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Soon after President Richard Nixon’s trip to China in February 1972, there was a lull in Sino-American relations. Nixon’s initial opening of China was followed by a period in which the projected normalization of diplomatic ties between the two powers was allowed to languish. An important precondition for a better U.S.-China relationship was Chinese leader Mao Zedong’s belief that the U.S.-Soviet differences were much greater than their ability to compromise and conspire against China. Mao was contemplating an alliance with the United States to counter the Soviet Union. However, Nixon’s visit to the Soviet Union in May 1972, Soviet leader Leonid Brezhenev’s return visit to the United States in June 1973, and the signing of several treaties greatly improved U.S.-Soviet relations. Mao was disappointed and annoyed.

During his sixth visit to China in November 1973, in a hastily arranged meeting on the evening of the 13th, U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger discussed possible Sino-U.S. military cooperation with Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai. He suggested that the United States and China sign an agreement on accidental nuclear war and also establish a hotline. When Zhou’s interpreter Tang Wensheng and Wang Hairong, then assistant foreign minister, reported to Mao that Zhou was too weak and incompetent in his talk with Kissinger, Mao assumed that Zhou had departed from the correct position, and had accepted U.S. nuclear protection in the event of a Soviet nuclear attack on China. On Mao’s order, several sessions of enlarged Politburo meetings were held to denounce Zhou from 21 November to 5 December. The purpose was to expose and criticize the so-called “Right Capitulationism” that prevailed while Zhou had presided over diplomacy toward the United States in the last several years. After such events, it is not difficult to predict that China’s perception and attitude toward the United States became more rigid.

When Mao did not see the expected intensification of the Soviet-American conflict, he flip-flopped on his anti-American approach, which his theory of “three worlds” attempted to rationalize. In his speech at the sixth special conference of the UN on 10 April 1974, Chinese Vice Premier Deng Xiaoping elaborated Mao’s theory of “three worlds” and China’s foreign policy. The hub of Mao’s new theory was no longer “an alliance with the United States to counter the Soviet Union.” Nor was there a reappearance of those world revolutionary propositions such as “anti-imperialists and anti-revisionists,” or “down with the imperialists, revisionists and reactionaries.” The core of the new theory was to ally with various nations against the Soviet Union, and to a lesser extent, against the United States. Mao modified his strategy from a united front with the United States to a united front against both the United States and the Soviet Union. China was to rely neither on the United States, nor the developed countries in Europe or Japan, nor any revolutionary parties of the world, but mainly on the governments of the developing countries in the third world.

When George Bush arrived in China as the head of the United States Liaison Office in October 1974, Mao was in the last leg of his life and was formulating his succession plan. Early in 1973, Zhou Enlai had been diagnosed with fatal bladder cancer and was now dying
in his hospital bed. After Deng jumped on the bandwagon at the Politburo meeting, criticizing Zhou in November/December 1973, he won Mao’s trust. Mao regarded his wife Jiang Qing, and her Shanghai henchmen (the so-called Gang of Four) as his true ideological heirs. But Mao was also aware that his radical supporters were not experienced in running the country. Mao decided to entrust Deng with more power and Deng was soon put in charge of foreign affairs, especially policy toward the United States. Deng was appointed first vice premier and put in charge of the day-to-day government work in November 1974. But Deng was constantly ambushed by the “Gang of Four,” who regarded him as the main obstacle to their road to the supreme power. During this period, Deng was very much of a caretaker as far as China’s policy toward the United States was concerned. He couldn’t exceed the stipulations of Mao’s theory.

While in Beijing, Bush complained about his isolation and little contact with Chinese officials. He recorded on 6 July 1975, “The people are so nice here but they can be so obtuse, they can be so removed – so little chance for contacts….I can sit formally for one hour with Wang Hairong who says absolutely nothing.” (353) Had Bush known more about China’s elite politics, he would not have been so disappointed that he was not able to engage in any substantive dialogue with any Chinese official.

President Gerald Ford was more cautious in handling Sino-American relations. The United States and China made an effort to maintain their relations at a strategic level. Kissinger kept making his bi-annual trips to Beijing. For the U.S. side, the domestic political cost was too high for normalization with the People’s Republic of China. Neither Kissinger nor Ford was willing to take the risk of breaking with Taiwan without a guarantee that Beijing would not conquer that island by force. George Bush was among those who warned Ford not to move ahead too precipitously in breaking relations with Taiwan.

