Major Eisenhower was in trouble. It was not the first time he had challenged his superior officers and the authority of the US Army. But this was a career-threatening incident. It was a challenge that could not be laughed off as a spirited cadet’s kick at the merciless discipline of West Point or even a young officer’s failure to stay in uniform and maintain precise army decorum. Eisenhower was thirty years old in 1920. Married, with a young son, the major had recently been the commanding officer of more than 10,000 soldiers getting ready for battle in Europe. But the world war was over now. The army’s leadership was frantically trying to hold its own as Congress chopped the military budgets. Eisenhower’s criticism of the army’s leadership and tactics was not welcomed.

As Ike quickly discovered, it is risky for a professional soldier to challenge higher authority. It is risky in any organization, large or small, public or private, if you wish to have a successful career. Any senior officer, corporate executive, or university president inclined to be honest can explain just when and how it is possible to swim against the current of established organizational dogma and doctrine. If that person happens to be insightful and exceptionally open, he or she will also tell you how dangerous it is to short-circuit the hierarchy or criticize an organization’s values and established ideas—especially in print.
In the years immediately following the Great War, it was particularly dangerous to ignore the US Army’s hierarchy and promote heretical ideas. The nation’s military was shrinking. Congress in the early 1920s did not cheer the American contribution to victory in Europe. The majority in Congress was unwilling to honor the army’s achievement by spending more tax dollars on national defense. While American veterans had good cause for pride in what they had accomplished “over there,” most Americans were in a big hurry to get the experience behind them. They placidly accepted the US Senate’s rejection of the peace treaty, the Versailles settlement in which President Woodrow Wilson had invested so much of his reputation. Republican Warren G. Harding’s campaign slogan in 1920 was “Normalcy,” and voters found that brand of politics appealing.

After the United States opted out of the League of Nations and President Harding took office, there seemed to be little need for an expensive military force. To most Americans there appeared to be no obvious threats to US security on the horizon. A surly Congress cut the army’s proposed strength from half a million to 300,000, and chopped it again the following year to 12,000 officers and 125,000 enlisted men—a skeletal force at best.

The shrinking army was an especially unpleasant organization for professionals, whether they were enlisted men or officers. Squeezed down in rank following the war, officers—even the most promising individuals—had little to look forward to in their military careers. That was true above all for those men who had new ideas about their service. Shrinking organizations encourage everyone on the inside to defend their turf and avoid risk. That is precisely what the Chief of Infantry did when he read Eisenhower’s article in the Infantry Journal calling for changes in accepted tactics—the same tactics that had just won the war in Europe. Major General Charles S. Farnsworth had commanded an infantry division in France, and he was understandably unhappy to read an essay that was critical of the army’s tactics and the attitudes of its officers.

The article proposed a different kind of infantry division, one in which a relatively new weapon, the tank, would play a decisive role in combat. The author, who had not been to France and had never experienced war
firsthand, challenged the wisdom of his superiors in the chain of command. “A great many officers,” he wrote, “are prone to denounce the tank as a freak development of trench warfare which has already outlived its usefulness.” Other officers, the article said, had never been in action with the tanks and apparently based their views “on hearsay.” Having little experience with tank warfare, “they simply ignore it in their calculations and mental pictures of future battles.” As a result, Eisenhower said, many officers fell “into a grievous error” and needed to be rescued by “facts” and “by sane and sound reasoning.”

The article had a sharp edge. It cut with particular force his superior officers, the ones who apparently needed to be instructed in proper infantry tactics. We will probably never know if Major General Farnsworth placed himself among those who based their decisions on “hearsay” or those who were given to “grievous error” by grounding their professional judgments on a slim or nonexistent base of information. What we do know is that the Chief of Infantry took hold of the issue at once. He called in the audacious major and told him his ideas were wrong, even “dangerous.” Calling for changes in the organization of the infantry at that time, in that tenuous political and budgetary environment, was a mistake, and he told Major Eisenhower to keep his ideas to himself. If he persisted, he would be court-martialed. The Chief of Infantry harshly stifled this critique of the existing structure and established tactics of his forces. The army was circling its wagons.

Ike had been encouraged to write on tank warfare by his good friend and fellow officer at Fort Meade, Maryland, George S. Patton, who wrote and published his own article on the great potential of the tank. Patton’s article, which was even more aggressive than Ike’s, called for radical changes in army strategy and tactics. Patton had returned from the war in Europe as a confirmed devotee of tank warfare. Never given to understatement, he recommended making the tanks into an entirely separate force that would be freed from the slow-moving infantry and allowed to operate as a relatively autonomous battle force.

