

Feature



The Eisenhower Jacket and Its Influence on Fashion

Byron Connell

This military-inspired design is an American original that has also become a fashion classic for both men and women

Question: What do these three garments have in common?

1. A waist-length semi-fitted jacket with a distinct waistband

closed by a button, closed by fasteners concealed by a fly from the waistband to the collar, a pointed collar above pronounced lapels, two pleated breast pockets,

with three-pointed flaps closed by concealed



Original Ike jacket worn by Eisenhower. [Kansas Historical Society](#) (above). Dickie Eisenhower jacket adapted as garrison uniform for [Stargate Atlantis](#) TV series (right).

fasteners, two side slash pockets, plain (unbuttoned) cuffs, and shoulder straps, made in wool.

2. A waist-length loose jacket dart-fitted and pleated to a waistband, closed by one button on the waistband and six to the collar, with an oversized rolled and pointed collar, three-quarter sleeves with rolled and pointed cuffs, and no pockets.



Stylized Eisenhower jacket, [McCall 8024](#), 1950.

3. A waist-length jacket with an exposed zipper running from the bottom to the collar, a simple pointed collar without lapels, two slash side pockets, and cuffs with single exposed buttons, made in a polyester and cotton blend.



Answer: They're all identified as "Eisenhower Jackets," despite distinct differences between the original, "military" jacket and the later civilian ones. This article attempts to examine how this came about. The reader must be warned, however, that in places I have been forced to speculate on sources of influence.

Background

The Eisenhower Jacket originated in 1944 as a U.S. Army uniform jacket. Twenty-seven years earlier, when the U.S. entered the Great War in 1917, the uniforms of the American and British armies were very similar. Both included khaki wool tunics and trousers. Both armies' tunic for enlisted men had a stand collar, with breast and side pockets. (British army officers had an open collar displaying a shirt and tie. U.S. Army officers wore the same tunic as enlisted men.) The similarity changed in 1925, when the U.S. Army replaced the closed-collar tunic with an open-collared coat displaying a shirt and tie. Initially provided only for the Army Air Corps, it was extended the next year to all officers and enlisted men.¹

¹ Mollo, *Army Uniforms of World War I*, cf. plates 112 and 182. For an extended description of the U.S. Army uniform, see my article, "The United States Army, 1917-1918: A Description of the Enlisted Man's Service Uniform," *The ICG Newsletter* IX:2 (2010); 1-2. Connell, "WWII U.S. Army Officers' Uniforms," [The Virtual Costumer 9:2 \(2011\)](#); 40.

The British army retained the World War I tunic as its basic service dress until 1937, when it adopted “battledress,” a uniform intended for use in garrison and in the field by both officers and enlisted men. Battledress replaced the service dress tunic with a waist-length khaki jacket that had a waistband with a double buckle, a fly front, a collar worn closed at the neck by enlisted men but open by officers, (displaying a shirt and tie). The jacket had two pleated patch breast pockets, with a pointed flap closed by a concealed fastener, and shirt cuffs, closed by a single exposed button.²

In comparison, when the U.S. entered World War II, the Army continued to wear the 1926 uniform, with modifications, replacing the dress coat with a field coat and the service cap with either the “overseas” cap or the helmet.³

The Military Jacket

General Eisenhower (right), Supreme Allied Commander in the European Theater, “admired the British Army’s battledress jacket and, in 1943, pressed for introduction of an improved version for both field and garrison use.”



² Jewell, *British Battledress, 1937-61*. This book includes the only photos of which I am aware of the patterns for the original battledress jacket and trousers. The images are very small.

³ See Connell, U.S. Army Officer’s field uniform, *The Virtual Costumer*, forthcoming.

Eisenhower jacket worn by donor William Lubar while a flight training instructor ([catalog no. 1994.0388.01](#)). Photo courtesy of the Smithsonian National Museum of American History.

The Ike jacket was made in 18 ounce dark olive drab (#51) wool serge. It had two chest pockets and shoulder straps, both identical in design to those on the service coat; however, it ended at the waist with a waistband that had either one button on a square-cut tab to the right front or a rectangular gold-colored metal buckle, similar in appearance to that on the service coat’s belt. The waistband had one button on each of the right and left rear quarters for adjustable tabs on each side, which had rounded ends. The lapels were the same as on the service coat; however, the front closed with four horn buttons concealed behind a flap on the left side. For warmth, the collar could be turned up and the lapels closed and secured with a button on the right and a buttonholed tab on the left. As on the service coat, the cuffs were plain, except for the braid denoting a commissioned officer. As with the service coat, the lining was in dark olive drab (#51) sateen.⁴

Variations existed, including a version (above right) without a fly front that had standard uniform buttons down the front.

