
“Be kind,” Dorothy Bush advised her son in 1970, when he became Ambassador to the United Nations. “Don’t be a big shot. Listen, don’t talk. Reach out to people… and recognize in diplomatic terms that the sovereignty of Burundi is as important to them as our sovereignty is to us.”

Four years later, when George H. W. Bush arrived in Beijing as head of the United States Liaison Office, a penchant for personal diplomacy had become his signature style. Eager to escape Watergated Washington, he had decided that Beijing was “the place to be,” even though the United States had not yet formally recognized the People’s Republic of China—and he would not actually be an ambassador. Bush hoped to energize Sino-American relations by building bonds of trust with the next generation of China’s leaders.

He was not all that successful. But Bush’s year in China laid the foundations for the pragmatic, prudent, personal foreign policy that would characterize his presidency.

With superb annotations and analysis by Jeffrey Engel, a professor of history and public policy at Texas A&M, *The China Diary of George H. W. Bush* sheds light not only on “the making of a global president” but on two nations in transition: late Maoist China, as it moved, tentatively, toward engagement with the international community; and the United States, as it absorbed the implications of defeat in Vietnam.

In the diaries, Bush emerges as the un-Kissinger. As Secretary of State to Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford, Kissinger believed that national interest and geo-political strategy were all that mattered to great powers. He belittled Bush as “too soft and not
sophisticated enough," too much inclined to put stock in public perceptions and illusory concepts like trust.

Bush thought Kissinger brilliant, but also an arrogant, petty tyrant, with a mania to monopolize policy making. Unlike the Secretary, he believed that perceptions of positive momentum could create a context for genuine progress. “Whether the Taiwan problem has been solved or not,” he advised, the leaders of the United States and China should talk.

Two incidents illuminate the differences between the two men. In October 1974, Bush disregarded State Department protocol and attended a National Day diplomatic function. In light of his “unique status in Peking,” Kissinger cabled him, he should cease and desist. Six months later, Bush asked for permission to offer his condolences on the death of the mother of Cambodia’s Prince Norodom Sihanouk. Kissinger said no: Sihanouk’s “rejection of our last efforts toward him makes it inappropriate in our view to go through the exercise you propose.”

Fifteen years after he left Beijing, Bush’s faith in personal diplomacy was put to the test. When China’s leaders cracked down on pro-democracy demonstrators, he tried to communicate directly with Deng Xiaoping. Deeply disappointed when Deng did not take his calls, the president nonetheless kept sanctions below the threshold that would cause a rupture between the two nations. “Had I not met the man,” he wrote, “I think I would have been less convinced that we should keep relations with them going.”

As liaison and as president, Engel suggests, Bush “never naively believed that friendships might trump national interests.” He was a foreign policy “realist,” akin to Kissinger in substance, if not in style. Uncomfortable with “the vision thing,” Bush has
not gotten his due as America’s first post-Cold War president. The reunification of China, the first Gulf War, and the North American Free Trade Agreement, Engel reminds us, “left a lasting imprint on the central strategic questions of the twenty-first century.” And personal diplomacy greased the wheels of each Bush initiative. No wonder Dorothy Walker Bush was so proud of him.

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