



AN AILING IKE

How Eisenhower's Health Affected His Role in the 1960 Election

By John W. Malsberger

By the time Richard M. Nixon ran for the presidency in 1960, considerable evidence already existed to suggest to the casual observer that he and Dwight D. Eisenhower, the President he had served for eight years, had less than a warm and trusting relationship.

Their difficulties began only weeks after

the team of "Ike and Dick" had formed in 1952, when allegations that Nixon was the beneficiary of a "secret rich men's" slush fund nearly forced him off the GOP ticket.

Four years later, as Eisenhower prepared to run for reelection, he advised Nixon to "chart your own course," advice that many interpreted as a clumsy attempt to "dump" Nixon as his running mate.

Throughout his presidency, moreover, Eisenhower made no secret of his desire to cultivate a group of young Republicans who would be capable of leading the country when he retired. And although Nixon's name was always on Eisenhower's list of Republican "comers," it was rarely at the top.

Nixon's 1960 campaign produced more evidence of their difficult relationship, in-

Opposite: President Dwight Eisenhower campaigns for Vice President Richard Nixon in Virginia during the 1960 presidential race, undated. Nixon chose to limit the President's speech making role, likely out of concern for his health.

cluding controversy over the GOP platform and the administration's fiscal policy.

Thus, when Nixon chose to limit Eisenhower's role to a few speeches at the very end of the campaign, a decision that frustrated and privately angered the general, many saw it as further proof of their unusual partnership.

Theodore H. White, in his bestselling *The Making of the President, 1960*, argued, for example, that the decision was deliberate. "[T]he Nixon people and Nixon himself, who had been treated like boys for so many years by the Eisenhower people, . . . itched to operate on their own, to direct the Republican Party as they had yearned so long to do."

However, in Nixon's own memoirs published nine years after Eisenhower's death, he explained that he decided to limit the general's campaign appearances in 1960 after he received phone calls in late October from the President's wife and the White House physician, Dr. Harold McCrum Snyder.

Nixon claimed that both asked that their calls remain secret and warned him that the President's health could not tolerate an expanded speaking schedule. Because Nixon was the only source for this claim, historians have often dismissed it as another self-serving assertion Nixon concocted to cover up his own mistake.

New York Times columnist Tom Wicker, in his 1991 book, *One of Us: Richard Nixon and the American Dream*, reverted to the interpretation first broached by White. "Nixon surely wanted to be seen as having won the presidency in his own right, and not owing to an Eisenhower blitz; he was tired of being obscured by Eisenhower's giant shadow—so tired that he made another mistake

President Eisenhower greets Vice President Richard Nixon at the White House in April 1958. The two had a less than warm relationship, but the President was willing to help in the 1960 presidential campaign.

in judgment, to limit the president's campaigning," Wicker wrote.

Too much evidence exists to deny that Nixon did chafe under the mentorship of Eisenhower, as many have argued, or that the political partnership of "Ike and Dick" was not built solidly on a foundation of trust and mutual respect. But the medical diary kept by Dr. Snyder does make it possible to lay to rest one aspect of their relationship.

It is clear that Nixon did want to make greater use of Eisenhower in the 1960 campaign but was dissuaded from doing so by genuine concerns raised by Dr. Snyder and Mamie Eisenhower over the state of the general's health.

Eisenhower Warns Nixon On Hikes in Defense Spending

As they vied for the Democratic presidential nomination in the early months of 1960, Senators John F. Kennedy and Stuart Sym-

ington attacked the Republican record of the previous eight years by playing on the public's concerns with national security.

Charging that Eisenhower's desire to balance the budget had produced a "missile gap" with the Soviet Union, Democrats argued for a sizable increase in defense spending. Although the President continued to insist that the U.S. missile defense was more than adequate to protect the nation, the Democratic charges put pressure on Nixon to break with his mentor on this issue. But when Nixon signaled a willingness to concede the need for higher defense spending, Eisenhower quickly quashed the idea.

Through a series of phone calls with the Vice President, the general maintained that any platform language calling for increased defense spending would be a repudiation of his administration's record. And he tartly reminded Nixon that he would continue to be the President until January 1961 and



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January 13, 1960.



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In the conduct of a national political campaign there are two distinct parts: (1) The support of the Presidential ticket; (2) The effort to elect all other candidates, both on the Congressional level and on the state and local level.