Unlike the battledress jacket, the Eisenhower jacket was intended to be worn in the field under an outer jacket and over a sweater as well as a flannel shirt and wool/cotton underwear. In practice, however, men tended to reserve it for dress, garrison, or walking-out use, not field use.⁵

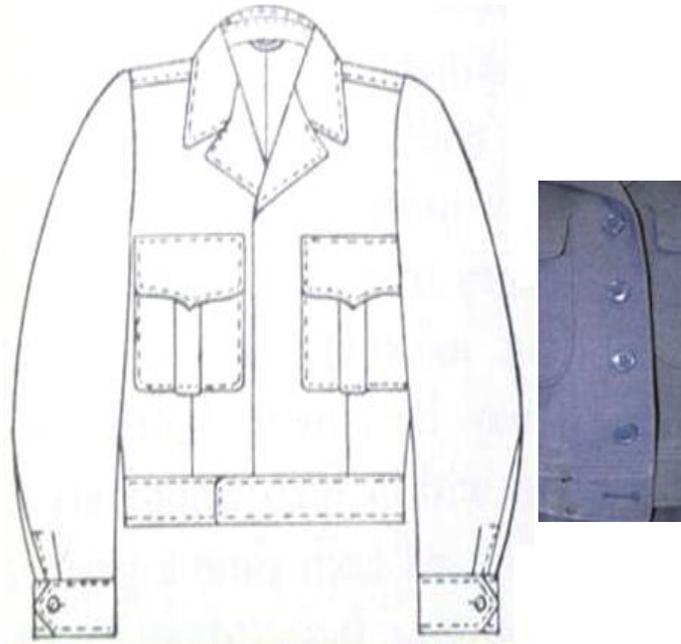
⁴ Connell, “U.S. Army Officers’ Uniforms,” op cit; 42.

⁵ Kennedy and Park, “The Army Green Uniform,” Technical Report 68-41-CM 6. Connell, “U.S. Army Officers’ Uniforms,” op cit; 42.



Despite Guido Rosignoli’s statement, “In the late 1940s, the American GI became the most elegant soldier in the world,” the Quartermaster Corps found the jacket less than satisfactory. “When the troops returned home, the men who were making the Army their career wanted a garrison uniform that was more flattering and attractive in civilian eyes. The olive-drab, short ‘Ike’ jacket was not a satisfactory semi-dress item in a peacetime society. . . . The baggy fit of the jacket further detracted from its suitability for wear as a service uniform.”

Kennedy and Park note that “the Quartermaster Corps began [in 1946] a program to improve [the jacket’s]



Original first design USAF Ike jacket, pattern date 2 May 1949. Single breasted, fly front or button model with a one piece bloused back. Most originals had button front but officers had them changed to the zipper front. [U.S. Air Force](#).

appearance. The patterns for the World War II jacket were modified twice with some fullness being eliminated each time.” They state that, “By 1947 it was apparent that no one was satisfied with the Eisenhower jacket as a dual-purpose item. Pressure developed to drop the . . . requirement [of 1946] that this jacket form part of the field ensemble so it could be redesigned solely as a garrison item.” As a result, “The final jacket design of 1950 had a straight, unbloused front, narrower sleeves, and a fitted waist. Some blousing was retained to give an ‘action back’ and to avoid the jacket rising above the belt when the wearer bent over”⁶

⁶ Rosignoli, “The Armies of the Atomic Age - the World after 1945,” Schick, *The Uniforms of the*



Trailways bus driver uniform. Photo: [Intaplo Industries](#)

World's Great Armies 236. Kennedy and Park, *The Army Green Uniform*, op cit, 6-7.

Between 1957 and 1961, with adoption of the new Army Green uniform, the Army phased the Eisenhower jacket out of use.

Both the Marines and the Air Force adopted versions of the Eisenhower jacket. In 1949, the Air Force adopted it in U.S.A.F. blue (shade 84) wool serge, 15 or 18 ounces, for winter wear, and tan (shade 193), for summer use. The tan jacket came in 10 ounce worsted wool, 11 ounce gabardine wool, or a wool-polyester blend. The blue version was a standard uniform item; the tan one was optional.

Initially, the Air Force jacket (far left) was identical to the Army one in all ways except color. In 1952, a modified jacket (left) changed the angle of the collar and lapels so that the upper line of the lapel; was horizontal instead of angled upwards. The modified jacket also used a buttoned cuff. The Air Force gave officers the option, apparently widely used, of a zipper closure concealed by the fly front in place of concealed buttons.⁷

The Air Force phased the jacket out of use in 1964.

In addition to its use by the armed services, Eisenhower jackets were popular with police departments and a variety of civilian organizations. A version existed for Trailways bus drivers (left).

⁷ [“USAF Flag Ranks”](#). This interesting Web site includes an extended description of the Air Force’s “Ike Jacket,” with photos of several USAF variations as well as labeled drawings from the 1952 modification.



Publicity still, [White Christmas](#). Paramount, 1954.

