

# A Roundtable on Jeffrey A. Engel, *When the World Seemed New: George H.W. Bush and the End of the Cold War*

*Brian C. Etheridge, Thomas A. Schwartz, John Robert Greene, Dustin Walcher, Fritz Bartel,  
and Jeffrey A. Engel*

## **Introduction to Roundtable on Jeffrey A. Engel, *When the World Seemed New***

*Brian C. Etheridge*

At a press conference after the Berlin Wall had been inexplicably breached by delirious Germans in the fall of 1989, a frustrated reporter from CBS pressed President George H.W. Bush about his apparent lack of enthusiasm: “This is sort of a great victory for our side in the East-West battle. But you don’t seem elated.” (267) Bush later explained to equally exasperated advisors that he refused to “dance on the Berlin Wall” and “stick a finger in Gorbachev’s eye.” This famous response epitomizes what Jeffrey Engel ultimately describes as Bush’s “Hippocratic diplomacy” in his excellent new book about the president’s handling of the end of the Cold War. For Engel, Hippocratic diplomacy meant that “he first strove to do no harm.” (6) In short, Engel credits Bush’s measured, patient approach with explaining the central issue around which, as he puts it in his rejoinder, he framed his story: “the wonder that that we all survived” the end of the Cold War. Although his thoughtful interlocutors find much to agree with in this interpretation of Bush’s handling of the end of the conflict, they offer important commentary about how we might problematize or re-frame this era moving forward.

All of the commenters agree that Engel’s work is an excellent example of traditional, narrative history. Almost uniformly, they admire the well-written prose, the absorbing narrative, and the strong pacing. Offering that he “would not be surprised if the book is in serious competition for major book awards and prizes, both scholarly and more popular,” Tom Schwartz describes the book as “exceptionally well written, in an engrossing and consistently interesting and moving style.” John Greene highlights on more than one occasion Engel’s “well-developed ability to let telling quotes from the sources speak for themselves.” Dustin Walcher shares a sentiment widely shared by the roundtable participants: “a masterpiece combining presidential and foreign policy history, the book will be a touchstone for future scholarship on the forty-first president.”

While they all agree that the book is particularly well executed, many of them point out that there isn’t anything necessarily new to the interpretation. In arguing for the success of Bush’s diplomacy, Engel’s book, according to

Greene, “breaks no new theoretical ground.” Schwartz declares “this is clearly the orthodox view of the Bush Presidency’s foreign policy,” while Walcher says “the picture that emerges of an experienced and careful policymaker will not surprise most *Passport* readers.” Engel concedes as much in his response, when he says that his book “does not offer a truly innovative revision of Bush’s leadership, whose caretaker qualities, as Professor Greene and others note, was largely perceived by his contemporaries and the first scholars of his presidency.” Instead, Engel offers that a major contribution of the book is a “deeper understanding of the quiet, subtle, and oftentimes behind-the-scenes way in which Bush put those key ideas into practice.”

Nearly all praise the international dimensions to his story. Schwartz and Fritz Bartel respectively laud “diligent and painstaking research” and “detailed explanations (and groundbreaking evidence)” related to decision-making in China, the Soviet Union, and Europe. But Bartel and Walcher point out that this international perspective doesn’t necessarily help further our understanding of why the Cold War ended; Bartel in particular contrasts Engel’s work with H.W. Brands’s *Unipolar Moment* to highlight the shortcoming of this personality-driven approach in this regard. Again, to his credit, Engel agrees about the value of such a structural approach, but avers that “to conduct that same search when trying to understand the individual thinking and decisions of global leaders mindful of the future yet largely consumed by managing the present, would have been less productive.”

Each reviewer takes issue with something topical, geographical, or temporal that Engel left out that may complicate the positive portrayal of Bush. Bartel wants more about Bush’s nuclear weapons policy, which might recast him more as a “an obstructionist who impeded progress towards a more peaceful world.” Walcher finds that leaving out a discussion of events in Central America constitutes a “substantial” omission. And Schwartz wanted to learn more about the election of 1992: “Why did the American people come to reject George Bush overwhelmingly—he got less than 38 percent of the vote—despite what are arguably some of the most successful foreign policy achievements of any President?”