The National Chairman is of course concerned with both these purposes, but principal responsibility for the conduct of the Presidential campaign must be borne by the Presidential nominee -- or his designated representative. Many speakers may be available for both divisions of the campaign, but the nominee for the Presidency should himself make sure that there is a group of speakers to support him and the Vice Presidential candidate. I believe the candidate should choose these men from among people who have the knowledge and qualifications expected for one or more of the Cabinet posts.

The man nominated for Vice President should, of course, have the qualifications to take over the Presidency whenever circumstances might compel him to do so, and should be able to speak from this broad base. Men who might qualify are, among others, Anderson, Lodge, Mitchell, McElroy, Rockefeller, Rogers, Morton, Halleck and, if he could be induced to go into political life, General Gruenther. (In this list, I have not tried to arrange names in any order of priority).

To speak in the field of Foreign Affairs, likely selections would be: Lodge, Dillon, Secretary of the Treasury Anderson, possibly Dillon Anderson. (Herter not mentioned because of office). (a)

To discuss finance and the duties of the Secretary of the Treasury are such men as Anderson, Stans, Dillon, Hauge, Baird, Scribner and George Humphrey.

In the field of Defense there are Gates, McElroy, Seaton and Dillon Anderson. Possibly others could be added from among the civilians now holding appointive office in the Defense Department. Brucker might be good. (a)

(a) Speeches in these fields should never be strictly partisan, but they can properly extol Republican record and policies.

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Dr. Howard Snyder, the President's personal physician, expressed his concerns to Nixon about the President's health and that his role in the campaign should be limited.

warned that any repudiation of his policies would sow discord and disunity within the party.

Throughout the campaign, Eisenhower and his friends also occasionally acted in ways that evinced less than complete trust in Nixon's abilities.

In February 1960, for example, Eisenhower handed Nixon a two-page memorandum describing how a national campaign was to be conducted. Among other things, the memo reminded Nixon that a national political campaign was waged to support the presidential ticket as well as candidates for state and local office, and that on matters of national defense, speeches "should never be strictly partisan" but were permitted to commend the GOP record.

Given the tension at the core of their partnership, it is not surprising that the question of how to use Eisenhower in Nixon's campaign produced friction and misunderstanding. Initially, the President indicated that he wanted to play only a limited role in the campaign. Much of his public appeal, he argued, was built on a nonpartisan reputation.

By late summer, the Democrats' attacks on his record seemed to rekindle the Presi-

Eisenhower's February 1960 memo to Nixon (page 1), complete with specific recommendations on how to conduct the campaign, revealed less than complete trust in the candidate's abilities.

dent's partisan fire. But in the midst of his nonpolitical speeches in the fall, Eisenhower's health faltered.

At an appearance in Detroit on October 17, Dr. Snyder noted in his medical diary that Eisenhower was angered by a pamphlet distributed by the UAW and the AFL-CIO that unfairly used Kennedy's Catholicism to discourage Republican votes. The pamphlet, which maintained that "a vote for Kennedy is a vote for liberty; a vote for Nixon is a vote for bigotry," so irritated Eisenhower, according to Dr. Snyder, that when he received the key to the city, "his lips were so tight that he could hardly smile."

For the remainder of the day, the President suffered periodic incidents of arrhythmia, and following the speech he delivered that evening at the 43rd National Automobile Show Industry Dinner, he returned immediately to his hotel and summoned Dr. Snyder.

"His blood pressure I could hardly get anywhere," Dr. Snyder later recorded in his medical diary. "There was such irregularity that I could not get a decent systolic or diastolic reading. It was just a trickle at the wrists, with runs and occasional pronounced emphasized systoles. He was having ventricular fibrillation, which is very dangerous."

Dr. Snyder administered oxygen and quinidine sulfate to treat the arrhythmia, and after 12 minutes, the general's heartbeat returned to normal.

Nixon Gets Secret Phone Calls Seeking Limit on Ike's Role

Eisenhower's heart trouble in Detroit was only the latest in a series of health problems that had plagued him, beginning with a serious heart attack in September 1955. During his convalescence, he was initially de-

Dr. Howard Snyder recorded in his medical diary for October 28 that First Lady Mamie Eisenhower "was plugging at me to tell the President he had to quit speaking and working for Nixon—that he might pop a cork."



Eisenhower joined Nixon and his running mate, Henry Cabot Lodge (left), at a campaign rally at Friendship Airport in Baltimore.

GENERAL SNYDER'S PROGRESS REPORTS - Friday,

28 OCTOBER 1960

Weight: 174

0804 - Went to his office.

