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Mamie Eisenhower In Perspective

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Mamie Doud Eisenhower was born 100 years ago this Thursday. She was the last First Lady born in the 19th century. Her upbringing and her view on life were reflected in how she perceived and carried out her role as First Lady. Mamie had life experiences to which American women related. As we will learn today, her years as an Army wife shaped her thinking on her relationship with her husband and family. She had lived in difficult places. She and Ike had lost their first son at age three and a half. They endured long separations. All of these events strained their marriage. Yet as Susan Eisenhower will discuss, the Eisenhowers' marriage endured.

After World War II, American women left the work place, whether by choice or societal pressures, to stay home in large numbers and raise the baby boom generation. As housewives, American women found Mrs. Eisenhower a role model, whether she was supporting her husband on the campaign trail or dressing in the fashions of the time. Our other speakers, Edith Mayo and Karal Ann Marling, will address each of these topics. But in remembering Mamie today, I'd like to look at a more personal side of her, her personality.

One of my favorite quotes by Mamie Doud Eisenhower is recounted by Julie Nixon Eisenhower in her book *Special People*. It was the 1972 inaugural parade for President Nixon's second term. Mrs. Eisenhower was riding in the same car as Julie. As Mamie said, she was "playing David" while David Eisenhower, Julie's husband, was off in the Navy. As Julie timidly waved at the crowd lining the street, Mamie said, "Don't give them any of that prissy stuff. Give them a big wave. Really say hello."¹ That's the Mamie Eisenhower that 1950s Americans knew and admired.

Her son, John, called her a westerner and said "she was rather quite friendly and outgoing, especially with strangers."² She had

a warm, open, breezy personality that he attributed to her years growing up in the west. Mamie was born in Boone, Iowa, and grew up in Denver, Colorado. The Doud Family was close knit. Though they socialized among their close circle of friends, the family spent a lot of time together. Within this close circle, Mamie's personality blossomed. Though an average student in high school, Mamie went on to Miss Walcott's finishing school in Denver, learning poise, etiquette, and how to manage a household.

Mrs. Eisenhower was a traditionalist in her role as wife and mother. She always said there could only be one star in the Eisenhower family, and it wasn't her.³ When asked if she wished she'd had a career, she responded. "I had a career. His name was Ike."⁴

That career began in the fall of 1915 in San Antonio, Texas. The well-to-do Doud family spent winters in San Antonio. One day, while the Doud family was visiting friends at Fort Sam Houston, Lt. Eisenhower in his first assignment after graduating from West Point, was doing his rounds as Officer of the Guard. The mutual friend called Eisenhower over to introduce him to the Doud family. Eisenhower was reluctant to come, but finally was convinced. You see, Ike had the reputation as the post woman hater. He later said that it wasn't that he didn't like women, it was that he couldn't afford women. Eisenhower was immediately taken with the petite Mamie Doud and asked her to walk post with him. As they walked by the barracks he would tell her to look away, she might see something she shouldn't. But with a mind of her own, Mamie took it all in. Eisenhower later wrote "The one who attracted my eye instantly was a vivacious and attractive girl, smaller than average, saucy in the look about her face and her whole attitude. I was intrigued by her appearance."⁵ For her part, Mamie said that Ike was "a bruiser, not like some of those lounge lizards she dated."⁶

By the time they completed the walk, Eisenhower was smitten. He tried to get a date, but Mamie was very popular. She was booked for the next three Saturdays, so he asked her for the fourth. In the afternoons or while Mamie was out with other young men, Ike sat on the porch with her parents and got to know them. Then when Mamie was dropped off by her date, Ike



Mamie in wedding dress, July 1916. (Dwight D. Eisenhower Library)

was also there to say good night. Soon Ike and Mamie were dating each other exclusively. By Valentine's Day they were engaged, and they were married July 1, 1916. Mamie's career as Ike's wife lasted 53 years.

Early in her married life, Mamie learned the importance of home. She saw her role as providing a comfortable place for her husband to come home to. Now this was especially challenging when the Eisenhowers lived in Gettysburg in 1918. During this time Captain Eisenhower had his first independent command as commander of Camp Colt, a tank training corps for 10,000 men located just west of the Cyclorama Center on the fields of Pickett's Charge. In the seven months Mamie and their first son, Doud Dwight, were in Gettysburg, the family lived in three different places. Of her arrival in Gettysburg, Mamie remembers,