In October 1975, during Kissinger’s advance trip to China to make arrangements for President Ford’s visit to Beijing, Deng Xiaoping “delivered a blistering and contemptuous review of the Ford-Kissinger policy.”¹ Deng’s tough attitude was in reality directed to shoring up and protecting his own declining status in the elite political struggle. Ford’s visit in December proved disappointing. The trip was cut from seven days to four, and Ford added stops in Indonesia and the Philippines to give his tour greater substance. Although the Americans wanted to issue a joint statement at the end of the meeting to give the impression of headway, the Chinese refused on the grounds that no concrete progress toward normalization had been made.² Regrettfully, these important meetings were not recorded in Bush’s China Diary. Immediately after Ford’s visit, to show China’s dissatisfaction with the status of Sino-American relations and the alleged U.S. appeasement of the Soviet Union, the Chinese government announced the release of three crew members

of a Soviet helicopter that had penetrated Chinese airspace in March 1974. When Bush departed China in December 1975, Sino-American relations were at their nadir.

*The China Diary of George H. W. Bush: The Making of a Global President*, skillfully edited by Jeffrey Engel, offers rare insights for both scholars and the general public. The book provides an understanding of George Bush’s subsequent foreign policy through his pre-presidential experiences in China. It is an important source of information for the study of Sino-American relations in the 1970s. To assess the significance of the volume, H-Diplo invited four scholars to comment on it. Their reviews are published here, along with a reply from Jeffrey Engel.

**Participants**

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**Adam Cathcart** is an Assistant Professor of History at Pacific Lutheran University in Tacoma, Washington. He holds a bachelor’s degree in cello from the Cleveland Institute of Music and earned his Ph.D. in contemporary East Asian history from Ohio University in 2005. His research interests are Chinese foreign relations and cultural relations during the Cold War. Ongoing projects include “Musical Diplomacy in the Opening of China, 1971-1973,” first presented at the U.S. Department of State in 2006. Articles stemming from his work in the Archives of the PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs are forthcoming in *Twentieth-Century China, The Chinese Historical Review*, and *China Quarterly*.

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**Priscilla Roberts** is an Associate Professor of History at the University of Hong Kong where she is also Honorary Director of the Centre of American Studies. She is also an Adjunct Professor with the Foreign Studies College of Northeastern University, Shenyang, China and an Honorary Professor at Shanghai International Studies University. She has edited the Chinese Diaries of David Bruce, George Bush’s predecessor as head of the US Liaison Office in Beijing. Her research interests focus upon the development and influence

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of the US foreign policy elite. She is currently working on a biography of the banker Frank Altschul, and a study of Anglo-American think tanks and the making of China policy.

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**Guoqiang Zheng** is an Associate Professor of History at Angelo State University, Texas. Focusing his research on the history of Sino-American Relations and Modern East Asia, he has published articles and book reviews in *American Review of Chinese Studies, The Chinese Historical Review*, and other academic journals and given presentations at national and international conferences.
The appearance of George H.W. Bush’s “China Diary” serves as a reminder that the story of U.S.-China relations in the 1970s has only begun to be told. Culled from the George Bush Presidential Library and shorn of a few redacted passages, the diary was published with the endorsement of the ex-President. It is a subjective and fragmentary record of Bush’s brief tenure, and, as a historical document, it hardly forces a fundamental reconsideration of Sino-US relations during the Ford administration. It is a useful source nevertheless that reveals much about its author, his personalized work with the Chinese, and the evolutions of U.S.-China relations in the 1970s. Along the way, various shades of tragedy are encountered: Bush is endemically isolated in Beijing, perceiving the decline of American power in Asia, left to ruminate amid a tiny circle of expatriates and his perceptive Chinese domestic help. But these tragic overtones will likely be overshadowed if and when the document is eventually translated and published in China (with heavy editing, naturally). Then, the diary will indeed be greeted with acclaim as another notch of validation in the master narrative of China’s rise.

