

Blake, David Haven, College of New Jersey. "Understanding Ike Day: From the Archives of Politics and Celebrity"

On October 13, 1956, CBS aired a remarkable television program weeks before the presidential election. Billed "A Salute to Eisenhower," the program was a star-studded tribute to the president on his 66th birthday. Jimmy Stewart hosted the program from Hollywood; the singers Howard Keele and Kathryn Grayson performed a duet from Abilene, Kansas; Nat King Cole and Eddie Fisher appeared from Los Angeles; and Helen Hayes offered birthday wishes while cutting a 2000 lb. birthday cake from a hotel ballroom in Washington, DC. As the program assembled images from across the continent, the president sat with his family, watching the tribute on the White House television.

Part of a nationwide "Ike Day" celebration, the program never mentioned the Republican platform nor broached policy at all. And yet, the press and public immediately viewed it as political gold. "Without a single plea for partisan votes," the *Washington Post* opined, "it was the most politically effective program of the week."

This paper uses Ike Day to explore the history of politics and celebrity in the United States. Archived in the Eisenhower presidential library, the Ike Day telecast provides a stunning contrast with the celebrity-themed materials in the Hollywood Democratic Committee (HDC) records at the Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research. In 1944, the HDC organized a radio broadcast to support Roosevelt's re-election that enlisted dozens of stars. Written by Norman Corwin, the script suggests a model of the activist celebrity which twenty-two years later, Ike Day would effectively try to stamp out. Where the Roosevelt broadcast actively engaged political discussion, using celebrity as an entrance into partisan debate, Ike Day used its celebrities to enhance Eisenhower's image as a lovable grandfather. The celebrity was useful to the campaign less as an advocate than as populist window dressing.

David Haven Blake is department chair and Professor of English at The College of New Jersey. He is the author of *Walt Whitman and the Culture of American Celebrity* and the co-editor of *Walt Whitman, Where the Future Becomes Present*. He has written about politics and celebrity for the *Huffington Post*, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, and the *Chronicle Review*.