"It was raining to beat the band. And Ike had one of his aides meet me and took me to this little place he had rented, which has a window in the front and a window in the back. No circulation, no heat. A coal stove. I'd never seen a coal stove in my life. I didn't know what to do. And the only heat you had was a base burner in the living room that heated the bedroom above, period.... So we lived in this very strange house and then during the summer months they let us stay in the ATO fraternity house which was right next door. But we could only stay in there during the summer. It had the most beautiful ballroom and no kitchen, so I, who'd never washed any dishes or done anything like that, had to wash dishes in the bath tub. Ike bought me a two-burner oil stove, and I was frightened to have to light it, I was afraid it'd blow up. So, I'd have to wait for him to come home to light it. I was twenty years old, twenty-one years old: I knew nothing about any of these things. So it was really pretty rugged. So then when the school season started, there was a little house on Springs Avenue and that was the last house we lived in. And while we're in there I got the news that my sister, who's younger than myself, had died, so I got right on the train and went to Denver. And then Ike was moved to Fort Benning, Georgia. So I never saw my things again. And one of them.. the

baby's high chair never showed up. I don't know whatever happened to it."⁷

Mamie's moves with the military encouraged her frugality when managing the household finances. Eisenhower always turned his pay check over to her. She said "I was the one that kept him out of debt. Ike didn't know whether he had 5 cents or 10 cents and he couldn't have cared less."⁸ She made one mistake in the early years. Before moving someone convinced her to sell all her furniture and buy new when she got to the new post. She soon learned that she could not replace her old furniture with the money she got for it.⁹ Forever after she made careful decisions with money. In 1933, when the banks were going to close, Mamie withdrew the family savings and purchased a couch. Today that couch is in the living room of the Eisenhower home here in Gettysburg. Mrs. Eisenhower just had it slipcovered to go with the new decor. An antique Sheraton chest of drawers in the master bedroom was also a prized possession. Mamie said it took her two years to save the money to get it. As she said, "I think so much more of those things that I worked hard for..."¹⁰

It was during those frugal years in the military that Mamie developed into a true hostess. The Eisenhower home always seemed to be the place where all the officers and their wives gathered. Dinners were potluck. For entertainment, Mamie would play the piano. She played all the popular songs of the day by ear as their friends gathered around for a sing-along. Soon the Eisenhowers' quarters were known as Club Eisenhower. As Eisenhower rose in rank, the breadth of Mrs. Eisenhower's entertaining expanded. By the time the Eisenhowers' were in the Philippines in the late 1930s, Mrs. Eisenhower was regularly entertained at the Presidential palace. Her experience and knowledge of etiquette even carried over into her family life. The Eisenhower grandchildren all confess that they all learned the proper use of the finger bowl by age three.¹¹

Mamie's experience as a hostess was especially useful as First Lady. She and the President entertained extensively during their years in the White House. She was personally involved in selecting the menus and making up guest lists and seating arrangements. The types of events varied widely, from stag dinners which were men only events for the President and close friends,

to State dinners, to receptions for the many clubs and organizations anxious to meet the First Lady.

Mary Jane McCaffrey Monroe, Mrs. Eisenhower's White House social secretary, recounts Mamie greeting a group from Kensington, Maryland.

Mrs. Eisenhower had already shaken hands with about three or four hundred or more ladies. But there was one particular lady who stayed 'til the very last. She was the end one in line. And she went through and Mrs. Eisenhower shook her hands and said, 'What? You here again?' She had a fantastic memory for names and for faces, and apparently this lady, and she told me this later on herself, she said, 'I was in here about three weeks ago and I bet my friend that she wouldn't remember me.'¹²

Mrs. Eisenhower especially liked to decorate the White House for the holidays. This hobby probably stems from her girlhood, because her parents always enjoyed decorating for all the holidays. She decorated the White House with corn stalks, pumpkins and black cats for Halloween, and eggs and bunnies for Easter, but she went all out for Christmas. She had the hallways filled with poinsettias with white branches sticking out. The entrance way columns were wrapped in garlands of pine with big red bows. Small Christmas trees flanked the East room fireplaces. In the State Dining Room, wreaths hung from the candelabra. And giant Christmas trees stood in the East Room, the Blue Room and even outside on the North Portico. As White House Chief Usher J. B. West said, 'Mamie Eisenhower decked the halls with more than holly.'¹³

Mamie was the first First Lady to have an official staff. According to Mary Jane McCaffrey Monroe, Mrs. Eisenhower's secretary in the White House Social Office, Mamie was so popular as First Lady that she received five or six thousand letters a week. That number would escalate to 10,000 letters a week for birthdays and anniversaries. In describing her popularity, McCaffrey Monroe said, 'People felt something about her. They felt toward her like a next door neighbor.'¹⁴ Mrs. Eisenhower insisted that every letter get a response and many of them received a personal letter from her.