Patton, too, was admonished for his critique of the infantry, but his courageous service in France, his powerful friends in the army, and his
image as an officer uniquely dedicated to combat shielded him from the worst effects of the incident. It did not hurt at that phase of his career to have a Distinguished Service Cross and a Distinguished Service Medal from the Great War. He, too, was vulnerable to attacks by the top echelons of the military bureaucracy, but he was tolerated as a unique variation on the traditional American officer: a man from the West (in his case) or the South and from one of those “better families” that provided backing for many a military career. Major Eisenhower lacked Patton’s background, his polo ponies, and his panache. Patton could get away with his article because he was Patton, and besides, he shortly returned to the cavalry.

Eisenhower, by contrast, was vulnerable to Major General Farnsworth’s threat. Ike understood that the Chief of Infantry was not bluffing and decided to keep his mouth shut about tanks. He had been promoted to lieutenant colonel during the war (at the age of twenty-eight), reduced following the armistice of 1918 to his regular rank of captain, and then promoted to major. It was not at all clear in the early 1920s that he would ever make it beyond that rank.

He was happy at Camp Meade, where he temporarily commanded a tank brigade. But he had barely cleared the crisis over his article in the Infantry Journal when he found himself threatened by another superior officer with a court-martial over a different matter. He had applied for a housing allowance that he was specifically not entitled to receive. He later said he made a mistake because he had not done his homework and did not understand the army’s intricate manual of regulations. He had never even bothered to read it, he said. That was a flimsy excuse that the army’s Inspector General was not about to accept. When the facts in the case became known to Brigadier General Charles G. Helmick, Eisenhower was caught in an embarrassing and threatening situation. Helmick was not inclined to brush aside an illegal payment of $250.67. Hard times made dollars and even pennies matter. Helmick wanted a court-martial that certainly would have ended the major’s military career. While Eisenhower managed to wiggle through this second career crisis, his army ratings in “tact” and “judgment” slid down.
These experiences leave us struggling to understand how and why Ike was having so much trouble with superior authority. Why did this young officer—at the time of this last incident Eisenhower was still only thirty—get into situations that pushed him to the brink of failure? These were not isolated incidents. There were others. The general pattern suggests that his efforts to become an effective military leader were seriously threatened by his failure to acquire a good sense of how his senior officers would respond to what he did, what the particular situation of the US Army was during the early 1920s, and what he needed to do to make a success of his career as a professional soldier.

To that date, he had not displayed the kind of hard-driving ambition we usually see in young professionals tagged for successful careers. He did not have the tightly focused sense of purpose that puts a professional in any organization on the fast track. He seemed, in fact, to have on blinders that obscured much of the setting that would control his career and the development of the entire US military—all services—for the foreseeable future.

To Major Eisenhower, of course, it looked different. From his perspective, it seemed as if the army was determined to thwart his career. Otherwise, he would have been sent to France during the war to lead men into combat. He had almost made it on one occasion, only to be stopped virtually at the dock. As a result, he acquired a great deal of experience in organizing and implementing training regimes during the war. The army tagged him as an officer with a special talent for training raw recruits and militias, and that tag locked him out of the combat command he coveted.

Football also kept leading his career astray. He loved the game and had played it fairly well before a crippling injury knocked him off West Point’s team. He then became a talented coach and found that his reward was a series of assignments that somehow always involved coaching. Coaching was not likely to lead him to high command. In the early 1920s, Ike explained his troubled career by looking outside himself for the source of his problems. But that is what most of us do when things are not going too well.
To some extent, he was right. He was being pigeonholed by the army bureaucracy, tucked into a category that suggested his career could be interesting and useful to the service and his country—even though it would certainly not lead to the top level of command, either battlefield command (his clear choice) or command in shaping strategy or the army’s all-important political context. The army bureaucrats had locked Ike in a dead-end organizational role. It was not at all clear in the early 1920s what he could do to break away from the path being charted for him. But it was very clear that he had the primary responsibility for finding a new path if he was going to get ahead. It was also clear that if he kept causing trouble for senior army officers, that would not happen.

He had to change because the US Army’s hierarchy was digging in for peacetime service and years, maybe decades, of shrinking budgets and slow promotions. Ultimately Ike would need to understand that hierarchy better and learn to control his tendency to be an abrasive subordinate if he was going to be a successful leader. During the war, he had demonstrated what he was capable of doing. With limited resources, he had built up an exemplary training camp. He had done this under the pressure of a wartime schedule that left no room for mistakes, no room for delays. But in 1920 and 1921, it appeared that his good works might not save his career. He might have only two choices: either he would leave the army, junking a decade of military experience, or he would learn how to deal with superior authority in new ways and with new results.

In order to understand the choices he made, the way they played out in his career, and his distinctive style of leadership, we need to look more closely at his personality, his identity, and the society that had shaped it. We need to start by looking further back, before the Great War, to his life in the small town of Abilene, Kansas, and to his interesting, rather unusual family.