The biggest dispute in the roundtable, however, revolves around Greene, who in the most thorough critique takes issue with Engel’s assessment of Bush’s activism. Greene finds the author indecisive in his assessment of “the managerial and executive style” of Bush, arguing that parts of his narrative should “lead the reader to conclude

that Bush was an activist president," but other comments "would lead one to conclude that Engel sees Bush as a passive guardian president." "One can be an activist," Engel responds, "not only by acting, but also by recognizing that even limited action, even inaction, might produce the outcome one desires." "This non-binary activism I consider Bush's greatest attribute," concludes Engel. "Believing the stream of history flowed in a generally beneficial direction, he chose to float when no clear destination for vigorous paddling appeared."

The conversation around Bush's activism, or lack thereof, gets to what I think is the meatiest part of the roundtable, one that Schwartz and Bartel are particularly eager to sink their teeth into. To wit: what is the significance of Hippocratic diplomacy, the ride-the-stream-of-time, first-do-no-harm, approach in the era of Trump? Schwartz offers that "a book about an accomplished and dignified President, surrounded by experienced and astute advisers, analyzing problems with intellectual sophistication and political sensitivity" will draw considerable attention because it stands in "stark contrast" to the "current occupant of the White House." Bartel puts it more stridently when he observes "in a whirl of orange hair, tweeted vulgarity, and American carnage, the stream of history dramatically changed its course."

In our current context, Engel's emphasis on Bush's easy assumptions about the inexorable march of democracy and American-style capitalism becomes even more important. Social psychologists use the concept of "attribution theory" to understand how people seek to make sense of their behavior and the behavior of others. As they often point out, people are quick to credit their own success to internal or dispositional causes rather than external or situational ones. Along this vein, the critique of Jim Hightower that Bush someone who "was born on third base," but "who thought he'd hit a triple" (24) suggests Bush fell victim to this phenomenon; and Engel's book indicates that it could apply to the nation under Bush as well. In this sense, Bush's unshakeable faith in the inevitable victory of American values of democracy and market capitalism may betray a fundamental attribution bias, in which he and his advisors were content to ride the stream of history because they attributed the unfolding of events to the inevitable triumph of American values, rather than to possible situational/structural factors outside of American influence.

Engel's telling of this story helps us recognize that blindness. Riding the wave is not always a good strategy, as Bartel argues, especially when that wave "bodes ill" for democratic institutions as he suggests it does today. But another virtue of recognizing this blindness is revisiting the assumed success of Bush's stewardship of the Cold War. We survived, yes, true enough. And for that we should all be thankful. Was that enough? Is that a high enough bar for success? Were there opportunities missed? (Some of the reviewers suggest so.) Counterfactually speaking, could there have been even better stewardship by someone who wasn't as blinded by the belief in the inevitable march of American values? Are there moments when a different kind of activism could have produced better results, especially as we understand the fruits of those actions today?

These are big questions. And it's a testament to both Engel's book and this provocative roundtable based on his work that they raise and address them. It's clearly a debate we desperately need today as we attempt to chart a path forward.

## Review of Jeffrey Engel, *When the World Seemed New: George H.W. Bush and the End of the Cold War*

Thomas A. Schwartz

Reading a book about an accomplished and dignified president who surrounds himself with experienced and astute advisers and analyzes problems with intellectual sophistication and political sensitivity evokes a certain degree of nostalgia in me. I will try not to succumb to this particular occupational hazard in reviewing Jeffrey Engel's *When the World Seemed New: George H.W. Bush and the End of the Cold War*.

*When the World Seemed New* (WWSN) is an impressive book. I would not be surprised if it turned out to be a serious competitor for major awards and prizes, both scholarly and more popular. For one thing, it is exceptionally well written; the style is engrossing and the narrative consistently interesting and moving. It is also a more traditional form of history, an examination of the foreign policy of President George H.W. Bush that uses an extensive range of primary sources to evaluate and provide an American perspective on his conduct in office and his historical legacy. But it is less traditional in the sense that through diligent and painstaking research, Engel has successfully incorporated the perspectives of Soviet, Chinese, and European leaders.

The research behind these foreign perspectives is impressive, although it is Engel's personal access to President Bush and his closest advisers that makes the book particularly valuable. The portrayal of Bush is generally quite favorable, although Engel does not shy away from criticizing what he sees as mistakes, such as Bush's failure to push the Chinese harder on human rights issues. This comes after a very compelling and moving narrative treatment of the crushing of the student movement in Tiananmen Square and an extensive consideration of Bush's agonized response to the massacre, including a long letter that he wrote to the Chinese leader, Deng Xiaoping. Engel balances the outrage felt by many Americans at the repression of the protests and their hope for a tough response with the Bush viewpoint that China should not be isolated and that in the long run engagement was the better strategy. In some ways, the jury is still out on this question, which Engel freely admits.