Bush was a safe choice to head the U.S. Liaison Office (hereafter USLO) in Beijing, but his education in China policy had not come without bruises. As the U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, Bush had been forced to grapple at length with the Taiwan issue in 1971. In October of that year, as Kissinger was concluding his first public trip to the PRC, Taiwan was stripped of its United Nations membership, forcing Bush to engage in a humiliating fight for a lost cause. (Ironically, Bush family recollections of this episode for contemporary readers in mainland China leave out the Ambassador’s defiant exit with the Republic of China delegate out of the General Assembly hall, reverse-engineering the episode to give Bush a share of credit for admitting the PRC into the United Nations).1 Bush had indeed been discussed in 1971 as the first head of a potential USLO, but Kissinger had dismissed Bush, the former head of the Republican Party, as “too soft and not sophisticated enough” (6). White House aide Dwight Chapin nevertheless lobbied H. R. Haldeman for Bush’s inclusion with President Nixon’s breakthrough February 1972 delegation to Beijing, describing Bush’s presence as “an off-beat idea that may at first glance appear ridiculous” but one which would mollify American conservative politicians and voters sandbagging the White House with doomsday denunciations of Nixon’s visit.2 Bush stayed at home while


2 Dwight L. Chapin to H.R. Haldeman, “Memorandum re: Ambassador George Bush,” January 24, 1972, White House Central Files, Subject Files, Trips [EX TR 24 China, People’s Republic of (Red China) Proposed 1972, Beginning – 7/28/71], Box 60, Folder 3, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland. For colorful examples of resistance to the China visit among Republican constituencies, see ibid, Box 58. Given the vehemence of the anti-communist sentiment present in these documents, it is unlikely that Bush’s presence on Nixon’s maiden voyage to China would have provided Nixon with much additional political cover.
Nixon posed at the Great Wall, but was finally tapped as USLO head in 1974 as successor to the esteemed David Bruce.3

The period of the diary stretches from 21 October 1974 to 22 August 1975, corresponding to Bush’s tenure as the head of the US Liaison Office in Beijing. Although the diary adds little to the existing record of how or why Bush was appointed, it does illuminate his problematic relationships with Henry Kissinger and Winston Lord. Kissinger and Lord, functioning respectively as Secretary of State and Head of China Desk at State, frequently admonished Bush for his overzealousness and unwarranted independence. In one of his first diary entries, Bush complains that Kissinger’s secrecy with regard to policy hamstrung the officers in the State Department’s Bureau of East Asian Affairs (5). Yet when Kissinger arrived in China in 1974, Bush was swept up into his energy, lifted from the torpor of isolating daily routine. Bush describes this flurry of banquets and performances in detail, resulting in the most sustained and interesting passages in the diary (94-96). When Kissinger insults him, to Deng’s face, as a “left-wing Republican,” Bush does not recount the sting in his diary.4 Although Kissinger wanted Bush to move slowly with the Chinese, from virtually the moment of his arrival in China, Bush was eager to create what he called “forward motion” in the relationship, going so far as to bring his “progress thesis” to an impervious Deng Xiaoping (6, 28).

Harmoniously enough, work for progress on China policy also served to accelerate Bush’s own career trajectory. While Bush wanted to welcome a bevy of important Washington (and Texas) players to China, he and his unscripted visitors risked upsetting the delicate progress that Kissinger and the State Department had fostered over the past three years (212-213).5

Such intensive preparations marked the cycles of patronage for which he would become famous. In setting the table for a Beijing-bound delegation of Texas oilmen coming to Beijing led by the octogenarian Neil Mallon, Bush painstakingly prepares for the visit by having Mallon presented with an elaborate banner adorned with a Mao quotation about “the future being in the hands of the young” (310, 314).

Congressional delegations were a less anodyne presence in Bush’s tenure. Bush recounts a number of Congressional mishaps with a touch of horror. When Congressman Carl Albert consistently interrupted Chinese Foreign Minister Qiao Guanhua in a meeting by misciting

3 Priscilla Roberts, Window on the Forbidden City: The Beijing Diaries of David Bruce (Hong Kong: University of Hong Kong Centre of Asian Studies, 2001).


5 Engel adds to his credibility among readers who might question his close affiliation with Bush’s legacy by illuminating this tension early on in the text. “State Department officials,” Engel writes, “recognized at once that Bush’s natural enthusiasm as a host, and his desire in 1974 to further develop his political war chest through distribution of...valued invitations, might limit their own ability to control high-level access to China.” Engel, 8.
the Shanghai communiqué (“we all agree there is but one Taiwan”) Albert got a note from Bush telling him to “shut up.” The next day Albert made a mash of meeting with Deng and Qiao. “It was not a disaster but it was pretty bad,” noted Bush, blaming the alcohol (230-231).6 In spite of such hiccups, Congressional delegations served an important purpose for Bush, keeping his network healthy in the United States, but doing so within the framework of an expanding Sino-U.S. bilateral relationship. It was not only the Chinese groups who used foreign relations as a screen for primary domestic goals!

