

Eisenhower's Sputnik Moment: The Race for Space and World Prestige

By Yanek Mieczkowski

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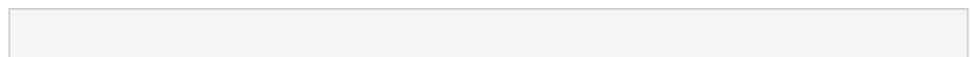
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In a critical Cold War moment, Dwight D. Eisenhower's presidency suddenly changed when the Soviet Union launched Sputnik, the world's first satellite. What Ike called "a small ball" became a source of Russian pride and propaganda, and it wounded him politically, as critics charged that he responded sluggishly to the challenge of space exploration. Yet Eisenhower refused to panic after Sputnik?and he did more than just stay calm. He helped to guide the United States into the Space Age, even though Americans have given greater credit to John F. Kennedy for that achievement.

In *Eisenhower's Sputnik Moment*, Yanek Mieczkowski examines the early history of America's space program, reassessing Eisenhower's leadership. He details how Eisenhower approved breakthrough satellites, supported a new civilian space agency, signed a landmark science education law, and fostered improved relations with scientists. These feats made Eisenhower's post-Sputnik years not the flop that critics alleged but a time of remarkable progress, even as he endured the setbacks of recession, medical illness, and a humiliating first U.S. attempt to launch a satellite. Eisenhower's principled stands enabled him to resist intense pressure to boost federal spending, and he instead pursued his priorities?a balanced budget, prosperous economy, and sturdy national defense. Yet Sputnik also altered the world's power dynamics, sweeping Eisenhower in directions that were new, even alien, to him, and he misjudged the importance of space in the Cold War's "prestige race." By contrast, Kennedy capitalized on the issue in the 1960 election, and after taking office he urged a manned mission to the moon, leaving Eisenhower to grumble over the young president's aggressive approach.

Offering a fast-paced account of this Cold War episode, Mieczkowski demonstrates that Eisenhower built an impressive record in space and on earth, all the while offering warnings about America's stature and strengths that still hold true today.



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Editorial Review

Review

"Mieczkowski deftly explodes the myth of an alleged 'missile gap' between the Soviet Union and the US. He overturns as well equally fallacious perceptions that the US lagged behind the Soviet Union in the technology of launch vehicles, intercontinental missiles, and Earth satellites. Readers will gain a much-needed appreciation of how Eisenhower and his military-civilian-academic team planned and built the administrative and technical infrastructure enabling the US to enter the space age. Mieczkowski's book is thoroughly rooted in primary sources and numerous memoirs, and extends earlier scholarship by space historians R. Cargill Hall, Roger Launius, and Walter McDougall. Summing Up: Highly recommended."?Choice (August 2013)

"Yanek Mieczkowski's assessment of Dwight D. Eisenhower's response to the Soviet technological feat also has important implications for broader debates over Eisenhower's presidential leadership, the creation of national security organizations, and assessments of the space race. Revealing how this episode altered the course of Eisenhower's presidency, Mieczkowski argues that it also produced some significant, albeit overlooked, accomplishments. All readers will be rewarded with Mieczkowski's superbly written narrative, enlivened with rich anecdotes and lively biographical sketches. Mieczkowski reaffirms that Eisenhower's 'Sputnik moment' remains a complicated aspect of his presidential legacy, which holds spectacular failures and missed opportunities as well as the quiet victories that the author portrays so well."?Benjamin P. Greene, *The Journal of American History*, (March 2014)

"*Eisenhower's Sputnik Moment* recognizes the President's strength of leadership in the supposed furore immediately after the first *Sputnik* launch. Indeed the author cleverly uses the Sputnik lens to provide a critique of Eisenhower's overall leadership style.... Mieczkowski's work is highly readable and attractive to historians beyond those simply interested in space.... This work is another important building block in helping historians understand the thirty-fourth President as a rather more nuanced leader."?Mark Shanahan,*Journal of American Studies* (2014)

