

Jeffrey A. Engel, *When the World Seemed New: George H.W. Bush and the End of the Cold War* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017).

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In *When the World Seemed New*, Jeffrey A. Engel has crafted an engaging revision of the end of the Cold War. Combining the best aspects of monograph and synthesis in a volume written with verve, Engel focuses on the period from Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev's visit to the United States in September 1988 until Gorbachev's deposition from leadership at the end of 1991. Engel centers his analysis on the presidency of George H.W. Bush, arguing that Bush employed a style of "Hippocratic diplomacy," in which he "first strove to do no harm" (6). Tracing Bush's actions – or more frequently, his inactions – through "the most internationally complex [presidency] since that of Franklin Delano Roosevelt," Engel claims that Bush was, and is, an "underappreciated president" (4, 8). While Bush was perhaps never fully possessed of the "vision thing," Engel portrays him as a steady hand, who believed in the righteousness of the United States, and was willing to let history unfold rather than to force himself upon events.

Engel begins with a brief biographical sketch of Bush's public life leading up to the presidency before throwing him headlong into 1989's various international crises. We see Bush get egg on his face over his refusal to publicly condemn the violence of Tiananmen Square while remaining noncommittal over his administration's support for *perestroika*. Of course, the public face of the Bush administration was rather the tip of the iceberg. Underneath the surface, Bush and his supremely skilled diplomatic and national security team – including Secretary of State James Baker, National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft, Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney and Deputy National Security Advisor Robert Gates – attempted to chart a course forward in which the United States could encourage democracy and integration in Europe unobtrusively and maintain American hegemony on the continent voluntarily. After watching the Berlin Wall come down, and meeting with Gorbachev in Malta in December of 1989, Bush entered 1990 with his hand firmly on the rudder, working through the issues of German reunification and

NATO membership before transitioning into the Gulf War and the attempted coup against Gorbachev.

Throughout, Engel portrays Bush as a man attempting not to overstep, concluding that he “rode the stream of history. And we all survived the Cold War’s surprisingly peaceful end” (484).

Particularly notable about Engel’s work is his extensive source base. A lengthy “note on sources” which follows the main text makes clear to readers that Engel has plumbed the depths of the major secondary literature, including those authors who make use of what Communist-bloc sources are available. Engel augments his voluminous secondary backing with newly-declassified American documents, noting that at one time his requests for declassification “exceeded the combined rolls of all other such requests submitted at all the nation’s presidential libraries” (6). Engel’s diligence has paid off in spades. His rich source base of government documents enabled him to credibly approach the end of the Cold War from the top down, rather than the bottom up.

It is this top-down approach that leads to the central question arising from Engel’s work: to what extent was Bush’s pattern of restraint and public-facing inaction a successful strategy? Engel believes that it was, noting that he assesses Bush by the baseline of whether or not he “accomplish[ed] all he... desired” (8). Because Bush believed his desires could be achieved through restraint – owing not least to his “belief in the inherent superiority of the American ideas on which he’d been raised” – he let events come to him throughout a turbulent time in international history (479).

The challenge for Engel becomes that for much of the book, Bush recedes into the background. He notes in the introduction that his book is “at heart an international story,” and he takes us throughout 1989’s hotspots, from Dan Rather’s interrupted broadcast during Tiananmen Square to the “spokesman’s mistake” that brought down the Berlin Wall (264). Certainly, Bush was at work publicly and behind the scenes during this time, despite this decentering of the American perspective. Engel places specific emphasis on Bush’s work to maintain relations with China after Tiananmen Square, noting that he “accelerated a process of Chinese integration with the world that neither he nor his critics who called out for punishment and revenge could have halted even if they had wanted to” (193). Later, Bush “reached the most important decision of his young presidency,” after a trip to Eastern Europe in July of 1989,

writing to Gorbachev to propose what would become their meeting in Malta, and writing to Chinese Premier Deng Xiaoping to criticize his handling of Tiananmen Square (227). Yet, these letters remained unpublicized, opening Bush up to criticism from Congress and the media, which Engel dutifully documents. Helen Thomas of the Associated Press recurs as a delightful thorn in Bush's side.

Indeed, it is only in 1990, a year of "more complicated realities" than its predecessor, that Bush emerges fully as the statesman that Engel has promised us (324). Engel shows us how Bush leveraged his connections built over decades of government service to forge support over his administration's position on Germany and over the first Gulf War. Bush's telephone diplomacy, in Engel's vibrant rendering, shows readers a president engaged in his "finest moments in office" (352). Perhaps Engel's focus on 1990 as a crucial year of reckoning for Bush is a subtle hint to reperiodize the end of the Cold War. Yet, given the book's emphasis on 1989 – nearly two-thirds of the text is dedicated to that year alone – such a supposition seems unlikely. Ultimately, this reviewer finds much to admire in Engel's concept of Hippocratic diplomacy. Given the contingent nature of historical events, it is difficult to say what a more assertive Bush in 1989 might have meant for the end of the Cold War. I also suspect, however, that Engel's willingness to accept inaction – or at least the perception of it – as leadership will ruffle feathers.

Such a brief review can necessarily say only so much about such an impressive and detailed work of historical scholarship. Engel has forced us to reconsider both George H.W. Bush's role in the end of the Cold War and, more broadly, how to evaluate a statesman's success or failure. His scholarship will undoubtedly inform and animate the works of historians who grapple with these questions for decades to come.