One obvious reason this book will garner considerable public attention is the stark contrast between the personal and presidential style of George H.W. Bush and that of the current occupant of the White House. Even though Engel does criticize Bush on occasion, the sense that this is a favorable portrait of an underappreciated leader is probably intensified by the automatic comparison readers will make with President Trump. There is little question that George H.W. Bush was a competent, intelligent, and wise chief executive. CNN recently broadcast a series on the 1990s, and its assessment of the Bush foreign policy was overwhelmingly favorable. The talking heads included scholars such as Tim Naftali, who headed the Nixon Library, and Gil Troy of McGill University in Montreal. Their verdict echoes Engel's conclusions and makes me wonder why the book reviewer for Kirkus would label this a "revisionist" study of Bush's foreign policy.<sup>1</sup> Engel's is clearly the orthodox view of the Bush presidency's foreign policy.

Engel provides a particularly careful treatment of the transition period between the Reagan and Bush administrations. Some readers might see this as a relatively minor point, but it has become increasingly clear that the period in which political power in the United States is transferred to new officials, most often of a different political party, frequently has important historical consequences. Historians have studied this issue as far

back as the transition between the Truman and Eisenhower administrations and have noted its significance for foreign policy issues since that time.

Engel has detailed the “pause,” or the period in which the Bush administration sought to assess and critique the approach of the Reagan administration toward Mikhail Gorbachev and his reforms. His account makes it clear that even though both presidents were Republicans, this was a “hostile takeover,” with a degree of animus and a dismissal of the Reagan people that is remarkable in retrospect. (I was particularly struck by the harsh treatment accorded to the State Department’s Roz Ridgway, the assistant secretary of state for European affairs.) This type of behavior may simply be inevitable, a product of a political system in which new officials feel the need to demonstrate their break with the past. But in the particular circumstances of 1989, the transition might have had disastrous consequences for American interests.

Engel’s narrative is chronological, but he is very adept at interweaving background and context as he takes the reader through the Bush presidency. This facility is well displayed in his fascinating narrative of the events of late 1989 in Europe. He moves from Poland to East Germany, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, and Romania at the same time as he writes about the American invasion of Panama, the memory of which has faded with time. The narrative shows the contrast between Bush’s caution in Europe and his boldness in authorizing the operation in Panama.

Engel’s discussion of the Panama operation is one of the junctures in the book where he implicitly recognizes that interpreting the forty-first president is a complex undertaking. The unilateral intervention in Panama, precipitated by an attack on American citizens, caused many Panamanian casualties and considerable collateral damage. But Engel also quotes James Baker as explaining that Panama established an important “emotional predicate” that enabled the administration to build support among the public for the use of American military power after Vietnam (308). Of course, not only was it a precedent for Desert Storm, as Baker suggests, it was also a precedent for Somalia, Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Iraq. The Bush presidency, though celebrated for its prudence in the use of military force, did establish precedents for future presidents who had less judgment and discretion.

Engel does make a very effective case for Bush’s approach to German reunification. His support proved far more insightful than the petulant opposition of Britain’s Maggie Thatcher. I share with Engel his belief in the centrality of Germany for American foreign policy during this period. This point is often underappreciated by American scholarly audiences, largely because Germany is one of the great success stories of American diplomacy, and historians are not drawn to studying success.

WWSN makes it clear how essential Germany was to Bush’s approach to European diplomacy. Bush’s decision to accept and welcome German reunification was one of the wisest of his presidency, and it is a very clear example of what Engel calls Bush’s “Hippocratic diplomacy”—i.e., first striving “to do no harm.” Engel also makes it clear that Bush’s support for German unity, a position that some might have argued went against the lessons of history, was tied to the president’s certainty that the United States needed to continue to play a central role in helping to keep the peace among the fractious Europeans.

Engel is well aware of the various historiographical issues at stake in the interpretation of the first Bush presidency. His account is balanced and detailed, and he weaves the biography of George H.W. Bush into a larger story about the foreign policy assumptions of a generation of American leaders. These assumptions—about the importance of American power in guaranteeing international stability, the key role of the United States in “pacifying” Europe, the confidence in the triumph of democracy, and the belief in the universality of American values—constituted the unexamined belief system that American leaders brought into their dialogue with both Soviet and Allied officials during the tumultuous period from 1989 to 1991. Engel demonstrates how influential these beliefs were in the negotiations and actions of Bush and his team. He also clarifies the role they played in Bush’s articulation of a “New World Order,” a formulation that created controversy but disappeared into obscurity after the 1992 election. The election of 2016, with its criticism

of this type of American “globalist” outlook, helps us to see more clearly the importance of this perspective for shaping the history of American foreign policy since the Bush years.

