

INTRODUCTION

*Bush's China Diary—
What You Are About to Read*

This is the diary George H. W. Bush kept while in China from October 1974 until December 1975. These are his own words, dictated from the small American outpost in the heart of massive Beijing. As head of the United States Liaison Office (USLO), Bush was Washington's chief representative in China, a crucial job that was not easily defined. The United States and the People's Republic of China did not establish formal diplomatic relations until 1979. Washington instead placed its official Chinese embassy in the Republic of China (Taiwan) after 1949, refusing to recognize the legitimacy of the Communist regime which came to power on the mainland after China's bloody civil war. Neither was Mao Zedong's Communist government eager to treat with an American government it repeatedly chastised as the leader of reactionary forces worldwide. In the chilly Cold War that followed, the two countries exchanged little trade, hardly any cultural contacts, and scant few formal talks. Instead they exchanged bullets and blood during the Korean War, and came close to doing more of the same during the frequent crises of the 1950s and 1960s.

Bush landed in China soon after the first tentative thaw in the two countries' otherwise frosty relationship. In 1971 President Richard Nixon announced his intention to go to China. His national security adviser and trusted aide Henry Kissinger had only recently returned from secret meetings on Chinese soil. These encounters quite literally changed the globe's geopolitical map. Both the Americans and the Chinese hoped that improved relations might

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help each counter the Soviet Union's growing influence around the world. Each government established a diplomatic office in the other's capital in the months that followed, in order to facilitate closer relations and to manage their growing set of business and cultural ties. David Bruce opened the USLO in Beijing in 1973. Bush served as its second head. He was Washington's ambassador to the People's Republic of China in all aspects save his formal title.

This diary recounts Bush's experience in his own words, and it is thus extraordinarily valuable for understanding both this complex man and this confusing time. Many books have been written detailing the Sino-American rapprochement. Few historians have studied the less earth-shattering, but arguably no less important, day-to-day workings of Sino-American diplomatic, cultural, and commercial relations as they evolved in fits and starts in the years between Nixon's 1972 visit and the 1979 reestablishment of full relations. Bush's diary paints an intimate portrait of two great societies in transition: China in the first days of its transformation from the isolation of the Cultural Revolution to its full integration into the international community and global economy, the United States beset by the quandaries and malaise of the early 1970s. Nixon's visit to China produced headlines around the world. Bush's journey did not. But whereas Nixon left China having charted a path to better ties between the two nations, the diplomats, businesspeople, educators, and tourists who subsequently trod that path truly made the relationship grow and prosper.

Bush's *China Diary* shows the future president in a new light, and indeed the intimate portrait it paints is without easy parallel in the annals of presidential history. Presidential memoirs abound, detailing their authors' experiences in office after the fact. Only a handful of future presidents kept detailed private journals in the years before they moved into the Oval Office. An even smaller number took time to enunciate their views on global affairs before their time in office, beyond campaign stump speeches. Those future presidents who did write frequently on international relations before

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their election—Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, and a post-1960 Richard Nixon leap to mind—generally did so for a public audience. Bush wrote for himself alone. He never intended his diary to be read by others. He certainly never imagined it would someday be published. The pages that follow reveal his private views on American politics, Sino-American relations, the Vietnam War, Watergate, and a host of other events and issues. They offer an unvarnished look at a man of great ambition at a crossroads in his life and career—a man hoping to do more in life, yet struggling to determine exactly what he should hold dear in his future pursuits.

This China Diary is fascinating, but to a historian it is hardly a perfect text. Bush never wrote the diary in a traditional sense. He dictated it into a tape recorder, typically at day's end, most often in the privacy of his changing room. These tapes were transcribed only years later by assistants. He sometimes made his journal entries nightly for weeks on end. If particularly busy, he would record the events of a whole week in a single sitting. Sometimes, especially while traveling, he failed to make an entry for weeks on end. As the diary was intended for his use alone, he felt no compulsion to make entries beyond a desire to record his unfolding Asian adventure.

The original tapes have been lost. All we have left are those transcriptions. Thus the pages that follow must be understood as Bush's words interpreted by assistants. The syntax of the "original" typed document, which remains available for review at the George Bush Presidential Library, is at times garbled. Authors of memoirs or letters have the benefit of editing their words to achieve precision. Bush spoke his memories, and he had no time (and even less inclination) for subsequent revisions. Moreover, even Bush's most fervent supporters concede that verbal elegance is not his strongest suit. The diary "sounds" like Bush, for good or for ill. When reading his diary one can easily hear him in the mind's ear, because in fact these are his words. Yet they were routinely recorded, often in fatigue, and then interpreted well after the fact by an assistant with the best of intentions but no independent guidance.