The personal interest that Mrs. Eisenhower took in answering correspondence was also evident in her relationship with the White House staff. She knew everyone by name and often engaged them in conversation about their personal lives. Her interest in their family was reflected each year at Christmas as she presented the staff with Christmas presents she personally selected. She also sent presents for spouses and children. She also remembered their birthdays and made sure to have a cake baked to celebrate the occasion. The degree of personal interest she took in the staff is perhaps best illustrated in the picnics the Eisenhowers held here in Gettysburg. For the Eisenhower's 39th wedding anniversary, they hosted a picnic at the farm. Invitations went out to all staff members whether working on the President's staff or the domestic staff. Everyone had an opportunity to tour the Eisenhower's newly completed home and stroll the grounds.

As First Lady, Mamie didn't adopt a cause as others have done. Nor did she actively get involved in the business of the Presidency. She said she set foot in the Oval office only four times, each time by invitation.¹⁵ But as anyone in a marriage knows, if the husband and wife are a team, each spouse influences the other in many subtle ways. And the Eisenhowers were a team. When Ike composed a prayer for his first inauguration, he consulted Mamie for approval. About his speeches, Mamie said to him one time, 'I'm an average person. Now when you make a speech, make it short and don't use big words. We know you know 'em. But use small words like we can understand.'¹⁶ She went on to say, 'Now I think I was his best subject on that.'¹⁷

By her own calculation the Eisenhowers lived in 37 different homes. Mamie said she lived in every kind of house but an igloo. But it was here in Gettysburg that she and Ike finally had their first and only home. Of the importance of home she said,

'Well, home to us meant a great deal, too. Now that I think the American people should know and realize. That it's in the home that everything starts. And ours has always been a home. No matter where we were or what sort of a house we lived in or anything else. Take a few little pictures out, you know, and put around, and little ashtrays or something, and it would turn out to be home.'¹⁸

This idea of home and the home's ability to rejuvenate a person really came through during Eisenhower's illnesses. During the White House years, Ike recuperated at the farm from his heart attack and his ileitis operation. Even near the end, when Eisenhower was in Walter Reed for the last 10 months of his life, Mamie felt that if she could just get him back to the farm to sit on the glass enclosed porch, or walk the fields, that the atmosphere would rejuvenate him.¹⁹ But, of course, that was not to be.

Those years after Ike's death were lonely years. Many of Mrs. Eisenhower's friends were also passing away. At one point David and Julie tried to talk Mamie into moving in with them. She promptly replied that they had their life to live and she had hers. Those last years friends and family still visited the Gettysburg farm. And there was laughter in the house. But it just wasn't the same. Granddaughter Mary Jean remembers a visit about two years after her grandfather died.

"The house was full (with guests) and she put me in with her on his side of the bed. And just as we were about to go to sleep she said, "It's nice to have somebody over there. That bed's been so empty." She just kind of cried herself to sleep that night. She really had such a hard time after he died."²⁰

But I'd like to end by remembering Mamie Eisenhower in a happier way. The way I think most Americans remember her. During President Nixon's term in office, Mrs. Eisenhower was often included in Nixon family events. Once she spent Easter with the Nixon family at Camp David. For Easter breakfast, the staff had dyed Easter eggs with the names of family members and set them on the table as place cards. Mrs. Eisenhower especially liked to tell how President Nixon's egg said "Mr. President," his wife's said "Mrs. Nixon," but hers just said "Mamie."²¹

1. Eisenhower, Julie Nixon, *Special People*, Simon and Schuster, New York, p. 188.
2. John S. D. Eisenhower, Interview with Carol Hegeman, 1986.
3. Media Transcripts, Inc., Mamie Eisenhower Interview with Barbara Walters, August 30, 1979, p. 41.
4. Eisenhower, Julie Nixon, *Special People*, p. 194.
5. Eisenhower, Dwight D., *At Ease: Stories I Tell To Friends*, Doubleday & Company, Inc., Garden City, New York, p. 113.
6. Eisenhower, Julie Nixon, *Special People*, p. 195.
7. Mamie Eisenhower, Interview with Ed Bearss, August 15, 1973.
8. *Ibid.*
9. Brandon, Dorothy, *Mamie Doud Eisenhower: Portrait of a First Lady*, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1954, p. 89.
10. *Ibid.*
11. Susan Eisenhower, Interview with Carol Hegeman, February 8, 1986.
12. Mary Jane McCaffrey Monroe and Anne Parsons, Interview with Carol Hegeman, September 22, 1983.
13. West, J. B. *Upstairs at the White House*, Warner Books, Inc., New York, 1974, p. 170.
14. Mary Jane McCaffrey Monroe and Anne Parsons, Interview with Carol Hegeman, September 22, 1983.
15. Eisenhower, Julie Nixon, *Special People*, p. 203.
16. Mamie Eisenhower, Interview with Ed Bearss, August 15, 1973.
17. *Ibid.*
18. *Ibid.*
19. *Ibid.*
20. Mary Jean Eisenhower, Interview with Carol Hegeman, June 25, 1987.
21. Eisenhower, Julie Nixon, *Special People*, p. 215.