

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Hannah Gurman. *The Dissent Papers: The Voices of Diplomats in the Cold War and Beyond.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2012. ix + 280 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-15872-5; ISBN 978-0-231-53035-4.

Reviewed by Javan D. Frazier (Middle Georgia College)

Published on H-War (December, 2012)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air War College)

Frazier on Gurman, *The Dissent Papers*

Dr. Hannah Gurman offers a new perspective on American foreign policy from the Cold War to the present in her latest book. The author takes some well-known figures and incidents in American foreign policy, such as George Kennan's containment ideas and George Ball's Vietnam War objections, and analyzes the language used in the writings of these authors to show how they dissented from the mainstream of American foreign policy. Kennan became the center of American foreign policy, but only for a short time. Ball was unable to change the course of policy toward Vietnam, though he was seemingly proven right in the long run. The author uses this same approach toward language in her analysis of the writings of Jack Service and John Davies who, along with other China hands, attempted to persuade their State Department superiors, and others within the U.S. government, to recognize the legitimacy of the grievances of the communist Chinese, the weaknesses of the Nationalists, and the need for a negotiated settlement to end the civil war there. Gurman shows that once agencies outside the State Department gained access to the writings of the China hands, these writings, which Gurman argues were not fully understood by outsiders, were used against them during the hysteria of McCarthyism. Finally, Gurman analyzes the effect, or seemingly lack thereof, on American foreign policy that the State Department Dissent Channel has had on policy since its inception in 1971. Gurman shows that rather than fostering debate and formulating new policy,

it became an instrument to crush dissent and punish dissenters.

An aspect of this book that particularly worked was the titles of the chapters. The first chapter, about George Kennan and entitled "The Pen as Sword," is appropriate, as Gurman shows how Kennan used his words to influence American foreign policy in a more powerful way than weapons seemingly could. The author describes the well-known story of Kennan's formulation of the containment doctrine but emphasizes the writing process and style more than is often the case. Gurman portrays Kennan as a bridge between the diplomats who wrote long, leisurely, personal correspondence to superiors far away and the twentieth-century diplomats who were so engulfed in a heavily bureaucratized organization that their ideas and perspective often were never read by their superiors. Due to his writing style and timing, Kennan was able to attain a position of great influence in American foreign policy but was unable to keep it. As Gurman notes is frequently the case for writers, Kennan was unable to exert any real control over his ideas and they often became misinterpreted or misused. As his ideas became more distorted, Kennan became more of an outside dissenter than an insider. In fact, Kennan's role as an outside dissenter was more important than his role as an insider which, as Gurman shows, he was not particularly suited for at the bureaucratized policy-planning level.

"Learn to Write Well" is the title of the second chap-

ter, which describes the challenges and persecutions of the China hands. The title plays off the advice given by Foreign Service supervisors to their subordinates. Many of the China hands took this advice to heart and did learn to write well. This group of Foreign Service officers attempted to influence American policy regarding the communists in China by showing the weaknesses of Jiang Jieshi's Nationalists and the growing strength of Mao Tse-tung's communists. Primarily through their reports to their supervisors and others in the service, the hands, particularly Jack Service and John Davies, attempted to influence policy but were unsuccessful. Even worse for the China hands were the repercussions of their writings. In the red-baiting, anticommunist fervor of McCarthyism, the writings of the China hands were seen as un-American and proof of how America lost China. The purge that followed the hearings on the China hands resulted in nearly all losing their Foreign Service jobs or being reassigned. Gurman argues that the writing style of the China hands was misinterpreted. The China hands had written well for themselves and their fellow State Department colleagues. Yet, outsiders, whether in Congress or the general public, interpreted their writings in a negative, harsh, and inaccurate way. As long as the writings remained in-house, the China hands were fine, but in the harsh glare of McCarthyism the hands suffered for their attempts to influence American foreign policy.

Revising the Vietnam Balance Sheet describes the efforts of George Ball to influence America's policy toward the Vietnam War in the 1960s. During Ball's earlier work with Jean Monnet on European economic recovery after World War II, he had learned a style of writing that was more literary and reflected diplomatic writing prior to the Cold War. Gurman illustrates how Ball used this style to try to convince government officials, particularly President Lyndon Johnson, to change America's policy toward Vietnam to escalate the war. When his efforts failed, Ball became, like Kennan, an outsider to the foreign policy establishment, where he ultimately proved more effective.

The last chapter describes the efforts of the State Department to control dissent within the Foreign Service by establishing a direct channel of communication between dissenting Foreign Service personnel and the secretary of state. This Dissent Channel, as it was called, allowed Foreign Service officers to present their differing views regarding policy to the secretary of state and within the confines of the State Department. The title of this chapter, "The Other Plumbers Unit," subtly alludes

to how the Dissent Channel, just like the plumbers from the Watergate scandal, had a mean, dark side. Unlike the plumbers, though, the Dissent Channel was incredibly successful at controlling or squashing dissent, as those who used the channel were either reassigned or fired. Furthermore, any hope that the Dissent Channel would be able to offer an alternate view of policy and possibly change it was destroyed by the manner in which the channel was used. Though Gurman focuses on how the State Department quelled dissent with the channel during the Nixon and Ford administrations, she cites examples of this from all administrations down to George W. Bush.

Throughout the book, Gurman portrays the State Department in a varied and complex way. At the beginning of the book, it is a department trying to modernize while wrestling with other agencies, such as the Department of Defense and the National Security Administration, to influence foreign policy. In the second chapter, the State Department is attempting to defend its personnel against virulent anticommunist attacks while also defending itself as an institution, both of which it did poorly. In the chapter on George Ball, the State Department is licking its wounds from McCarthyism and so weakened from the loss of China that few are in a position to influence a change in America's policy of expanding the war in Vietnam. In the last chapter, it appears as if the State Department is trying to foster debate about foreign policy but instead the department uses the Dissent Channel to weed out dissenters through McCarthyism. Gurman's account of State Department actions illustrates how complex, dynamic, and tragic American foreign policy since the Cold War has been at times.

Dr. Gurman's perspective reflects her scholarly background in both English and history. Her literary analysis of the writings of Foreign Service personnel is as thorough as any applied to a great literary work. This way of analyzing foreign policy documents is one that I had never considered and I find it illuminating. Though I am not versed in literary theory, I think it has merit in the study of American foreign policy or, at least, Gurman has shown its merit.

The chapter about the State Department's Dissent Channel offers insight into an institution I had never heard of and may pave the way for future studies on the subject. This chapter also, however, helped to crystallize an idea I had about this book while reading it. If Foreign Service personnel have little real influence on foreign policy, of what value are their reports and docu-

ments that are used as sources by many scholars of American foreign policy? If all the information sent up the chains of command is ultimately ignored or marginalized, should scholars be analyzing any of it? As Gurman portrays it, once those at the top have made policy, there appears to be nothing that those below can do to change it. I do wonder if the Foreign Service is as helpless as the author's depiction seems to suggest.

Some readers may object to Gurman's primary emphasis on George Kennan in the development of containment policy or her use of the Wade-Giles spelling of Chinese names. Yet, I think the focus of this book, to show how diplomatic dissenters influenced or did not influence foreign policy, will overshadow any weaknesses. One of the best compliments that can be paid to a book is to say that it made the reader think and this book certainly accomplished that.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-war>

Citation: Javan D. Frazier. Review of Gurman, Hannah, *The Dissent Papers: The Voices of Diplomats in the Cold War and Beyond*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. December, 2012.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=35978>



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