

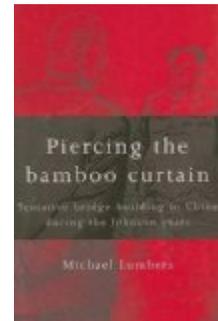


Michael Lumbers. *Piercing the Bamboo Curtain: Tentative Bridge-Building to China during the Johnson Years*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008. x + 286 pp. \$79.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7190-7778-4.

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Published on H-Diplo (June, 2009)

Commissioned by Christopher L. Ball



Johnson's China Syndrome

This well-researched and lucidly written monograph considers U.S. policy toward the People's Republic of China (PRC) during the presidency of Lyndon Johnson. Based on a wide array of revealing documents, the book posits that the breakthrough in Sino-American relations customarily credited to President Richard Nixon and National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger represented, in fact, the culmination of policies and proposals formulated by their immediate predecessors. Nixon and Kissinger "built on ideas that had already gained high-level credence" between 1964 and 1968, and it is those ideas Michael Lumbers, an independent scholar based in Toronto, Canada, explores in his work (p. 231).

Though Johnson ended the stagnation that had characterized Washington's approach to China for over a decade, the impetus for change came from not the president or his senior advisers but mid-level specialists in the State Department. Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs Roger Hilsman, who believed that the Chinese threat to American national security was inflated, set the wheels in motion. In a seminal speech in December 1963, Hilsman called for a calibrated policy of engagement and containment of the PRC to end its political isolation and nurture moderate forces in Beijing on the one hand, and deter Chinese aggression in Third World on the other. Hilsman and others at the State Department felt that policy review would also enhance American prestige globally and stem the loss of international support for Taiwan. Unfortunately, Johnson's

senior aides either rejected or ignored these recommendations, convinced as they were that such "appeasement" would only embolden the PRC's fiery leadership (p. 92). Concerned about his own credibility and unwilling to reward Beijing after it successfully tested an atomic bomb, Johnson sided with his aides. The president's position plus Hilsman's resignation in March 1964 proved a severe albeit temporary setback for the "China reform camp" in Washington (p. 145).

In late 1964, James Thompson, a Far East specialist at the State Department assigned to the National Security Council, spearheaded a second campaign to change the administration's stance on China. He argued that engagement of China and the concomitant exposure to Western goods, people, and ideas would attenuate Chinese revolutionary fervor and "erode" the worldview of Beijing leaders (p. 87). However, the start of the American intervention in Vietnam and publication of Lin Biao's "Long Live the Victory of People's War," urging colonial and semicolonial nations to pursue violent national liberation in 1965, militated against endorsement of Thompson's recommendation by Johnson, and, in fact, "confirmed the worst suspicions of Chinese intentions" of the White House (p. 98). Sensing that Beijing sought in Vietnam to affirm its leadership of global militant communism in light of the open split with Moscow while avoiding a direct, Korea-like confrontation with the United States, Johnson opted to contain but not confront China, and thus did not alter his administration's policy vis-à-vis

Beijing.

The approach to China underwent “symbolic and substantive alterations” in 1966 (p. 137). Johnson and his cabinet suddenly became “more receptive to some of the arguments advanced by the China policy reform camp” owing to the declining prestige and growing vulnerability of China occasioned by the overthrow of Sukarno’s leftist regime in Indonesia, reaffirmation of Soviet leadership of the world communist movement, mounting tensions with Moscow, and the chaos engendered by the Cultural Revolution (p. 145). Academics, members of Congress, and press secretary Bill Moyers, “a decisive voice” who became “increasingly convinced of the urgency of presenting the peaceful side of America’s face in Asia,” echoed the sentiments of the reform camp (p. 156). Against the advice of Secretary of State Dean Rusk, the administration’s most ardent opponent of policy review, Johnson eventually undertook the “most significant bridge-building initiative” of his presidency, a July 12, 1966, address to the American Alumni Association articulating the rationale for a new China policy and “laying the rhetorical foundation and justification for redefining America’s relationship with the mainland” (pp. 157, 159). The rhetoric never translated into action, however, as events in Vietnam, public opinion, concerns of regional allies, and fear of irrational behavior by Beijing embroiled by the Cultural Revolution constrained Johnson. “With the advent of China’s intense political and social turmoil, the deferment of substantive policy reform was no longer mandated by an expansionist menace, but by the calculation that a xenophobic, inward-looking leadership would refuse to accept any olive branch offered to them [sic]” (p. 203).

