The granddad in chief; David Eisenhower, wife Julie mine memories of Ike's twilight years

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In 1969, Richard Nixon was eager to spend time at the Catoctin Mountains retreat reserved exclusively for the fraternal order he had just joined: U.S. presidents. His daughter Julie accompanied him as he whisked into the secluded sylvan enclave, where a jarringly simple sign announced their arrival in "Camp 3."

What happened to "David"? The disappearance of that name erased a dictate of Dwight D. Eisenhower, the GOP general Nixon had served as vice president. It was also a dismissal of the tribute Ike had paid to his grandson, whom Julie Nixon had just married. "I tell ya -- within one hour, they found the shed," Julie recalls over coffee one afternoon with her husband at their suburban Philadelphia home. "My dad got the sign back up." There would be no doubt when future visitors arrived: This place was Camp David.

Nixon's gesture further sealed a unique bond between two presidential families that are still linked four decades later in America's collective memory as a love-locked dynasty. American presidents come and go, but the fascination with their family trees endures. The presidential family diaspora carries with it many obligations, perceived and unperceived, imposed and organic. There are kin who buff legacies and kin who stain them. There are kin who demand attention and kin who disappear.

And then there are the archivists, the accumulators of arcana and tidbits, a particular breed of presidential kin that gathers and collates, often as part of a very public exercise in trying to understand the very non-public selves of their unknowable forebears. These days, David Eisenhower -- a Pulitzer finalist for his 1986 book, "Eisenhower at War" -- and his wife aspire to be this last kind of presidential kin. Julie chimed in three years ago with the book, "Pat Nixon: The Untold Story." And now she has collaborated with her husband in a reminiscence about Ike's retirement years, the just-released "Going Home to Glory: A Memoir of Life With Dwight D. Eisenhower, 1961 to 1969."

David Eisenhower, now director of the Institute for Public Service in the school of communication at the University of Pennsylvania, chats breezily in the living room of the couple's snug rancher set off the road in a thickly wooded area outside Berwyn. In the study, he shows off a baseball signed by Babe Ruth and bubbles enthusiastically about watching Dave Righetti throw a no-hitter at Yankee Stadium on the Fourth of July 1983 with his father-in-law in George Steinbrenner's box -- the son-in-law asked Nixon to sign his program, the only time he ever asked him for an autograph.

Eisenhower, a bookish 62-year-old with a soft, round face and a welcoming manner, bonded over baseball with both his future wife and his father-in-law. He played APBA, a dice-driven board game, with her when they were courting; he compiled lists of the greatest players at each position with the former president. Games delight and distract in glory times and in moments of crisis. David's best friend, former Virginia congressman Tom Davis, remembers playing whiffle ball with his pal on the White House tennis court when Nixon was president and relaxing over the board games Diplomacy and Risk at David and Julie's Washington apartment in the midst of Watergate.

Julie gets coffee in a kitchen where the refrigerator looks like a typical grandparent's -- covered with photos of children on magnets. But look closer, and you'll double-take. Why, there's a magnetized picture of Richard Nixon. Not President Richard Nixon but Julie's "daddy," with his then-2-year-old granddaughter, Melanie. "She looks like me," says Julie, now a slender 62-year-old mother of three and grandmother turned out fashionably in a fitted pantsuit.

The daughter says she has never seen the movie "Nixon," never read the "negative things." Julie and David both say they've never heard the song "Fortunate Son," Creedence Clearwater Revival's Vietnam-era hit that lead singer John Fogerty has said was inspired by the perception that David Eisenhower received privileged treatment during the war because of his family connections. The title rankles, ever so slightly, they say, because Eisenhower served two years on a guided-missile cruiser while in the Navy Reserves, though he didn't see combat. Nixon advised him to join the reserves, rather than the Army, and he took his competency test in the White House, Eisenhower recalls.

In the living room, Julie ushers me over to two cushiony upholstered chairs. "Sit in my dad's," she says. "Mom always liked comfortable furniture."

The couple is there to chat about their Eisenhower book, but they are surrounded by memories of Julie's parents that only they could recognize as memories. A long antiquey table against the wall; a framed lacquer image of a deer given to Richard and Pat Nixon during a 1950s goodwill trip they made to Vietnam at the request of President Eisenhower. The furniture came to David and Julie as the Nixons downsized to their last residence, a townhouse in New Jersey. "We really lucked out in that move," Julie observes.

Midway through the conversation, she brings over a wood carving of Camp David, a gift to her father by a U.S. serviceman stationed in Vietnam. "Look," she says, flipping it over to show off a piece of paper held on by peeling Scotch tape: "For the president of the United States," it reads.

She considers it, then says, almost to herself: "I've got to get some more Scotch tape."

