coalition builder. Eisenhower, moreover, did not admire Johnson. In private, the retired Eisenhower said of him: "That fellow's such a phony." It

is unsurprising, therefore, that Eisenhower's variant of Johnson's first-year doctrine is substantially different—and no less valid.

Eisenhower's administration demonstrates that a president who invests the first year of the first term in developing and implementing a strategy for success can reap major legislative victories late in the term. This Eisenhower corollary to the Johnson first-year doctrine has practical advantages. As Johnson's own example demonstrates, a president who excels in the first year may lose momentum long before the opportunity for reelection, when such accomplishments are no longer current events. In 1964–65, Johnson's approval ratings were among the best ever recorded, and never fell below 60 percent. But they eroded steadily thereafter, hovering stubbornly in the low 40s by 1967–68. Eisenhower's first-term approval ratings were durably high, beginning at about 70 percent and staying there all four years. Achieved four months before the election of 1956, the Federal-Aid Highway Act contributed to Eisenhower's overwhelming reelection victory in 1956, when he earned 57 percent of the popular vote, improving on his excellent 1952 performance. At the time, it was the fifth best election performance since 1824, when popular votes were first fully tallied.

Conversely, an urgent press for major legislation in the first year, before careful preparation, can backfire. In the first year of his first term, with Democratic majorities in both houses of Congress, President Bill Clinton chose Hillary Clinton to lead his administration's health care agenda. The White House effort was energetic and persistent. Eight months into his first term, Bill Clinton addressed Congress personally, striving for support for the plan. But 12 months later the effort had failed, and indeed it contributed to major Republican gains in Congress in the 1994 elections.

Despite facing a Congress controlled by the opposition party, despite prioritizing foreign policy in his first year, despite a commitment to limit bureaucracy and the federal budget, and despite a personal distaste for congressional politics, Eisenhower achieved, in his first term, one of the most ambitious domestic policy achievements of any presidency. His success offers practical lessons to the next administration in Washington—an administration that, like his, will face an overstretched budget. It will also face a federal gas tax that has shrunk steadily in real terms for almost a quarter century, and an aging transportation infrastructure. Eisenhower's first-year strategy prepared him to master challenges of this kind, and a strategy like it may be the key to success in the next administration.

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