1247 - Returned to the Mansion.

BP: 146/84/68 regular

Mamie was plugging at me to tell the President he had to quit speaking and working for Nixon -- that he might pop a cork. I have been cautioning him in this regard during the past several weeks since he became involved in a direct effort to elect Nixon.

1435 - Returned to the office.

1545 - Departed the White House by helicopter for MATS Terminal.

1550 - Arrived at MATS Terminal.

1600 - Airborne for Philadelphia International Airport. Captain Marsh and I were also aboard. We flew on the COLUMBINE.

1632 - Arrived at Philadelphia International Airport. The President was greeted by Lt General Milton G. Baker, Chairman, Nixon for President Committee of Pennsylvania; Senator Hugh Scott; and a large group of Republican VIP's.

1650 - Departed the airport by motorcade.

1710 - Arrived at Bellevue Stratford Hotel. The President was escorted to his suite by General Baker and Mr. O'Brien, Manager of the Hotel.

1830 - The President, accompanied by Senator Hugh Scott, General Baker, and Mr. O'Brien, went to the Crystal Room for a reception, which lasted until 1850 hours.

1850 - Departed the reception to go to the Ballroom where the dinner was to be held.

1900 - The President was the Guest of Honor at a dinner given by the Nixon for President Club of Montgomery County, Pennsylvania. The dinner lasted until 2100 hours. He spoke to the assembled guests at 2030 hours for 30 minutes.

2105 - Departed the Bellevue Stratford Hotel by motorcade for Philadelphia International Airport. Senator Hugh Scott accompanied the President.

2125 - Arrived at Philadelphia International Airport.

2135 - Airborne for Washington, D. C.



terminated to refuse the GOP nomination in 1956, but finally agreed to run because he felt there were no young, dynamic moderate Republicans who were ready to take his place.

In June of 1956, however, shortly before the party conventions, the President underwent surgery because of an attack of ileitis but recovered from it so rapidly that it did not impair his reelection campaign. Far more serious was the mild stroke Eisenhower suffered in late November 1957, which, while it left his motor and sensory abilities unaffected, occasionally led to garbled syntax when speaking publicly.

These three episodes seemed to convince Eisenhower that the stress of both his wartime and his presidential leadership was beginning to take a toll on his 67-year-old body. Early in 1958 he sent a “Personal and Secret” letter to Nixon outlining procedures to be followed in the event of his incapacity and designating his Vice President as “the individual explicitly and exclusively responsible” for making that determination.

Given his recent history of health problems, it was not surprising that the arrhythmia he suffered in Detroit mobilized his family and his physician into action. Dr. Snyder recorded in his medical diary on October 28 that he had been advising the President to limit his campaigning because “Mamie was plugging at me to tell the President he had to quit speaking and

June 14, 1962

Dear Mr. Vice President:

This is just a note to offer my congratulations on your great success in the first step of your gubernatorial campaign. We are all, of course, pulling hard for you.

I enjoyed reading your book and one remark you make in the last chapter got me to thinking a bit. You mentioned that I went out to the airport to meet you the night after the election returns were in when you returned to Washington, in the capacity of representing the President. It occurs to me that you might have thought it a little peculiar that Dad was not able to be at the airport himself. In actuality he had left for Augusta that morning, at everybody's urging, more tired and more discouraged than any of us had seen him in his career. The one remark he made to me was, “The whole thing has been useless; I might as well have been having fun these last eight years.”

I doubt that you have been told, but the doctors were concerned over the amount of exertion that Dad underwent in the last few days of the 1960 campaign. He was beginning to develop physical symptoms, such as heart flutters and the like, and we were all worried about him. Dr. Snyder said several days before the end of the campaign that Dad would make it through, all right -- but just barely. So you can see why all his associates practically shoved him on the airplane, the morning of November seventh.

This letter calls for no reply since I know you are busy. This one thing has been on my mind, however, for some time.

Barbara joins me in sending our very best to you and Mrs. Nixon.

Respectfully,

The Honorable Richard M. Nixon
P. O. Box 6539
Metropolitan Station
Los Angeles 55, California

John Eisenhower, the President's son, wrote to Nixon in June 1962 recalling his father's poor health during the campaign, that he “was beginning to develop physical symptoms, heart flutters and the like, and we were all worried about him.”

working for Nixon—that he might pop a cork.”

