

America still likes Ike
Which is why he soon will become only the seventh president with a
monument in Washington

Sunday, April 25, 2010

By [David Shribman](#), Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

WASHINGTON -- This is a city full of statutes and statues -- but stingy with monuments.

George Washington won America's independence and then established the dignity and restraint of the presidency in a flamboyant, monarchical age. He has the most prominent monument in the capital.

Thomas Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence and was the premier American political thinker of the Enlightenment era. He has an elegant monument on the Potomac tidal basin.

Abraham Lincoln saved the Union and expressed the American idea and American ideals in Biblical cadences. His monument is an eloquent neoclassical coda sheathed in Colorado marble at the western end of the National Mall.

There are but three other presidential monuments: a moving tribute to Franklin Roosevelt, who is credited with defeating the Depression and then the Axis Powers; an island named for the conservationist president Theodore Roosevelt, who is credited with preserving 150 national forests, 18 national monuments and five national parks in seven and a half years in office; and an arts center named for John F. Kennedy, who argued that a great nation should honor the performing arts as much as the commercial and martial arts.

Now Washington is preparing for a seventh presidential monument, an airy 4-acre testimonial in oak groves and stone blocks just off Capitol Hill designed by the renowned Frank Gehry to celebrate the achievements of a man who served two terms as president and commanded the Allied forces in Europe in World War II.

But why a monument to Dwight D. Eisenhower when there isn't one to James Madison, or James Monroe, or Andrew Jackson?

"How about eight years of peace and prosperity and playing a key role in all of us not speaking a Germanic tongue right now?" Republican Sen. Pat Roberts of

Eisenhower's home state of Kansas answered in an interview this month. "This honors not only a president but a humble man from Abilene."

A humble man -- but one who has grown in the nation's esteem since he left office in 1961.

Today historians praise Eisenhower not only for his political sense in reconciling the irreconcilable before D-Day and in the last days of World War II but also for his "hidden-hand" -- the phrase belongs to Fred I. Greenstein, the Princeton historian, but has been adopted widely -- style of presidential leadership. The earlier view saw Eisenhower as a bland placeholder, oblivious to the cultural crosscurrents of his time, more interested in his golf swing than in the arc of history.

"I believe Ike was a great president, projecting the image of being a moderate and doing what's right for our people and our country," said Rep. Dennis Moore, a Kansas Democrat who is a member of the Eisenhower Memorial Commission. "People really respect President Eisenhower, and he absolutely deserves this. I have heard nobody speak against this."

Building a presidential monument in the capital requires several steps. This being Washington, contention almost always trumps consensus and the simplest task has a way of morphing into a complex ordeal.

It took nine decades between the end of the Washington administration and the opening of the Washington Monument -- and that was for a chief executive who has neither predecessor nor peer, who was eulogized by Henry Lee for being first in the hearts of the American people and who won the presidency essentially unopposed.

By that standard, the Eisenhower Memorial is on a fast track. It is set to open in May 2015.

The site today is a jumble of bleak concrete off Independence Avenue across from the National Air and Space Museum (the nation began to reach for space in the Eisenhower era) and bracketed by the Federal Aviation Administration (created in the Eisenhower years) and buildings occupied by the Education and Health and Human Services departments (both spinoffs of the Eisenhower-era Department of Health, Education and Welfare).

Eisenhower Square, as it will be known, captures Eisenhower in being understated. "This is a tricky site, partially enclosed by buildings and adjacent to two lanes of parking and six lanes of traffic," said Daniel Feil, the executive architect for the memorial committee. "This is an architectural challenge demanding an architect at the top of his game."

Enter Mr. Gehry, known for the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao in Spain and the Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles. He decreed there would be no Eisenhower statue, but there will be a woven, translucent stainless-steel-wire tapestry with black-and-white images. (Remember, the Eisenhower years were basically in the black-and-white of the Cold War and, besides, color television didn't take hold until General Electric's Porta Color set was introduced five years after Eisenhower's retirement.)

But the point isn't so much what the memorial will be made of but what Eisenhower was made of, and what he made of the gifts he had.

The general was not known as a man who challenged the prevailing zeitgeist, yet the phrase "military-industrial complex" is rooted in his presidential farewell address in 1961.

He was not known for having a searching mind, yet 18 months before the Senate screwed up the courage to censure Sen. Joseph McCarthy, he told graduating seniors at the Dartmouth College commencement of 1953: "Don't join the book burners. Don't think you're going to conceal faults by concealing evidence that they ever existed. Don't be afraid to go in your library and read every book ..."

He was not known as a stirring speaker, yet who can fail to be moved by the remarks he made to the soldiers, sailors and aviators of the Allied Expeditionary Force just before D-Day?: "You are about to embark upon the Great Crusade, toward which we have striven these many months. The eyes of the world are upon you. The hopes and prayers of liberty-loving people everywhere march with you."

We need memorials, to be sure. But we need memory, too. The Eisenhower monument will be a welcome addition to Washington's city grid -- and to the nation's historical landscape.

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