

## BOOK REVIEW

*When the World Seemed New: George H.W. Bush and the End of the Cold War*,  
by Jeffrey A. Engel (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017; pp. 596.  
£26.10).

With this masterful book, Jeffrey A. Engel introduces a broader audience to his extensive work on George H.W. Bush. Engel, well known as an expert on the United States's forty-first president, makes a clear historiographical contribution to debates over George H.W. Bush's presidency and particularly his foreign policy. In contrast to the president's critics, Engel argues that Bush had a vision, and he achieved it. In Engel's view, Bush subtly and discreetly guided events. Engel's account is a rebuttal to scholars, including myself, who see the Cold War as having ended before Ronald Reagan left office. Engel also wades into the debate about whether, as François Mitterrand suggested, Bush 'lack[ed] original thinking' (p. 204). In assessing Bush's contributions, Engel returns repeatedly to the notion of 'Hippocratic diplomacy', which he uses to emphasise that Bush as president was driven by the principle to which doctors swear an oath—to 'do no harm'. In Engel's view, Bush 'guided' the United States and the world to a peaceful end to the Cold War. 'Avoiding doing the wrong thing' made Bush 'a success' (pp. 467, 484).

Engel notes that Bush and his aides saw Gorbachev's reforms as threatening to the United States, in contrast to Reagan's view that Gorbachev had a new approach to the United States and the world. Significantly, Bush did not see Gorbachev's reforms as signalling the end of the Cold War. In part, Bush feared that an end to the *status quo* would lead to the recall, or, worse, the expulsion, of US troops from Europe. It was not until his Oval Office address after the Soviet Union's collapse that Bush finally acknowledged the Cold War's end and uncharacteristically suggested that 'Every American can take pride in this victory' (p. 473).

The readership for Engel's deeply researched work should not be limited to those interested in the end of the Cold War. Given Bush's long career, and his son's accession to the presidency, students of US foreign relations over the last fifty years will find much value in this book. The pace of 1989, 1990 and 1991 in terms of US foreign policy was staggering, offering one explanation for the volume's length—484 pages of text. What is more striking is not just how many crises Bush confronted but the ways they repeatedly overlapped with one another.

One key theme in Engel's account is Bush's conservatism. Not in a political sense, but as Engel puts it, 'in the traditional sense of the word, one who believed that future success required holding fast to the best features of the past' (p. 22), Bush sought to create or sustain stability and ensure that the US would not have a declining role in Europe. Yet, although Engel portrays Bush as 'conservative', he does not see the president as trapped in the past. Indeed, Engel highlights 'how lightly he wore the past' when considering attending Hirohito's funeral or contemplating German unification (p. 279).

Engel, building upon his earlier work, highlights the significance of Bush's time as US ambassador to the United Nations (UN) to his later diplomacy.

Bush had only been granted the post at the UN after having lost a Senate campaign and having been passed over to be Secretary of the Treasury. It was at the UN that Bush practised careful listening, which would serve him well as president. For example, his first overseas trip as president was to Japan, to attend the emperor's funeral. There, Bush held countless meetings with other world leaders, listening to their concerns and world-views. One other striking feature of Engel's account was how often Bush addressed a diplomatic problem or crisis with a personal letter.

This is not a book with an exclusive lens on Bush himself. Many chapters focus on events in the Soviet Union, Germany and China, in which Bush played at most an off-stage role. Engel draws upon the research of others to set Bush's contributions in a broader international context; indeed, Engel's account could be considered an international history of Bush's first three years in office.

Yet the book is at its best when Bush is the central figure. As a storyteller, Engel has an eye for detail, such as the incident when Bush offered a raincoat (not his own, we later learn) to a woman standing in the rain to hear him speak in Hungary. He also highlights little-known episodes such as Gorbachev and Bush's conversations about Cuba during the 1989 Malta Summit. It is clear that Engel had the opportunity to interview the former president at length, but Engel did not become captive to his central subject. Although, in Engel's assessment, Bush was one of the most 'qualified' to be elected to sit in the Oval Office, he does not rate him as among the 'most accomplished' (p. 25). Similarly, Engel uses the word 'timidity' when discussing Bush's policy toward Eastern Europe and Panama (pp. 250–1).

Engel lightly connects events of the Bush presidency to international relations today in two ways. First, he highlights current Russian President Vladimir Putin's experience in the German Democratic Republic at the end of the Cold War and how it informed his approach to foreign policy today. Second, Engel's analysis highlights why Bush looks attractive to many observers now, even more so than he did in the months before the US invaded Iraq in 2003. His experience, prudence and gentlemanly approach to American power are notably absent in the White House today.

Engel has made significant efforts at declassifying the Bush administration's documentary record. He was well positioned for many years at the Bush School of Government and Public Service at Texas A & M University, only a short walk from the George H.W. Bush Presidential Library Center in College Station, Texas. Although the book clearly draws upon these documents, I wish that Engel had done more to highlight what his declassification efforts produced—he does not make clear enough what is new in this volume.

Finally, by concluding his account with the collapse of the Soviet Union, Engel deprives his readers of a comprehensive account of the final year of Bush's presidency. Engel argues that the presidential election consumed Bush in 1992, but I would have liked to have heard more about US policy-making regarding Bosnia and Somalia, as well as how Bush and the United States responded to a world without the Soviet Union.

SARAH B. SNYDER

*American University, Washington, DC*

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