If Congressional groups were mostly helpful for his career, Bush had more difficulties with the proliferation of “friendship groups” and scholarly exchanges. In one of the longer analyses in the entire diary of a single conversation, Bush describes an unnamed linguist from the October 1974 Committee on Scholarly Communication delegation. The scholar, Bush recalled, wanted the U.S. to normalize immediately its diplomatic relationship with China so that ideas could be more rapidly exchanged. Countering that “there was a certain unreality to the pitch,” Bush critiqued the scholar’s “lack of recognition that in a quest to discover more about language he was prepared to forget any global political problems....he was so overawed with getting his toe in the door” (31). Later, Bush notes the tendency of “China hands” in the U.S. to “continue to slam us around...I say they are doing it too much, because I worry more about American public opinion than some of our China specialists, and the public opinion’s effect on our being able to perform and fulfill a policy” (319). As prime examples of prevalent China specialists, Michael Oksenberg and Lucian Pye’s work turns up at various points in the diary. Thinking aloud about Oksenberg’s assertion that declines in American trade with the PRC were linked to dissatisfaction with U.S. support for Taiwan, Bush responds with West Texan argot, blurting “Hogwash!” (316). Rough and exasperated, Bush stated at the outset of his tenure that “the professors don’t know a hell of a lot more about what’s going to happen in China than the politicians or the military” (8). His growing reliance on scholarship by American academics, however, implies respect of a certain type.

As a would-be ambassador and potential presidential candidate, Bush was more interested with his own image. The diary is accordingly studded with references to Bush’s jogging and especially bicycling through Beijing in an effort to raise his public profile in China.7 But Americans are Americans, and automobiles inevitably come to the fore. In an anecdote about his wife Barbara, family dog Fred, and Guo, the family chauffeur, Bush reveals his displeasure with an incident with a few neo-colonial overtones:

“Bar [Barbara Bush] took Fred downtown, went to the store yesterday, came out and there were a hundred people surrounding the car staring at the Guo-driven Chrysler. Really staring at Fred. I told her not to do that anymore. It

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6 Carl Albert Foreign Travel Series, Box 7, Folders 10-18, “Visit by Carl Albert and John J. Rhodes to China,” University of Oklahoma Library Special Collections.

7 According to the Chinese Foreign Minister Qian Qichen, Bush’s bicycling paid off in 1989, when Deng Xiaoping brought it up as a kind of joke to break the ice soon after the arrival of Bush’s National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft to Beijing after the violence of June 4, 1989. See Qian Qichen, Ten Episodes of Chinese Diplomacy (New York: HarperCollins, 2006) 135
put Guo in a funny position. Fred can go to the Ming Tombs and run around out there, but I don’t want to have the image of a chauffeur-driven dog kind of thing.” (216)

Bush was also wary of driving around town quite simply, because an employee of the Liaison Office had killed a Chinese civilian in a car accident and had had to be expatriated. And Bush, to his credit, appears highly aware of treading in footsteps redolent of Western privilege in China. A few long conversations with Jan Viseboxse, the ancient Dutch ambassador who had been feeding Americans intelligence from the city since 1948, may have helped to shape his sense of the sensitive history surrounding the Western presence in the city (137). And Bush’s compound lacked a contingent of U.S. Marines, after all, because China, citing the humiliations of the late 1940s, demanded they be sent back (59).

Foremost, the diary is a window into the diplomatic enterprise of the foreigners in Beijing – a window focusing on the foreign legations, the insular life there, the daily comings and goings of mainly non-Chinese. This is the tragedy of the diary – that it has much more in common with diaries of the missionaries and diplomats in Beijing in the late 19th century than memoirs being written today. After voicing his frustration with not being able to pick up the phone and get some information from any Chinese, Bush makes a morose observation that might well serve as the epigraph to his entire diary: “It is just this middle kingdom syndrome. We are the foreigners, the barbarians” (301). Bush reads books about Empress Dowager Cixi during his tenure, and in some ways the communist court seems equally distant. (Senators like Warren Magnuson and Mike Mansfield could meet with Zhou Enlai, while Bush never did.) The rather tight expat culture is seen also in Bush’s fascinating interactions with the talented Holdridge family and the gregarious (and intellectually formidable) Lilleys. And the old world is present in Bush’s discussions with the veteran ambassadors, even as he reaches out to his colleagues from the Middle East and Africa.

In sum, this is a fine new source, and Engel and his press deserve much applause for placing it in the public record. One can only hope that it will be translated soon into Chinese so that scholars and graduate students on the mainland and Taiwan can also wrestle readily with what it ultimately means.