In a 1962 letter to Nixon, John Eisenhower, the President's son, wrote similarly that near the end of the 1960 campaign his father was “beginning to develop physical symptoms, such as heart flutters . . . and we were all worried about him. Dr. Snyder said . . . that Dad would make it through [the campaign] all right – but just barely.”

These concerns apparently led to private phone calls to Nixon, as Eisenhower noted in a 1966 letter to his close friend William E. Robinson that “I did not learn until a few weeks ago of the conversation between Howard Snyder and the Vice President and his later determination to oppose . . . including Chicago in my itinerary in the closing days of the 1960 campaign.”



To learn more about

- Dwight D. Eisenhower, go to the Eisenhower Library's site at www.eisenhower.archives.gov/.
- Richard M. Nixon, go to the Nixon Library's site at www.nixonlibrary.gov/index.php.
- Eisenhower's push for the Interstate Highway System, go to www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2006/summer/interstates.html.

FLS
Nixon, Richard

September 21, 1966

Dear Bill:

The article that accompanied your letter has certain elements of truth. I did not learn until a few weeks ago of the conversation between Howard Snyder and the Vice President and his later determination to oppose my including Chicago in my itinerary in the closing days of the 1960 campaign.

I made my first purely partisan speech of the campaign on October twenty-eighth in Philadelphia. The obstacle that prevented me from starting earlier was a result of a schedule to which I had earlier agreed. Dick wanted me to make a swing of a "non-political" character, in which I would not talk about the contest itself but would -- in Detroit, San Francisco, San Diego, Houston and Virginia -- talk in support of the policies that Dick was expounding.

Because we had billed this whole thing as a non-political thing, people got the idea that I was not enthusiastic about Nixon. However, as soon as the tour was finished I went to Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Cleveland and New York -- about all that any individual could do in that amount of time.

When I first learned that Dick was falling behind I called him from the West Coast in the midst of my publicized non-political swing. The mistake I made was in failing to break off that tour at that minute, come back to Washington and get into the fight. The Chicago question was a mere detail -- in my opinion had little effect.

Please give my affectionate greetings to Ellen and, of course, all the very best to yourself.

Cordially,



The Honorable William E. Robinson
Quaker Lane
Greenwich, Connecticut

his decision to limit the President's role in the closing weeks of the campaign was not an act of revenge against his mentor or an egotistical mistake. It was made out of real anxiety about the President's health.

That it was a decision he did not make easily or happily, moreover, is suggested in the recollection of Dr. Arthur Flemming, Eisenhower's secretary of health, education, and welfare, and a major campaign adviser in 1960. As they flew to Milwaukee late on the Sunday evening before election day, Nixon defended himself from the criticism that he had not used Eisenhower sufficiently in the campaign.

Nixon admitted that he had been "hesitant about asking him to become deeply involved—after all, he's the President of the United States." And then, in a revealing afterthought, Nixon added, "maybe he's worried about his health."

Because Nixon lost the 1960 election by fewer than 113,000 votes out of more than 68 million cast, students of politics both then and now have often speculated about what he could have done differently. Many have cited his poor performance in the first television debate with John F. Kennedy as a reason for his slim defeat. Others point to the knee infection that hospitalized him early in the campaign or his foolish promise to visit all 50 states during the campaign.

The limited use of Eisenhower in the campaign has also been mentioned as a contributing factor. And while it's impossible to reduce the decisions made by American voters to any one cause, it's not unreasonable to believe that a healthier Eisenhower might have given Nixon the edge in 1960. He still had enormous personal popularity, and many of the World War II veterans among the electorate surely still liked Ike.

If Eisenhower's poor health may have contributed to Nixon's loss in 1960, it may have ironically helped Nixon win the presidency in 1968, another close election. After he left the White House,

President Eisenhower revealed in a 1966 letter to a friend that he had just learned of the efforts by his doctor, Howard Snyder, and Richard Nixon to limit his campaigning in 1960.

Debate over Cause of Nixon Loss Still Includes Eisenhower Illness

The narrow margin of Nixon's loss to Kennedy in November produced anger among Eisenhower and his friends and in retrospect put more significance on the decision to limit Ike's campaign role than perhaps it deserved.

The day after the election, Eisenhower complained to his friend Ellis D. "Slats"

Slater that "this is the biggest defeat of my life. . . . Dick never asked me how I thought the campaign should be run." More than three years later, William E. Robinson still grouched that "it took a special brand of ego and arrogance . . . to fail to ask for the President's help until too late."

