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Document #1051; February 10, 1959

To Robert J. Biggs

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The Papers of Dwight David Eisenhower, Volume XIX - The Presidency: Keeping the Peace
 Part VI: *Setbacks: November 1958 to February 1959*
 Chapter 15: *"Debate is the breath of life"*

Dear Mr. Biggs: I was much moved by your recent letter to me, and can well appreciate from it the serious thought and reflection you are giving to problems affecting our country.¹ The points you raised (some not entirely clear to me) included three that especially impressed me. Some of them clearly have significance to our free society and form of government.

I refer to your comments that normal confidence and feeling of security can be easily shaken in these times; your implied request that I undertake to stabilize the spirit of our population, and your conviction that if the government and its leaders know the nation's goals and missions and state the way they should be achieved, those leaders could be sure of the backing of our people.²

Concerning these comments I have several observations.

I think it is undeniably true that the activities of our government have tended to become much more complex, impersonal and remote from the individual, with consequent loss in simplicity, direct human contact and clear guidance by higher authority I believe you to be urging. In good part this situation is inherent in life in the mid-twentieth century--in a highly developed economy and a highly complex society such as our own. The complexity is reflected in the need to qualify (to "hedge" is the term you use) many of our policies, which means simply to give careful thought to the possibility that what we do in one field may have unacceptable impact in another.³ To reduce complexity I believe it essential to keep governmental activities as close as possible to the people concerned. I have frequently stressed the need for these functions to be performed at local and state level rather than at the Federal.⁴ Incidentally, I assure you that I have tried always to avoid creating any doubt in anyone's mind as to my own goals and convictions. If I have failed in this respect, it has been purely an error of an expression and not one of purpose.

Another part of the difficulty undoubtedly comes from the high degree of confusion and uncertainty on major national problems that seems to exist today. As you know, for four years our government has been a divided government, with the Administration confronted by a Congress controlled by the opposition--and the two working, if not in opposition, at least at cross purposes much of the time. An example is the sparring that seems to go on constantly over our defense situation--and specifically over our missile position. It is difficult indeed to maintain a reasoned and accurately informed understanding of our defense situation on the part of our citizenry when many prominent officials, possessing no standing or expertness except as they themselves claim it, attempt to further their own ideas or interests by resort to statements more distinguished by stridency than by accuracy.⁵

Even if this division in the government did not exist, I doubt that citizens like yourself could ever, under our democratic system, be provided with the universal degree of certainty, the confidence in their understanding of our problems, and the clear guidance from higher authority that you believe needed. Such unity is not only

logical but indeed indispensable in a successful military organization, but in a democracy debate is the breath of life.⁶ This is to me what Lincoln meant by government "of the people, by the people, and for the people."

The mental stress and burden which this form of government imposes has been particularly well recognized in a little book about which I have spoken on several occasions. It is "The True Believer," by Eric Hoffer; you might find it of interest. In it, he points out that dictatorial systems make one contribution to their people which leads them to tend to support such systems--freedom from the necessity of informing themselves and making up their own minds concerning these tremendous complex and difficult questions.⁷

But while this responsibility is a taxing one to a free people it is their great strength as well--from millions of individual free minds come new ideas, new adjustments to emerging problems, and tremendous vigor, vitality and progress.

One of my own major aims and efforts has been to assist in every way open to me in giving our people a better understanding of the great issues that face our country today--some of them indeed issues of life and death. Through being better informed, they can best gain greater assurance regarding our nation's situation and participate in establishing policies and programs which they think to be sound and right. The quest for certainty is at best, however, a long and arduous one. While complete success will always elude us, still it is a quest which is vital to self-government and to our way of life as free men.

May I end by saying how stimulating I found your letter and the thoughts it evoked, and how much I admire your fortitude in pondering these problems despite your deep personal adversity. My best wishes are with you in your grave illness. *Sincerely*

¹ Biggs, a 44-year-old World War II veteran who had served in the Army from July 1942 to November 1945, had written on November 8, 1958 (same file as document). He had been employed as a road and safety supervisor for a trucking concern in Washington State and had previously been a bank trust officer. He had been hospitalized since December with a diagnosis of inoperable pancreatic cancer. Presidential Secretary Ann Whitman had asked General Goodpaster if this letter appealed to him as "something the President should answer (and that you would *like* to draft?)."

² Biggs had written that contemporary American feelings of insecurity "manifest themselves in the guise of a recession, etc." Eisenhower, he said, had an unprecedented opportunity to remedy the situation by making "well thought out direct statements to the public to assure them that government does not operate without them and in consideration of them."

³ Biggs had said that he "felt from your recent speeches the feeling of hedging and a little uncertainty. We wait for someone to speak for us and back him completely if the statement is made in truth."

⁴ See, for example, no. 1041.

⁵ In January 1959 perceived disparities in guided missile capabilities between the United States and the Soviet Union--the so-called "missile gap"--had rekindled a controversy (for background see no. 396). Surveying U.S. missile program progress, the *New York Times* had described what Administration critics saw as a growing gap in missile production. At a National Press Club luncheon on January 14 Eisenhower had conceded that it would be "a little stupid" to deny the Russian lead in certain phases of missile development. But, he emphasized, it was "absolutely fatuous and futile" to try to compare United States progress against that of the Soviet Union on an item-by-item basis (*Public Papers of the Presidents: Eisenhower, 1959*, pp. 25 - 26). On January 17 Senate majority leader Lyndon Johnson had announced an investigation to "straighten out the confusion" over the nation's defenses. Other Senators called for the quick adoption of more extensive airborne defenses and the purchase of additional first-generation ICBMs. The Air Force took the opportunity to pressure the Administration to support its program for the creation of twenty-nine Atlas and Titan missile squadrons. See *New York Times*, January 12, 15, 18, 31; Watson, *Into the Missile Age*, pp. 314 - 19; Glennan, *The Birth of NASA*, p. 23; and Levine, *The Missile and Space Race*, pp. 86 - 88. For developments see no. 1100.

⁶ Biggs had written that Americans needed "more of the attitude of a commanding officer who knows the goal and the mission and states, without evasion, the way it is to be done."

⁷ See Eric Hoffer, *The True Believer: Thoughts on the Nature of Mass Movements* (New York, 1951). Hoffer's frustrated, isolated and insecure "true believer" was a person who found meaning in his life by joining a movement. Hoffer had written, "Of what avail is freedom to choose if the self be ineffectual? We join a mass movement to escape individual responsibility, or in the words of the ardent young Nazi, 'to be free from freedom'" (p. 30). Unhappy with his life and social setting, a true believer was prepared to make great sacrifices in a collective effort to rebuild society to his liking (James T. Baker, *Eric Hoffer* [Boston, 1982], pp. 22 - 25). Eisenhower had read Hoffer's book in 1952 and had given copies to his friends. In 1956 *Look* magazine had run a feature on Hoffer, calling him "Ike's Favorite Author."

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