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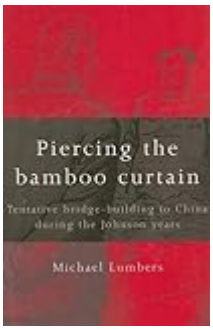

Michael Lumbers. *Piercing the Bamboo Curtain: Tentative Bridge-Building to China during the Johnson Years.* Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008. x + 286 pp. $79.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7190-7778-4.

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Johnson's China Syndrome

This well-researched and lucidly written monograph considers U.S. policy toward the Peopleâs 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 âbuilt on ideas that had already gained high-level credenceâ 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 Washingtonâs 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, Johnsonâs senior aides either rejected or ignored these recommendations, convinced as they were that such âappeasementâ would only embolden the PRCâs 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 presidentâs position plus Hilsmanâs resignation in March 1964 proved a severe albeit temporary setback for the âChina reform campâ 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 administrationâs 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 âerodeâ the worldview of Beijing leaders (p. 87). However, the start of the American intervention in Vietnam and publication of Lin Biaoâs âLong Live the Victory of Peopleâs War,â urging colonial and semicolonial nations to pursue violent national liberation in 1965, militated against endorsement of Thompsonâs recommendation by Johnson, and, in fact, âconfirmed the worst suspicions of Chinese intentionsâ 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 administrationâs policy vis-Ã -vis Beijing.

The approach to China underwent âsymbolic and substantive alterationsâ in 1966 (p. 137). Johnson and his cabinet suddenly became âmore receptive to some of the arguments advanced by the China policy reform campâ owing to the declining prestige and growing vulnerability of China occasioned by the overthrow of Sukarnoâs 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, âa decisive voiceâ who became âincreasingly convinced of the urgency of presenting the peaceful side of Americaâs face in Asia,â echoed the sentiments of the reform camp (p. 156). Against the advice of Secretary of State Dean Rusk, the administrationâs most ardent opponent of policy review, Johnson eventually undertook the âmost significant bridge-building initiativeâ of his presidency, a July 12, 1966, address to the American Alumni Association articulating the rationale for a new China policy and âlaying the rhetorical foundation and justification for redefining Americaâs relationship with the mainlandâ (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. âWith the advent of Chinaâs 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]â (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, Johnsonâs concerns about personal and national credibility, and, perhaps most important, the presidentâs March 31 announcement that he would not seek a second term, which nullified all prospects for tangible improvement of Sino-American relations until Johnsonâs 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 Zedongâs commitment to continuous revolution and the demonization of Washington it mandated precluded âany relaxation of attitudes toward the USâ 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 administrationâs policy toward China. While it does appear that Johnsonâs âinstinctive hostility to China policy reform sprang more from a politically infused aversion to rocking the boat and a determination to preserve his martyred predecessorâs record than from any personal fixation with Chinese power,â 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 Houseâs 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 Houseâs 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 Johnsonâs leadership style. The author affirms that in the matter

of Sino-American relations Johnson emerges as an âattentive and well informed leader who dominated the foreign policy processâ (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 âavert disasterâ 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 authorâs own admission, the president accorded Rusk âa considerable degree of leeway,â allowing Rusk to become the âmost forceful and articulate voice of opposition within Johnsonâs inner circle to any modification of Americaâs posture towards the PRCâ (pp. 60, 61). Ultimately, Rusk prevailed.

The book has other shortcomings. For instance, the author argues that the Johnson âadministrationâs refusal to compromise its ties to Taiwan most likely contributed to the radical orientation of Chinaâs foreign policy in the late 1950sâ (p. 21). But reputable scholars have shown that revolutionary Chinaâs own internal dynamics and Mao himself, not Washington or Taiwan, were responsible for that radicalization. The author contends that Taiwan was the âmost pressing issue in Sino-American relations, rather than U.S. opposition to world revolution,â but never develops that idea (p. 217). The third chapter on the origins of the Vietnam War and attendant reaffirmation of Washingtonâs 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 Chinaâs role in abetting it. Chapter 5 similarly contains information about the Cultural Revolution immaterial for delineating the Johnson administrationâs response to it. In that chapter, the author should have expounded on the substance of the Sino-American ambassadorial-level dialogue taking place in Warsaw and Washingtonâs understanding of the Sino-Soviet dispute. The author does address the dispute, but mostly as it affected Beijingâs 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 Houseâs 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 Johnsonâs 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 âpierced the bamboo curtainâ–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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