"In *Eisenhower's Sputnik Moment*, Yanek Mieczkowski. . . explores the thirty-fourth president's leadership style through his response to the launch of the Soviet Sputnik. With its focus on presidents, high policy, and personal anecdotes, this is as mainstream as science-flavored U.S. history gets. . . .This is less a book about a foreign policy crisis, per se, and more about the domestic political response to a perceived threat to American interests abroad?more 'the world in the U.S.' than 'U.S. in the world.'"?Audra J. Wolfe,*Oxford University Press Journals, Diplomatic History*(June 2015)

"By probing Eisenhower's response to the Sputnik scare, Yanek Mieczkowski, better than any historian thus far, has shown the general's understanding that his nation's strength rested on a proper balance of the spiritual, economic, technological, civilian, and military spheres. Drawing on both documentary material and his interviews with key figures, this lively, well-researched, and eminently readable book should be a primer for presidents and policymakers in the twenty-first century."?William B. Pickett, author of *Eisenhower Decides to Run*

"The 'Sputnik Moment' has been invoked in the twenty-first century as shorthand to symbolize how the United States has traditionally been surprised and shocked by external events and how it ultimately recovered and triumphed. It has held symbolic value as the classic story of American history in which a vision of progress dominates, but as Yanek Mieczkowski makes clear, there is so much more to learn. He analyzes this 'moment' as Eisenhower experienced it and finds that the classic narrative is much more about partisan politics and long-term Cold War strategy than about responding to crisis. This most welcome book will become a benchmark in the historiography of the space age."? Roger D. Launius, Senior Curator, National Air and Space Museum, Smithsonian Institution, author of *After Apollo: The Legacy of the American Moon Landings*

"The Soviet Union's launch of Sputnik in 1957 was a shock. Dwight Eisenhower, it turns out, was the nation's shock-absorber-in-chief. Deeply researched and absorbing, Yanek Mieczkowski's new book makes a ringing case for Eisenhower's calm, restrained approach to this alleged calamity, and shows convincingly that the president left the country well ahead of the Soviets in the race for space, and without breaking the federal budget. *Eisenhower's Sputnik Moment* is a superb contribution to Eisenhower scholarship and the new political history."?Andrew J. Rotter, Charles Dana Professor of History, Colgate University, author of *Comrades at Odds: The United States and India, 1947–1964*

"Yanek Mieczkowski's study of Eisenhower during the Sputnik period is a very wonderful contribution to history. In particular, Eisenhower has not been given enough credit for a lot of things. His leadership and his technical knowledge on how to catch up to the Russians got us to the moon. Most of the credit for this goes to Kennedy, but *Eisenhower's Sputnik Moment* shows who was really responsible for developing our space program. A lot of Ike's major contributions have just never been credited to him; I want to thank Mieczkowski for his valuable work."?Senator Larry Pressler (Ret.)

"Beautifully written and meticulously researched, this exquisitely balanced study of Ike's strengths and weaknesses during a national crisis is absolutely essential for understanding the complex, incremental style of leadership that led to monumental achievements by President Eisenhower. In reading this book you will understand why Frank Gehry, the world's most celebrated living architect, came to be fascinated by Ike's innovative scientific spirit and designed a memorial to match it."?Carl W. Reddel, Brig. Gen., USAF (Ret.), Executive Director, Eisenhower Memorial Commission

"Yanek Mieczkowski's new book helps greatly to clear away the deep weeds of political rhetoric and posturing about Sputnik in the early Cold War years, enabling the reader to understand fully the moment, President Eisenhower's response to it, and the consequences of his response. In my documentary on Eisenhower's Cold War leadership (*Ike: Building Weapons, Talking Peace*), I let Mieczkowski and his excellent research tell the real story behind Sputnik's apparent scientific and political 'triumphs' for the Soviet Union in the race for control of the heavens and superiority in the Cold War."?George A. Colburn, writer and producer of *Eisenhower's Secret War*

About the Author

Yanek Mieczkowski is Professor of History at Dowling College. He is the author of *Gerald Ford and the Challenges of the 1970s* and *The Routledge Historical Atlas of Presidential Elections*.

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