

New drafts of Eisenhower's farewell address : The New Yorker

A few months ago, Grant Moos was closing his boathouse, near Hackensack, Minnesota, as he does every summer, tying up loose ends, sweeping up debris. This year, though, his sister Kathy insisted that it was finally time to do something about six cardboard boxes that for decades had been stacked in a corner next to a 7.5-horsepower Evinrude engine.

The boxes belonged to their father, Malcolm Moos, a journalist and academic who was a speechwriter for President Dwight Eisenhower. When Moos left the White House, in 1961, he donated some of his papers to the Eisenhower Presidential Library, in Abilene, Kansas, but he kept some, too.

The boxes were full of pine needles, acorns, and mouse droppings, and smelled of campfires. As Moos looked through the contents, he came across a batch of folders marked “Farewell Address.” He looked up the Eisenhower Library, and sent the boxes off to Abilene.

At first, the library did not know what it had. As archivists began to go through the papers, however, they discovered a trove of drafts, memos, and research materials that had long been missing from the record of one of the twentieth century’s most important speeches. For fifty years, Americans have regarded Eisenhower’s Farewell Address with a mixture of awe and bewilderment. Speaking three nights before the end of his Presidency, in 1961, Eisenhower warned of a “scientific-technological élite” that would dominate public policy, and of a “military-industrial complex” that would claim “our toil, resources, and livelihood.”

In the decades since, Eisenhower's warning has seemed prescient. The convergence of American military might and a powerful arms industry has characterized wars from Vietnam to Iraq, and the web of power that he described seems present in American society today. Still, generations have wondered what prompted the most celebrated general of the Second World War to leave the White House with a warning about the military. Eisenhower's grandson David writes in a new memoir that Ike "developed a kind of split personality about the most controversial speech of his life," downplaying its significance to old military and business friends while professing pride in it to others.

Some historians have regarded the Farewell Address as an afterthought, hastily composed at the end of 1960 as an adjunct to the 1961 State of the Union. Others have regarded it as the soulful expression of an aging President who was determined to warn the American people of dangers ahead. But the Moos papers make clear that the address, far from being an afterthought, was among the most deliberate speeches of Eisenhower's Presidency. Regarded in his day as inarticulate and detached, Eisenhower in these papers is fully engaged, grappling with the language of the text and the radical questions that it raised.

Contrary to what some historians have speculated, it was not Moos or his assistant, Ralph Williams, who suggested a farewell address. On May 20, 1959, Moos was meeting with the President, when Eisenhower proposed an idea for "one speech he would like very much to make." It was to be, Moos recorded, "a ten-minute farewell address to the Congress and the American people." Moos deemed the idea "brilliant" and began making notes.



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Eisenhower was a rigorous editor. Major speeches such as the State of the Union might be refined ten or twelve times. Even by those standards, however, the Farewell Address was special. Eisenhower personally rewrote the opening passages, and his brother Milton overhauled the entire speech. It was batted back and forth for months; in the end, it underwent twenty-nine drafts (twenty-one previously unknown drafts were found in the boathouse papers).

The papers also debunk a myth. Some historians have credited Norman Cousins, the editor of *The Saturday Review*, with helping to shape the speech, in December of 1960. It's true that Cousins called the President on December 14th, but "the idea of trying to get anyone like Norman Cousins working on it would be dreadful," Eisenhower's secretary wrote to Moos. "How in the world do we diplomatically thank him, but say No?"

One core idea dominates every version: the first draft described "the conjunction of a large and permanent military establishment and a large and permanent arms industry." Policing it would require "all the organizing genius we possess" to insure "that liberty and security are both well served." It added, "We must be especially careful to avoid measures which would enable any segment of this vast military-industrial complex to sharpen the focus of its power." Through scores of revisions, that idea persisted. As delivered, the speech memorably read, "In the councils of government, we must guard against the

acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex.”

At the library, the staff is ecstatic about the find. Karl Weissenbach, the director, predicted that the new documents will “change the history and interpretation of the most famous farewell address in American history.”

It’s also a reminder of the contingency of historical research. Had Moos vacationed in Florida rather than in Minnesota, the documents might have disintegrated. Instead, the memos and drafts survived, snug in a boathouse corner, rejoining history just in time for the fiftieth anniversary of Eisenhower’s address. ♦