In the nearly half-century since Ike went off to retirement at his farm in Gettysburg, ex-presidents have kept squirreling deeper and deeper behind layers of men in sunglasses with earpieces. A heavy gate and guard booth block the way to Jimmy Carter's home in Plains, Ga.; wary guardians monitor anyone who approaches George W. Bush's homes in Texas or Bill Clinton's in Chappaqua, N.Y.

But when Ike leaves the White House, a single Secret Service agent and vehicle follow his car to Gettysburg, David and Julie write in their memoir. Ike and Mamie Eisenhower are joined by the family's personal attendants, Sgt. John Moaney and Rosie Woods (not to be confused with Rose Mary Woods, she of the mysteriously erased Watergate tapes). As their car approaches the farm, the driver of the Secret Service vehicle honks the horn and makes a U-turn, heading back to Washington.

At the Gettysburg cattle ranch, the first property Ike owned after decades of living in either Army housing or the White House, the help refer to the 70-year-old former president as "the General." He's fabulously curmudgeonly. He institutes a "shoot on sight order" for barnyard cats that dare trespass onto his land, chafes at a poll that ranks his presidency among the worst ever, gripes that Kennedy loyalists are trying to pin the blame on him for the failed Bay of Pigs invasion, and argues with the editors of his memoirs. The General's son, John Eisenhower -- author of numerous history volumes, who is now 88 and living in Trappe, Md. -- assists with the memoirs.

The grandson makes 30 cents an hour tending the vegetable garden and painting fences, tasks the General expects to be completed in chop-chop fashion. David Eisenhower, who turns 13 that first summer on the farm, often gets stuck with "Granddad" for terrifying car rides. Ike hasn't driven himself for two decades, and once he gets his license, even a short jaunt with him behind the wheel can be a "traumatic experience."

"Granddad took corners sharply; the squeal of rubber against concrete and gravel roads never ceased to surprise him, or unsettle me," the grandson writes. "Every bump and lurch elicited a faint 'damnation,' and every other driver on the road was evaluated by the literal standards Granddad had memorized from his driving brochures." He'd blast his horn "like an air raid alert" at tourists who blocked the road gawking at Civil War monuments.

"He had high expectations of everybody," Julie tells me, a demure smile underscoring the magnitude of the understatement. "He wasn't that warm." Dinner conversations could turn into interrogations, as if they were aides-de-camp or joint chiefs: "What's your opinion? What do you think?"

Mamie Eisenhower, who is 64 when her husband leaves office, inhabits a role that seems more quiet and deferential than influential in the presidential retirement tableau. The couple share homes on the Gettysburg farm and at their winter place on the 11th fairway at El Dorado Country Club in Palm Desert, Calif., a sunny escape built for them by the Texas oilman Robert McCulloch. Mamie suffered, her grandson and Julie say, from troubles with a rheumatic heart and Meniere's syndrome, an inner-ear disorder that can cause dizziness and other symptoms.

Her condition, which was not widely known during her husband's political career, was probably responsible for the catty rumors about Mamie being a "tottering" heavy drinker, Julie and David say in the interview. She was known as a vivacious hostess, but in the memoir she mostly shows up playing solitaire or watching soap operas in bed while her husband, who will have his own serious health problems, keeps a hectic schedule.

Eisenhower has too much energy not to make a ruckus, prowling their California redoubt "like a caged lion." "He makes everyone nervous," a card-playing buddy observes. One day, he grabs an air rifle from a guest and takes aim at a silver dollar on a silver coffee urn 25 paces away. He misses, knocking a hole in a strip of glass above a door leading into the bedroom, where Mamie is wrapped in towels for a massage.

" 'Darndest thing, Ike,' she declares suspiciously," the Eisenhowers write. " 'The masseuse told me she couldn't rub too hard -- little pieces of glass all over my back.' "

Mamie could not "pacify and entertain him," so she would talk staffers into finding activities to occupy him. " 'Take him off my hands,' " she would say, " 'Alone here he just goes wild.' "

David Eisenhower, who decades later is still trying to figure out his Granddad, writes that he was discouraged from asking about the General's wartime experiences leading Allied troops in Europe during World War II. What he learned about the liberation of Europe was from books and documentaries, the grandson writes.

Once David asks Mamie if Ike's "compulsive restlessness, his habit of maintaining company around the clock, revealed a weakness, perhaps a fear of being alone, or a nonexistent inner life," the grandson writes. She doesn't really answer, lamenting to her grandson that she had had a painting studio built for Ike in an upstairs room at the Gettysburg house, but he never used it because he had to be downstairs to "poke his nose in everything."

The grandson follows up with another question, wondering whether Mamie "had really known Dwight Eisenhower." She pauses, then says: "I'm not sure anyone did."

In the early years of Ike's retirement, his grandson attends Philips Exeter Academy, a prestigious New Hampshire boarding school, where his roommate was Fred Grandy, who later starred as Gopher on "The Love Boat" and became a Republican member of Congress. Grandy, now a morning talk show host at Washington's WMAL Radio, remembers somehow getting the grandson of the Republican Party's biggest living icon elected president of the school's Young Democrats club. "The General was a little pissed off" about the prank, and the young Eisenhower never served in his new office, Grandy recalls.

