

# Bridge—Not Chess— Is the Ultimate War Game

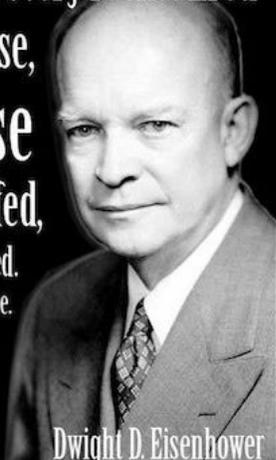
There's a reason why Eisenhower and his generals were passionate about this most cerebral pastime.

By MICHAEL LEDEEN  
Sent in by Doris Neiman

On the night of Nov. 7, 1942, as allied forces in Operation Torch headed for the North African coast, commanding Gen. Dwight Eisenhower waited anxiously. It was foggy, and news of the invasion was slow to arrive. To pass the time, Ike and three associates played bridge.

The game was an important part of Ike's life—throughout the war, in the White House and in retirement. In those years many American leaders were passionate bridge players: One of the men at Eisenhower's table that night was Gen. Alfred Gruenther, later NATO Commander and for many years president of the World Bridge Federation. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles bragged about his mastery of the game, and his department long conducted a world-wide bridge tournament in embassies and consulates.

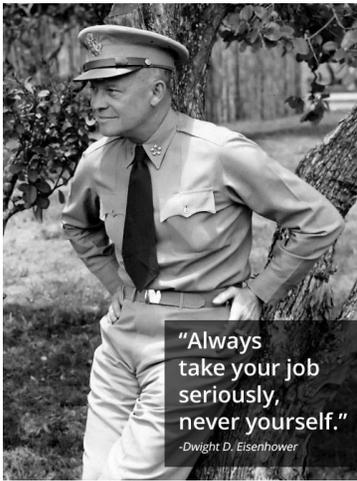
**Every gun that is made,  
every warship launched, every rocket fired  
signifies, in the final sense,  
a theft from those  
who hunger and are not fed,  
those who are cold and are not clothed.  
This world in arms is not spending money alone.  
It is spending the sweat of its laborers,  
the genius of its scientists,  
the hopes of its children.**



Dwight D. Eisenhower

You'll often hear that chess is the ultimate model for geopolitics, indeed for war itself. In the 1963 hit movie "From Russia With Love," James Bond is menaced by the brilliant Soviet chess master Tov Kronsteen (clearly modeled on Boris Spassky).

But Eisenhower knew better. No board game can replicate the conditions of the battlefield or the maneuvers of geostrategy, for one simple reason: All of the pieces are visible on the table.



Card games are better models because vital information is always concealed by the “fog of war” and the deception of opponents. Most of the time a bridge player sees only one-quarter of the cards, and some of the information he might gather from them is false.

Bridge is largely about communication, and every message a player sends—by bidding or playing a significant card—is broadcast to the player’s partner and his opponents. Frequently a player will have to decide whether he would rather tell the truth to his partner (thereby informing his opponents) or deceive the enemy (thus running the risk of seriously fooling his ally across the table).

Nothing like this exists in even the greatest board games. They permit some feints, to be sure, but not outright lies. Great bridge players are great liars—as are brilliant military leaders and diplomats and politicians. To take the most celebrated recent example, Deng Xiaoping, the man who transformed modern China, was an avid bridge player who had a private railroad car for his games.

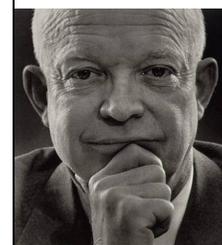
The difficulty of weighing truth and lies is one reason that computers don’t win at bridge, whereas at the highest level of chess they do very well. IBM’s Deep Blue defeated grandmaster Garry Kasparov in a six-game match in 1997, but bridge is simply too tough for the machines.

Bridge may also be too tough for contemporary Americans. The bridge-playing population is shrinking and aging. In Eisenhower’s time, close to half of American families had at least one active bridge player; as of 10 years ago, a mere three million played at least once a week, and their average age was 51. Kibitz at a national bridge championship or a local club game and you’ll be impressed by the white hair and the number of wheel chairs and oxygen tanks.

Another measure: When Operation Torch landed, there were several bridge books on the best-seller list. Nowadays bridge books are printed in small numbers by specialized publishers. Poker books do somewhat better, but no writer’s celebrity approaches that of Ely Culbertson or Charles Goren, the high-profile bridge authors in the past century.

The shrinking population of American bridge players goes hand in hand with other evidence of declining mental discipline, including shortening attention spans and decreases in book readership. You can’t be a winning card player unless you can concentrate for several hours, and mastery of the game takes years.

"A people that values its privileges above its principles soon loses both."



Dwight D. Eisenhower

Neither is bridge a solo activity; you need a partner with whom you must reach very detailed agreements about myriad situations. All this is good for the mind: Bridge provides stimulation that can help players retain their mental toughness and stave off dementia.

Eisenhower and Gruenther would be disturbed by the declining popularity of bridge, knowing that it is a quintessential American game, developed in its modern form in the 1920s largely on board the Vagrant, Harold Vanderbilt's yacht. American players continue to win in international competition, but they are mostly professionals. Insofar as they have day jobs, they are often stock or options traders, not business leaders, diplomats or military officers.

It might be helpful to introduce bridge instruction and competition to high schools and colleges, as has been done with chess. Bridge lovers like Bill Gates and Warren Buffett would surely approve and could sponsor programs and tournaments for young players, with suitable rewards.

It's no accident that the greatest thinker of modern times, Niccolò Machiavelli, was a card player, nor that his masterpiece, "The Prince," remains essential reading for our special forces officers. A prince, Machiavelli wrote, should be "faithful to his word, guileless" but "his disposition should be such that, if he needs to be the opposite, he knows how." That's a lesson you can only learn from kings and jacks, not kings and rooks.

Mr. Ledeen, a freedom scholar at the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies, is a bridge life master and the former coach of the Israeli national bridge team.

*For more information on D-Day, Bridge and Eisenhower, see:*

<http://home.comcast.net/~dist8adv/jun09/ike.htm>



Bridge game in the White House Treaty Room at Ike's 70th birthday celebration (October 14, 1960).

Eisenhower (left) is playing with William Robinson, Bernard Montgomery and an unidentified fourth.