But whatever mistakes or omissions Nixon may have made in the campaign, the evidence from Dr. Snyder's medical diary indicates that

to become as involved in the campaign as some people thought President Eisenhower should've been. And he was commenting particularly on this address that President Eisenhower had made up in Pittsburgh about a week or so before. That address had had a very positive impact on the campaign; the poll curve moved up in a definite way. He said to me, "I've been hesitant about asking him to become deeply involved--after all, he's the President of the United States." Then he said, "Maybe he's worried about his health." That's about all he said about it, but I could tell it was on his mind. Then he said, "This is going to be a close one; it can go either way. If we win, we're in for four exciting years; if we lose, we're all going to have to make some new plans"--or something to that effect.

The day after the election I was in President Eisenhower's office, in the Oval Office--I forget what brought me there but for some reason I had business there. When we finished discussing that particular item, he said to me, "Arthur, tell me, who was in charge of that campaign?" And I said, "Well, that's a little difficult to answer. There were times when it was clear that Bob Finch was in charge; at other times Len Hall seemed to be more in the driver's seat; and then there were other times when Fred Seaton seemed to be caught up [unintelligible]."

He said, "Well, I'll never understand why I wasn't asked to participate more than I was in the campaign. There's nothing that I wanted more than to turn this position over to Dick Nixon." I've often cited that as the classic illustration

Arthur Flemming, Nixon's secretary of health, education, and welfare, recalled in a 1988 interview that Nixon told him of his hesitancy to use Eisenhower in the 1960 campaign in part out of concern for the President's health.

Eisenhower's heart continued to weaken. He suffered two more heart attacks in November 1965 and in April 1968, the latter leading to his hospitalization in Walter Reed, where he remained until his death in March 1969.

While at Walter Reed, Eisenhower had two more heart attacks between April and August of 1968, and 14 episodes of cardiac arrest. His rapidly failing health seemed to persuade him to abandon a principle he had maintained ever since entering politics in

1952—refusing to endorse any presidential candidate before the Republican convention formally nominated one.

Still determined as he had been since 1952 to steer the GOP in a moderate direction, Eisenhower believed that of the three major candidates, Nelson Rockefeller was too liberal and Ronald Reagan was too conservative.

Thus, on July 17, more than two weeks before the start of the Republican convention, Eisenhower announced from his sickbed in

Walter Reed, that he believed, perhaps at long last, that "Nixon's the one!" Nixon, of course, went on to secure the GOP nomination and to narrowly defeat his Democratic opponent, Hubert Humphrey, in November, assisted in both cases, no doubt, by his long-time political partner. **P**

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NOTE ON SOURCES

The author gratefully acknowledges the generous assistance the staff of the Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library, Abilene, KS, and the staff of the Richard M. Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, CA, provided in researching this article.

This article is based on research in a wide variety of records at the two libraries.

Of the holdings at the Eisenhower Library, especially useful for this article were the papers of William E. Robinson, a newspaper editor, business executive, and close friend of Eisenhower. The Ann C. Whitman File, records kept by Eisenhower's wise and extraordinarily efficient secretary throughout his presidency, was also remarkably useful, especially the Ann C. Whitman Diary Series and Dwight D. Eisenhower Diary Series.

The Eisenhower Library also has the Medical Diary of the President's personal physician, Dr. Howard McCrum Snyder, whose spare and pithy comments covered a wide array of issues. The Eisenhower Library's vast holdings of oral histories, covering most of the major and minor administration figures, including Arthur Flemming, give much personal insight into the Eisenhower presidency.

Nixon's Vice Presidential Papers, General Correspondence, Series 320, at Yorba Linda is a vast collection of letters written to the Vice President by public officials and private citizens.

There are many histories of the 1960 election. Among the most useful for this article were:

Theodore H. White, *The Making of the President 1960* (New York: Atheneum Publishers, 1962); Tom Wicker, *One of Us: Richard Nixon and the American Dream* (New York: Random House, 1991); Richard Nixon, *Six Crises*, (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1962); Richard Nixon, *RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1978); and W.J. Rorabaugh, *The Real Making of the President: Kennedy, Nixon, and the 1960 Election* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2009).

Author



John W. Malsberger is professor of history at Muhlenberg College, where he has taught since 1978. His specialties include 20th-century America, American foreign policy, and American economic history. His most recent publication is "Dwight Eisenhower, Richard Nixon, and the Fund Crisis of 1952," *The Historian* 73 (Fall 2011): 526–547. He is currently writing a book on the political partnership of Eisenhower and Nixon.