In the 1954 film, *White Christmas*, Danny Kaye, Rosemary Clooney, and Vera-Allen are all wearing Eisenhower jackets in their number, “Gee! I Wish I Was Back in the Army” (above).

The jacket even influenced science fiction. In his 1958 novel, *A Planet for Texans*, H. Beam Piper described the uniform of the Solar League's diplomatic service as a "short black Eisenhower jacket, gray-striped trousers and black homburg."⁸

The Civilian Jacket

It's quite common to see civilian fashions imitate military uniform features: braid on a jacket or bodice (imitating a hussar's braid), patch pockets with flaps, shoulder straps, the list goes on. Alexander McQueen, for example, used “military” braiding in some of his designs, including his 2006-07 “Rape of Scotland” collection.⁹

⁸ Piper, "Lone Star Planet," in *Four-Day Planet and Lone Star Planet*; 241-242.

It also is not uncommon for civilian fashion to adopt military items virtually unchanged. The trench coat and the bomber jacket are only two examples. This is true especially during wartime. It is less true in times of peace. However, the 1950 McCall's pattern mentioned above, which appears to be a stylized version of the military Eisenhower jacket and is so labeled, could have been issued during the Korean War.

What then explains the Eisenhower jacket's influence on civilian fashion? I speculate that Dwight Eisenhower's election as President in 1952 brought interest in items of clothing associated with him, including the military jacket, which was still in use by three of the four services. During the mid-50s, both McCalls and Simplicity offered other patterns related to the Eisenhower jacket.

The Eisenhower jacket is as dead as Mussolini.

– *Los Angeles Times*

Notwithstanding the August 28, 1957 *L.A Times* article, “[Here's What to Wear for School](#),” the Eisenhower jacket continued to influence both men's and women's fashion well after that. A men's suit (right), designed in 1968 by Francis Toscani (1915-1973), seen at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, featured a waist-length wool twill jacket with lapels and collar very reminiscent of the military jacket, closed by a center front

⁹ Bolton, *Alexander McQueen: Savage Beauty*, 64-67, 113, 116-117.

zipper to the neck. While not actually concealed by a fly front, the zipper is really hard to notice.

The jacket's influence has extended into this century. In *Uniforms*, Paul Fussell quotes Gina Bellafante, writing in *The New York Times* about the 2001 Milan fashion shows, to say, “By the time the men's shows ended . . . editors and buyers had witnessed more . . . Eisenhower jackets . . . than if they had stayed home and spent five days with the history channel.”¹⁰

There is a significant difference in design between the military jacket and its stylized adaptations and the windbreaker type of jacket labeled as an Eisenhower jacket, such as the one Dickies called a “Lined Eisenhower Jacket” or an “Insulated Eisenhower Jacket.”



Eisenhower-inspired wool twill jacket with novel rounded collar, oval waist, and cuff plackets. Francis Toscani, c. 1968. Photo by Tina Connell, 2011.

¹⁰ Fussell, *Uniforms; Why We Are What We Wear*, 189.

On November 26, 2011, Wikipedia's article on the [Eisenhower Jacket](#) says, "Thanks to its favor among GI golfers, *Eisenhower included*, the Ike jacket look became a golf course staple and inspired the 'golf blouson', later called 'Windbreaker' ... (emphasis mine)."

The article does not supply a citation for this assertion. However, I have looked at a lot of photos of Ike playing golf as a civilian and in none of them is he wearing a jacket remotely resembling the military Eisenhower jacket. Instead, he was mostly photographed on the links either in short-sleeve shirts or in Cardigan sweaters. Thus, I find the author's assertion unconvincing.

To close the circle, in 2010, the U.S. Navy adopted new E1 to E6 uniforms for enlisted personnel, including a black windbreaker jacket with shoulder straps and a knit stand-up collar. It is popularly referred to as an Eisenhower jacket (right).

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Eisenhower-style windbreaker jacket for U.S. Navy E-1 to E6 service uniforms

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Eisenhower Jacket Patterns

In the 1950s, McCall's and Simplicity offered patterns for civilian jackets inspired by the Eisenhower jacket. Some may still be available on Ebay:

McCall's 8024, Misses Stylized Eisenhower Jacket, 1950

McCall's 4684, Girls Eisenhower Jacket Jumper, 1953.

Simplicity 1719 Junior/Misses' Two-Piece Suit Sewing Pattern, 1956.

Byron Connell, is a historian by training. He likes to help at masquerades rather than entering them. Since being part of the Torcon best-in-show entry, he enters in the Master division when he does so. Byron has run masquerades at several Costume-Cons and Philcons, and directed the Anticipation masquerade. He belongs to the Sick Pups (the New Jersey-New York Costumers' Guild), the SLUTs, (St. Louis Ubiquitous Tailoring Society), and the Armed Costumers' Guild. Byron is a past President of the International Costumers' Guild, which honored him with its [1996 Lifetime Achievement Award](#). He likes hard sci-fi., alternate history, alternate worlds, and fantasy.