General Dwight D. Eisenhower's D-Day radio address to the Allied Nations (June 6, 1944)

Added to the National Registry: 2002
Essay by Timothy Rives (guest post)*

Dwight D. Eisenhower

On “D minus 3” (28 May) 1944, General Dwight D. Eisenhower, “Ike” to great and small, recorded two messages for broadcast when the Allies launched their long-awaited invasion of the European continent. One message was directed to the invaders; the other to the captive inhabitants awaiting liberation from Nazi tyranny.

But on that late date the hour of invasion and liberation was still a mystery, even to Ike. Operation OVERLORD, the Allied assault on the Normandy coast, had already been pushed back from early May to early June. “D (Day) Minus 3” on 28 May shows the Allies were confident of an invasion launch of 31 May or 1 June. But foul weather now threatened further delay. Further delay threatened the outcome of the war. A low pressure cell filled the air with rain and wind and the seas with ship-swallowing swells as it settled over the English Channel. After an agonizing few days of false starts and protracted meteorological debate, Ike bet the war on a forecast for 36 hours of improved conditions. He finally unleashed the invasion on 6 June 1944.

These two recordings were broadcast that historic day. Tone distinguishes the exhortations. General Eisenhower’s “Order of the Day,” addressed to the “Soldiers, Sailors and Airmen of the Allied Expeditionary Force,” rings with confidence. His voice, reminiscent of the actor Clark Gable’s, marched briskly across the air as he snapped off each syllable like a crisp salute.

By contrast, Ike’s promise of liberation to the “People of Western Europe” lacks the martial strut of the Order of the Day. The pace lags. The annunciation falters. A war weariness weighs down the heavy sentences. Ike’s voice betrays the 80 cigarettes he inhaled each day and the insomnia that would not surrender until the Nazis quit the fight.

Why the difference between the two recordings? What, if anything, explains the change in mood and spirit?

Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) founder William Paley may have the answer. Paley served as General Eisenhower's Chief of Radio Broadcasting. The job was part of the Psychological Warfare Division within the Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force. Paley's duties included propaganda broadcasting, as well as recording the D-Day statements of Ike and other Allied leaders.

Eisenhower's message to the captive peoples was thoroughly vetted by the Army, the State Department, and the White House before its recording. Still crisis erupted when Robert Sherwood, a Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright working for Paley, detected a landmine in the phrasing. Sherwood alerted Paley to the danger of the Top Secret words. The potentially fatal sentence instructed "patriots" outside of recognized resistance groups to "continue your passive resistance, but do not needlessly endanger your lives before I give you the signal to rise and strike the enemy." Sherwood interpreted the sentence to mean the patriots *should* endanger their lives needlessly but only when instructed to do so by Ike. Sherwood drafted a simple fix. The new phrase read "but do not needlessly endanger your lives; wait until I give you the signal to rise and strike the enemy." Paley agreed the "much needed" pause of the semi-colon corrected the statement. One wonders, however, how much this change affected the understanding of the statement by English speakers or how well it survived translation into French, Dutch, Flemish, Norwegian, and Danish.

Now the real crisis began. Paley must convince a harried commander on the brink of conducting one of the largest military operations in history to re-read the statement with the problematic part revised. In other words, Paley wanted a do-over from one of the busiest men in the world.

Ike's staff told Paley to fix it anyway he could but to leave the supreme commander alone. Paley tried several voiceovers, but none captured Eisenhower's distinctive voice or intonation. Ike *must* do it himself, Paley said. The supreme commander at length conceded.

The next morning Paley "drove our camouflaged truck, filled with sophisticated recording equipment, to his headquarters, strung a microphone inside, and Eisenhower, grumbling and sore as hell, made the new recording."

Ike's somber rendering of his message to the "People of Western Europe" reflects his mood in the tense days leading up to the Normandy attack--and his exasperation with Paley. A "grumbling and sore as hell" Eisenhower was an understatement. Paley surely received a blistering reproach when he met Ike for the re-recording session. Once the fire of the legendary Eisenhower temper cooled, he sank back into the fatigue that had become the norm and read his pledge of liberation again.

Now Paley's task was to wait until the appointed hour to flip the switch and launch Ike's vocal invasion of the Nazi-occupied continent. To prevent a deadly premature broadcast of the message, Paley relied on a radioman calling from the hostile shore with the code word, "Topflight." Message received, Paley "gave the signal, and instantly, without a hitch, the world was informed of D-Day":

"People of Western Europe! A landing has been made this morning on the coast of France…."

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.