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These facts about Bush's diary presented methodological challenges in preparing it for publication. For the reasons enunciated above, some sentences run on, meander, or, quite simply, make little sense. I have tried to edit these sentences whenever necessary in order to create a readable text, yet without altering the tone and the cadence of a voice well known to most readers. Sometimes this meant starting a new paragraph where I believed Bush was turning to a new idea or train of thought, rather than where the transcriber had chosen to make a break. Very infrequently this meant excising extra words, adding conjunctions between sentences, or changing punctuation. I performed such grammatical surgery with the lightest hand possible, changing the text only on those rare occasions when it appeared absolutely necessary to enable the reader to comprehend fully Bush's meaning. As noted previously, the full text of the transcription—the nearest thing we have to an original—is available to researchers at the Bush Library.

Other issues posed greater methodological problems. Of greatest significance was the fact that some names of persons and places were unintelligible. No amount of forensic work could resurrect them. Bush does not speak Chinese, and neither did his transcribers. Given these circumstances some names, and Chinese names in particular, have been quite literally lost in translation despite the best efforts of native Chinese speakers employed in this detective work. Other names in the "original" diary were unintentionally misspelled by the original transcribers or lacked sufficient information for a full identification. Bush wrote for himself, after all. Thus, to give one example, he was perfectly content to record his happy meeting with a young couple, the "Smiths," from Texas. Identifying these two from among all the Smiths in Texas proved impossible. Indeed their name might have been Smythe or Smithe; each would have sounded the same to the transcriber. Yet, in my opinion at least, no such failure to identify a person or place should detract from a reader's ability to understand the larger themes with which Bush grappled in these pages.

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Such small negatives aside, Bush's diary sheds tremendous light on his Beijing experience, especially when illuminated by the annotations I offer. These footnotes, designed to explain the context of Bush's experience, draw upon secondary works by historians; memoirs of participants and witnesses to these events; contemporary press accounts; documents from the National Archives of the United States and the National Archives of the United Kingdom; documents from the Bush Presidential Library; and a series of interviews with President and Mrs. Bush and some of their closest associates from these years. Many of the diplomatic records cited in this context were made available to researchers only in January 2007, and thus many are being published here for the first time. To minimize clutter, documentation for this information appears in endnotes grouped at the back of the book. Where a footnote is associated with an endnote providing such documentation, the number of the footnote, both in the text (⁵) and at the start of the note itself (5), has been set in italics. The specific endnote can be quickly located by reference to the running head on each page of the endnotes section; it identifies the text pages with which the endnotes on that page are associated. A bibliographic essay describing the most helpful secondary works is also included as part of the endmatter.

To further enhance the readability of Bush's diary, I have converted Chinese spellings from the older Wade-Giles form used in the diary's initial transcription to the Hanyu Pinyin style adopted by Beijing in 1979. When quoting from other contemporary documents, however, and especially from the diplomatic documents used to illuminate various passages, I have retained the original spellings in deference to the documents' authors.

This book could not have been written without President Bush's endorsement, though in order to minimize his influence over its historical interpretations his contact with the workings of this project was purposely kept to a bare minimum. He cleared away the legal barriers to its publication; he and Mrs. Bush sat for numerous in-

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terviews; and his office helped facilitate interviews with some of his associates. At no time, however, has he or anyone in his office requested the right to review or to alter my interpretation of these events as described in the pages that follow. Issues of editing and transcription aside, the words that follow in the diary text are Bush's alone, and those in the introduction and notes are mine alone. I take no responsibility or credit for his; he bears no blame for mine.

Bush's China experience—what he terms in his preface “one of the greatest adventures of our lives”—dramatically changed his life. It rejuvenated him after the tribulations of Watergate; it inspired his passion for foreign affairs; and it set him on his course for the White House. To emphasize the ways in which his time at the USLO influenced Bush, an interpretive essay follows the diary text. It describes Bush's diplomatic legacy and the ways in which his China Diary illuminates the diplomatic principles he came to hold while in Beijing.

China mattered to Bush. He came to believe, during his presidency and after, that Sino-American relations held the key to a peaceful and prosperous twenty-first century. This is one of the diary's crucial stories, because the George H. W. Bush who landed in Beijing in the fall of 1974 was hardly the international statesman he later proved himself to be. On the contrary, he was a relative neophyte in the world of high-level diplomacy, wholly unaccustomed to the nuances of American diplomacy as practiced overseas. By 1989 he was considered something of a foreign policy expert, and his reputation in this field has only improved with age. As readers will surely see, Bush's time in China played a central role in his diplomatic education.

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