"You had some baggage," Julie teases her husband.

David Eisenhower shrugs: "I'm the only grandson. It's a difficult relationship."

The couple, both products of Republican big shots, had met as children. They like to refer to a photograph of them as 8-year-olds in 1957, on the reviewing stand for the second Eisenhower-Nixon inauguration. Julie had recently crashed a sled into a tree and had a skinned nose and black eye. Granddad advises his vice president's little girl to turn to one side to shield her black eye from the camera. In the resulting picture, David Eisenhower is looking directly at his future wife.

They are reunited when Julie enrolls at Smith College and David is a student at nearby Amherst College, a bastion of liberals. Tom Davis, the former congressman and David Eisenhower chum, was also at Amherst in those days and says "the middle of the road" at the school in the 1960s "was down the left-hand gutter."

The General was, predictably, unenthusiastic about David's college choice -- but also diplomatic. In a letter, he writes, "I had always secretly hoped that you might develop a yen for West Point but most certainly I have no criticism of your choice of your present school. It has a truly wonderful reputation."

The General isn't easily persuaded about the romance that develops there, either, though Mamie is enchanted about the prospects. At Gettysburg, the General summons the young couple to his office and chews out his grandson. "I was not concentrating on the right things; I was neglecting my health. . . . I was oblivious of the long road, doing too much, planning too little. Julie felt, and was supposed to feel, partly responsible," David writes.

The romance that blossoms, despite Granddad's discouraging tone, is set against a backdrop of Vietnam War protests. While David courts Julie, his grandfather is consulting with President Johnson, who calls often, the grandson writes, for "spiritual" succor. "He wanted the comfort of communicating with someone who could comprehend the unique pressures of the presidency." The General thought Johnson's "most serious error in Vietnam was procrastination." In a meeting with Defense Secretary Robert McNamara, he demands, "Why don't you declare war?"

In their living room in Berwyn, Julie gently interjects as David is trying to explain the General's thoughts about the war. "You're not making it clear your granddad was against what the president was doing in Vietnam," she says. "We've clarified that" in the book, she says.

David smiles. "We've left this thing ambiguous."

Just as the backdrop for the romance was war, the backdrop for the engagement that bound together the Nixons and Eisenhowers was a presidential campaign, and all the anxieties that accompany such contests. In November 1967, Julie and David decide to tell Mamie, but David takes two days to get around to breaking the news to Granddad. The conversation leads to an "uneasy silence." But when he returns to Amherst, a letter waits for him: It contains an endorsement of the engagement and gives another glimpse of the Granddad he seldom saw.

"For many years I have been struck by the virtual impossibility of men of the Nordic strain to express, in a face-to-face meeting, their affection," Ike, by then in failing health, writes. "I sometimes envy the Latins, who do not seem to be prey to those particular inhibitions -- but I would not go so far as to favor the habit of men kissing each other."

Meanwhile, David writes that his future father-in-law is "walking a tightrope by accommodating my desire to join the campaign trail" while trying to avoid giving the impression that he is trying to pressure Ike to endorse him. The aging Eisenhower's imprimatur "mattered on a personal level and a political level," Julie says in the interview. "He was a godlike figure in my father's life."

Two decades later Nixon gives Julie and David his notes from a meeting with Eisenhower the year before the election. Chatting about the roiling war protests, a smiling Eisenhower says: "Maybe the hippie generation would benefit from a stint in the Army."

Eisenhower eventually endorses Nixon, and with an endorsement of another sort in hand from the General, the young couple orders wedding invitations. No simple task. The fancy engraving requires ample advance notice, meaning the order would go to the printer before the election. If Nixon loses election, Julie says in the interview, they figure the wedding can "be a consolation." There is also the matter of how to identify her parents, who might be the president-elect and first lady-to-be. Or not. They decided to play it safe and call them "the honorable Mr. and Mrs. Nixon."

They marry on Dec. 22, 1968, more than a month after Nixon's victory. By then, Ward 8 at Walter Reed Medical Center had already been Granddad's home for months.

"He retained his mind to the very end," the grandson says in the interview. "There's no period of . . ."

"Mental decline," Julie says, finishing her husband's sentence the way that some couples married for 42 years tend do.

"In fact he was . . . " David says.

"Sharper," Julie says.

David rushes to his grandfather's bedside in March 1969 to find a man whose eyes have gone black, "dilated by darkness and morphine." On March 28, an Army general summons the grandson back to Eisenhower's bedside. It was time to say goodbye.

The grandson falls in line with his own father and Ike's doctor, Gen. Leonard Heaton, at the foot of the bed.

They stand "at rigid attention."

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