It is remarkable that so many foreign policy transformations occurred during one presidency. The Bush presidency confronted a set of international issues, from the collapse of communism, the Gulf War, the suppression of rebellion in China, and the reunification of

Germany, any one of which would merit a separate volume. Engel manages to handle all of these in this book, creating a model of concise prose. Nevertheless, I disagree with some of his choices. For example, Bush’s success in assembling the international coalition that defeated Saddam Hussein in the Gulf deserves more attention than Engel provides, although I think he is successful in demonstrating the effectiveness of the Bush approach. That approach, with its emphasis on personal diplomacy, receives an important endorsement in this study, much more so than in previous works on the period.

One small point indicates how careful Engel was in his research. In recapping the history of the so-called Brezhnev Doctrine, the Soviet policy of military intervention to prevent any communist state from turning away from the true faith, Engel describes the Soviet intervention to crush the Prague Spring in 1968. He writes that “hundreds of civilians were killed, thousands imprisoned. Tens of thousands fled west” (93). Initially I thought he had erred and confused the results of this intervention with the results of the 1956 Hungarian incursion. However, when I checked this with the Cold War International History Project at the Woodrow Wilson Center, I learned that these figures were accurate, although this information became widely known only after the fall of communism in Czechoslovakia. The number of lives lost and the degree of resistance have been generally ignored in many of the survey histories of the Cold War. However, Engel dug deeper than most of these writers did, and on a point that was not even central to his book. I was embarrassed that I had not known this.

If I wanted to offer one criticism of the Engel book, it would be that he does not take the story into the last year of the Bush presidency. I realize this is a somewhat unfair criticism, as the book is already almost five hundred pages, and an author should be able to stop when he or she chooses. But I would have liked to see Engel’s assessment of what happened to the skillful and prudent George Bush and his team in 1992. Why did the American people reject

George Bush overwhelmingly (he got less than 38 percent of the vote), despite what were arguably some of the most successful foreign policy achievements of any president in history?

By way of an answer, Engel briefly comments on the continuing crises faced in Yugoslavia and Somalia, and he repeats the oft-expressed view that Bush suffered from the perception that he cared more about foreign affairs than domestic policies, a perception that was especially dangerous during an economic recession. That is the received wisdom, and there is undoubtedly great truth in it. However, one wonders if Bush's failure does not also reflect on the tensions inherent in the domestic politics of American foreign policy. Bush refused to "dance" on the Berlin Wall in a way that might have humiliated Gorbachev, and he resisted marching to Baghdad and deposing Saddam to seal the victory in the Gulf War. Both are actions for which he receives praise from historians, if not credit from his contemporaries.

Nevertheless, it also seems as though Bush was unable to convince the American people that his "New World Order" was worthy of their continuing support and that they had a stake in American leadership on the world stage. It is interesting that in 1992 Bush faced a brief primary challenge from Patrick Buchanan, who maintained Trump-like ideas on foreign involvements and international trade before Donald Trump. And in the general election, Ross Perot's views on NAFTA truly foreshadowed Trump's protectionism and rejection of the liberal world order Bush embraced. In this final year of the Bush presidency, the picture of Bush's achievements does become more mixed. It reflects ways in which his electoral failure was a warning to future American leaders about the danger of neglecting the domestic politics of foreign policy.

This unfair criticism aside, Jeff Engel has produced an outstanding book about an American president whose integrity and judgment we could admire and respect. Bigly.

Note:

1. <https://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/jeffrey-engel/when-the-world-seemed-new/>

### Review of Jeffrey A. Engel, *When the World Seemed New: George H.W. Bush and the End of the Cold War*

John Robert Greene

Jeffrey A. Engel's new book, *When the World Seemed New: George H.W. Bush and the End of the Cold War*, joins a rich and growing literature dealing with the foreign policy of the administration of the first George Bush. Engel's well-researched book breaks no new theoretical ground. He argues—as have many students of Bush-era diplomacy—that Bush's foreign policy was both nuanced and generally successful. Engel supports this point of view through a worthy survey treatment of the story of the implosion of Communism in Europe, one that shows the linkage of that event to events in the rest of the world (although Africa gets short shrift here). As is the case with any lengthy survey, one can quibble with judgments the author made along the way. But it is in his analysis of the managerial and executive style of the character of the title character of his book—ultimately, his view of whether or not George H.W. Bush was a guardian or an activist president—that Engel's work is less than convincing.

