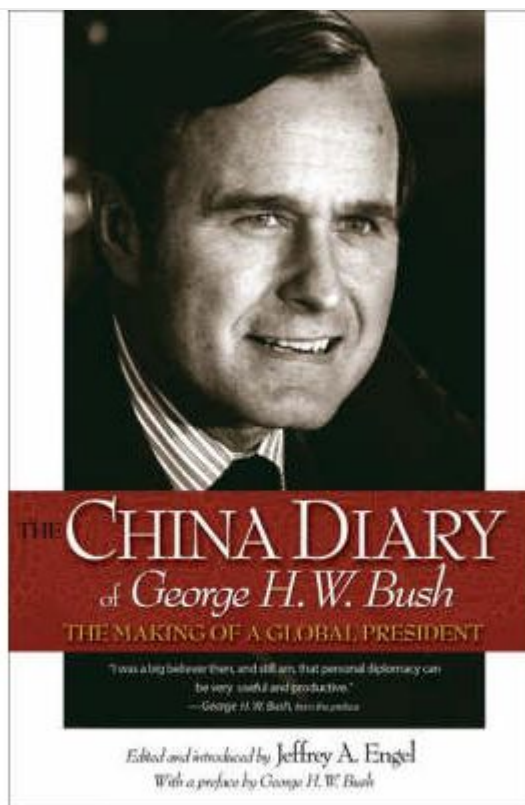


{essays in history}

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The China Diary of George H.W. Bush: The Making of a Global President



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Reviewed Work(s)

The China Diary of George H.W. Bush: The Making of a Global President. By George H.W. Bush, Edited By Jeffrey A. Engel. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008). Pp. xxxi, 544. Cloth, \$29.95.

From October 1974 to December 1975, George H.W. Bush served as *de facto* American ambassador to the People's Republic of China, a nation with which the United States would not normalize relations until 1979. The departing chairman of the Republican National Committee, Bush understood that this new and unusual assignment might distance him from the disgraced Nixon administration while preserving his chances either of returning to Texas politics or being selected vice president in 1976. While neither of these short-term ambitions came to pass, Bush's political fortunes would recover. Along with his ambassadorship to the United Nations and his stint as head of the Central Intelligence Agency, the China expedition bestowed upon Bush foreign policy credentials that would propel him to the White House in 1988, and it also shaped his response to the Tiananmen Square crackdown during his first year in office. Given the importance of the China mission to Bush's own political career and its significance for Sino-American relations, it is with keen interest that one approaches the diary he kept during these formative 14 months in Beijing. In contrast to the apparent haste with which Douglas Brinkley edited the *Reagan Diaries* (2007), Jeffrey Engel gives the full and unabridged record, bolstered by a sparkling interpretive essay and extended bibliographic note. Bush employed a dictaphone to record entries nearly every day of his mission, and, at least in Engel's assessment, did not expect they would ever be made widely available. Consequently, one finds in *The China Diary* a man who frets over his muscle aches ("someday I will write a book on massages I have had ... from the UN to the steambaths of Egypt and Tokyo") and the gastrointestinal distress that can accompany exotic cuisine (Engel, 116). The reader also finds a Texas oilman agonizing over decline of America's credibility. "So much of the world depends on the United States," Bush lamented in the spring of 1975 (Engel, 160). "So much depends on our self-confidence in our ability to cope. If we project this confusion and failure and discouragement it will show up all around the world. People wonder anyway when they see commitments unkept. I think of Cambodia, and I think of Vietnam, and I think of what that means to the

Chinese government and others as they see us unable to fulfill commitments made” (Engel, 161). If these words sound familiar, it is likely because the central figure in Bush’s education during this period was Henry Kissinger. Indeed, among the few formal obligations entrusted to America’s man in Beijing were either to prepare for the prospect of a Kissinger visit or to recover from one. Privately contemptuous of Bush (“*Vat* am I to do with this turkey?” he allegedly remarked to aide Alexander Haig), Kissinger sought to contain Bush, an equally ambitious Donald Rumsfeld, and anyone else who might challenge Nelson Rockefeller for the vice presidency in 1976.[1] Despite such internecine rivalries, Bush came to share with Kissinger the realist’s faith in overriding importance of states’ interests and the distribution of power in the international system. Unlike Ronald Reagan, neither Kissinger nor Bush could accept at face value the shibboleths of the Cold War right. Consider a passage from the *China Diary* that would not have endeared Bush to the growing conservative movement in the 1970s: “I don’t think the United States has anything to fear from China. The talk about how we lost China infuriates the Chinese and now it infuriates me. I can see where it is very clearly wrong. China was not ours to lose and that has been part of the problem” (Engel, 356). Where Bush’s own views diverged from the realism of Kissinger, and where Engel’s analysis in the interpretive essay is particularly strong, is over the utility of personal diplomacy. While in Beijing, Bush hosted tennis tournaments and established friendships with communists and assorted leftists whom he might—and later often *did*—call upon during his White House years. Personal trust did not trump interests, Bush understood, but it could often forward them. The image of a lanky American riding along the street on his bicycle or that of a genial yet reserved American arriving at a Chinese national day could foster trust and friendship, Bush clearly believed. To Kissinger, such displays were too “soft” for the world of statecraft. Bush’s assignment ended abruptly with his appointment as head of the CIA, an institution then under fire from both traditional liberals (who assailed its covert operations and domestic spying) as well as neoconservative Democrats like Senator Henry “Scoop” Jackson (who charged it with ignoring a Soviet nuclear buildup). In his 2007 biography of the forty-first president, Timothy Naftali writes that both George and Barbara wept upon hearing the news, assuming the new posting signaled the end for Bush’s White House dreams.[2] These fears, of course, proved ill founded. As such, the publication of *The China*

Diary provides an invaluable resource both for historians seeking to understand a man who struggled to articulate a “vision thing” and for voters in 2008 who seek to understand what exactly constitutes foreign policy experience.

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[1] Timothy J Naftali, *George H.W. Bush*, 1st ed. (New York: Times Books, 2007), 23

[2] *Ibid.*, 31.



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