The 1968 Tet Offensive and mounting evidence of a military stalemate in South Vietnam led Johnson to consider, once more, building a rapport with Beijing, this time to drive a wedge between Chinese and Vietnamese communist leaders and thus press Hanoi to accept a negotiated solution to end the war. Rusk himself recognized the merits of that plan, and for the first time supported policy review. Again, however, circumstances intervened to derail rapprochement. Most notable among those was the unfavorable disposition of allies—notably, Seoul, Bangkok, and Taipei—and the American public, Johnson’s concerns about personal and national credibility, and, perhaps most important, the president’s March 31 announcement that he would not seek a second term, which nullified all prospects for tangible improvement of Sino-American relations until Johnson’s successor assumed the presidency. As it turns out, even if Johnson

had decided to proceed with policy review then—or at any other time during his presidency, for that matter—it is unlikely that Beijing would have responded positively. Mao Zedong’s commitment to continuous revolution and the demonization of Washington it mandated precluded “any relaxation of attitudes toward the US” in Beijing, the author notes on the basis of arguments advanced recently by China scholars (p. 233). Therefore, there was no lost chance for peace with China during the Johnson years.

As intimated above, the author considers public and allied opinion instrumental in shaping the administration’s policy toward China. While it does appear that Johnson’s “instinctive hostility to China policy reform sprang more from a politically infused aversion to rocking the boat and a determination to preserve his martyred predecessor’s record than from any personal fixation with Chinese power,” that is not effectively corroborated by the source material (p. 78). Also, while the author weighs in on the influence of newspaper editorialists and academics, he ignores the stance and pull of the American business community. Ultimately, it is never clear from the book precisely where the American public and interest groups stood on China. While it seems public opinion and academics in particular favored policy review, the author partly attributes the White House’s decision against rapprochement in 1968 to the domestic mood. The author more ably addresses the disposition of allied Asian governments and the consideration accorded to it by Johnson. The White House’s desire to indulge those allies may well have been the greatest obstacle to policy review and the reason Nixon, not Johnson, achieved the breakthrough in Sino-American relations.

The book offers revealing insights into Johnson’s leadership style. The author affirms that in the matter of Sino-American relations Johnson emerges as an “attentive and well informed leader who dominated the foreign policy process” (p. 7). Actually, the president comes across as tentative and indecisive in the narrative, victim of the pressures of his advisers, public opinion, and foreign allies. The author himself notes that Johnson deferred U.S. military intervention in Vietnam in 1964 in order to “avert disaster” and win the November presidential contest (p. 99). Such timidity is not the mark of dominant leadership. Rusk was arguably more assertive—and central—in the China policy debate. By the author’s own admission, the president accorded Rusk “a considerable degree of leeway,” allowing Rusk to become the “most forceful and articulate voice of opposition within Johnson’s inner circle to any modification of America’s posture towards the PRC” (pp. 60, 61). Ultimately, Rusk

prevailed.

The book has other shortcomings. For instance, the author argues that the Johnson “administration’s refusal to compromise its ties to Taiwan most likely contributed to the radical orientation of China’s foreign policy in the late 1950s” (p. 21). But reputable scholars have shown that revolutionary China’s own internal dynamics and Mao himself, not Washington or Taiwan, were responsible for that radicalization. The author contends that Taiwan was the “most pressing issue in Sino-American relations, rather than U.S. opposition to world revolution,” but never develops that idea (p. 217). The third chapter on the origins of the Vietnam War and attendant reaffirmation of Washington’s rigid China policy is captivating but filled with data only tangentially related to the topic. The chapter is less about Sino-American relations than Vietnamese revolutionary activity and China’s role in abetting it. Chapter 5 similarly contains information about the Cultural Revolution immaterial for delineating the Johnson administration’s response to it. In that chapter, the author should have expounded on the substance of the Sino-American ambassadorial-level dia-

logue taking place in Warsaw and Washington’s understanding of the Sino-Soviet dispute. The author does address the dispute, but mostly as it affected Beijing’s relations with Moscow and Hanoi. Lastly, it is not clear from the book whether the Cultural Revolution was a positive or a negative for the White House’s bridge-building effort with Beijing. The author vacillates on the implications for Sino-American relations of the Cultural Revolution, as he does with public opinion.

Despite some lacunae, this book offers valuable new insights into the history of the Cold War. It thoughtfully assesses Johnson’s foreign policy as it concerned East and Southeast Asia, and sheds important light on the Vietnam War and the Cultural Revolution in the PRC, among other related matters. Though it is difficult to discern how the Johnson administration “pierced the bamboo curtain”—its ideas never going beyond the stage of rhetoric—the book successfully traces the evolution of the China policy review process in Washington. This impressive piece of scholarship is sure to prove useful for both students and experts, and is a must for all university libraries.

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Citation: Pierre Asselin. Review of Lumbers, Michael, *Piercing the Bamboo Curtain: Tentative Bridge-Building to China during the Johnson Years*. H-Diplo, H-Net Reviews. June, 2009.

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