

Nancy Bernkopf Tucker. *The China Threat: Memories, Myths, and Realities in the 1950s.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2012. xiii + 295 pp. \$39.50, cloth, ISBN 978-0-231-52819-1.



Reviewed by R. Thomas Bobal

Published on H-War (January, 2013)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

In *The China Threat* Nancy Bernkopf Tucker utilizes recent secondary material and her own considerable past research to fashion a comprehensive and readable synthesis of American relations with China under President Dwight D. Eisenhower. The subtitle of the book is “Memories, Myths, and Realities in the 1950s.” It easily, however, could have been the main title. While Tucker labors to accomplish several feats in the book--to reestablish the importance of individuals in the formulation of foreign policy and to explicate the restraining role of domestic events and realities--her primary goal is to revise the “myths” which have come to surround the Eisenhower administration’s policy towards China and to reveal the “reality.”

This places Tucker and her work squarely in the camp of the Eisenhower revisionists. In the decades after President Eisenhower left office historians portrayed him as, to quote historian Robert J. McMahon, an “amicable but bumbling leader who presided over the ‘great postponement’ of critical national and international is-

ssues.”[1] Beginning in the 1980s, however, a new and revised understanding of Eisenhower emerged. As researchers gained access to administration records they began to portray Eisenhower as, to paraphrase one of these revisionists, “the hidden-hand president.”[2] Eisenhower emerged from these accounts as a cool, calculating--almost wily--leader who fed the public a steady diet of intentionally misleading and bellicose statements, while behind the scenes he exercised a steady and deft hand.

Eisenhower emerges similarly from Tucker’s account. Publicly the president, and other administration officials, voiced harsh anticommunist and anti-Chinese rhetoric, but behind the scenes they were more nuanced. As Tucker reveals, while administration officials “publicized the harshest aspects of their China policy” they privately worked towards lessening tensions. Eisenhower, for instance, supported loosening trade and journalistic travel restrictions (pp. 182-183). And far from encouraging Taiwanese leader Chiang Kai-shek during the two Taiwan Straits crises,

as has often been portrayed, he labored to broker a compromise. The president even, Tucker writes, recognized that the United States “should, and eventually would,” adopt a two-China policy and “open diplomatic relations with Beijing” (p. 2). Yet, publicly Eisenhower presented a very different reality, depicting China as “aggressive and irrational” because he “realized the value that the portrait ... offered.” It “kept allies ... alert and wary” and immunized him against attacks by the China lobby and other foreign policy hawks (p. 181).

This represents *The China Threat*’s greatest strength. It lucidly explicates the complex institutional and international restraints which informed and constrained Eisenhower’s policy. These include well-known forces such as the China lobby and the widespread anticommunist sentiment of the time, but also less visible forces, such as racial perceptions, American business interests, and hardliners within the administration itself. This last factor represents perhaps the work’s greatest revelation. As Tucker elucidates, Eisenhower faced constant pressure from hardliners within his own administration. When, for example, he considered relaxing trade restrictions he was opposed by a broad spectrum of officials within the Department of Defense, the CIA, and the Treasury Department. Tucker also generously utilizes recent secondary literature to place the administration’s policy within the larger international context, incorporating not only the Chinese and Taiwanese perspectives, but also those of the Soviets and America’s European allies.

All told, Tucker is attempting to write *the* book on the Eisenhower administration and China, to incorporate all of the factors and forces at play. As might be expected, she handles some of these factors and forces better than others. For instance, Tucker’s venture into cultural history proves less than successful. Her analysis of race is cursory and confused. In one paragraph, for instance, she notes that Eisenhower “brought a pa-

ternalistic and patronizing attitude to bear” against China; she then proceeds to provide a few examples (including Mao Zedong’s “fanatical” and “hysterical” views on atomic weapons), and concludes the paragraph by asserting that “Eisenhower did not see China as seriously menacing the United States and used such rhetoric to prove to China’s enemies in America that he was aware of, and alert to, the China threat” (pp. 58-59). Is Tucker arguing that the President held racialized, “paternalistic” views or that he only espoused them for public consumption (and if this is so, why cite remarks made by the president in private to his advisors)? In any case it is unclear and also immaterial. Race is never mentioned in reference to any specific policy initiative or to the president’s overriding China policy. Equally mystifying is Tucker’s omission of religion. In recent years groundbreaking works like William Inboden’s *The Soul of Containment* (2010) and Seth Jacobs’s *America’s Miracle Man in Vietnam* (2005) have demonstrated that beliefs about religion proved foundational to how Eisenhower administration officials conceived of the Cold War and also many of their foreign policy initiatives. Given the history of intense American missionary efforts in China this would seem a force worth examining in detail. Yet, there is nary a reference. Finally, given the importance Tucker lends to the China lobby some readers may find themselves wishing she had devoted more attention to this constraining force.

Despite these flaws *The China Threat* is a crisply written, judicious, and comprehensive appraisal of the Eisenhower administration’s policy towards China. It will be of greatest use to undergraduates and laymen. For experts, it will likely yield few insights not found elsewhere, but it may provoke them into considering a factor or influence which they had allowed themselves to forget.

Notes

[1]. Robert J. McMahon, "Eisenhower and Third World Nationalism: A Critique of the Revisionists," *Political Science Quarterly* 101, no. 3 (1986): 453. See also Stephen G. Rabe, "Eisenhower Revisionism: A Decade of Scholarship," *Diplomatic History* 17, no. 1 (January 1993).

[2]. Fred I. Greenstein, *The Hidden Hand Presidency: Eisenhower as Leader* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994).

publicized

publicized

the existence of

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-war>

Citation: R. Thomas Bobal. Review of Tucker, Nancy Bernkopf. *The China Threat: Memories, Myths, and Realities in the 1950s*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. January, 2013.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=36482>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.