Engel begins with a useful review of the foreign policy of Ronald Reagan that downplays the impact that Reagan's policies had on ending the Cold War. Rather, Engel enshrines Mikhail Gorbachev as "the modern-day Prometheus of change" (18), contending that while "many thousands can take the credit" for the end to the Cold War, the credit belongs to "Gorbachev most of all" (19). In support of this

view, he offers a useful and generally convincing outline of Gorbachev's mindsets of reform—labelled by many, though not all, as perestroika and glasnost. But his conclusion on the primacy of Gorbachev in the events that brought the Cold War to an end will be battered by those who believe that Reagan spent the Soviet Union into oblivion with an astronomical increase in American defense spending that, try as it might, the Soviet Union could never match.

Engel's look at "Bush's Rise" in chapter 2 of *When the World Seemed New* offers little that has not been told before, with one notable exception. Few would dispute Engel's place as the leading scholar of the first Bush and the People's Republic of China; his masterful editing of *The China Diary of George H.W. Bush* (Princeton, 2008) was a welcome addition to the literature. So it comes as no surprise that he tells the story of Bush's role as Gerald Ford's envoy to China (1974-1975) with a spirited breadth of detail that has not yet been seen from any Bush biographer. However, Engel's recounting of Bush's pre-presidential career curiously omits any serious detail on his time as Ford's Director of Central Intelligence—a role that allowed him to sharpen both his diplomatic and bureaucratic skills. Regardless, it can be said that George Bush was present at the creation of the post-Cold War world, and whether Reagan or Gorbachev was ultimately responsible for the set of circumstances that led to the end of that conflict, Bush, even as Reagan's loyal and trusted vice president, most certainly played no fundamental role in the formation of policies that led to communism's collapse—a point that Engel clearly and rightly makes.

Yet even with a breadth of training that led some in the press to dub him the "résumé candidate," the new president, according to Engel, came to office in January 1989 unsure of how to deal with the teetering Soviet Union. Inexplicably to some leaders, Bush's administration began by standing in place on Soviet policy—a regroup that became known as the *pauza*—the "pause." A "comprehensive review" was demanded, studies were made, meetings were held, and Margaret Thatcher fumed; the prime minister felt that Bush was not up to the task of pushing the USSR over the edge.

Engel hedges on whether or not he agrees with Thatcher's assessment, but he does make it clear that he sees Bush as stalling for time, waiting until his administration could create a plan. But others (including myself) have interpreted the *pauza* as a plan of its own. Bush wanted—needed, in his view—to distance himself from the policies of his predecessor, policies that had come under attack not only from the Democrats, but from the right wing of his own party, which had felt that Reagan's second term overtures to Gorbachev smacked of a Nixon-like détente.

The mere act of the regroup allowed Bush to position his administration as being different from that of his predecessor—as a welcome change from Reagan's perceived softness on communism. In this context, the *pauza* would be activist in nature, not passive, as Engel suggests. Indeed, the *pauza* did produce a serious policy shift, mentioned by Engel, when the Bush administration called for a reduction in the number of NATO forces stationed in Europe (139). Engel is clearly correct, however, in noting that on May 12, 1989, the *pauza* ended with a whimper, when Bush spoke at Texas A&M University and declared that his policy would go "beyond containment"—a phrase that meant little, and that Engel rightfully describes as little more than sloganizing.

Engel's study of the Bush administration's policy towards China and its reaction to the carnage of Tiananmen Square is little short of masterful. Given Engel's previous contribution to the literature, it is not surprising that this is the most detailed section of the book, and the most exciting. The cables sent by U.S. Ambassador James Lilley to the White House Situation Room are used with aplomb by Engel; they give the reader a minute-by-minute unfolding

of the crisis. Here, and throughout his book, Engel shows a well-developed ability to let telling quotes from the sources speak for themselves; thus, the drama of the situation literally works itself to a fever pitch.

One can, however, take issue with Engel's analysis of the administration's response to the slaughter at Tiananmen. It is both useful and telling that Engel demonstrates how Bush filtered the crisis in China through his memory of the Hungarian uprising of 1956 and was determined to avoid a repeat of that disaster. The fact that the disaster *was* repeated, however, left Bush with a crisis to manage. Echoing those contemporary observers who wanted Bush to issue a punitive response to the regime in Beijing and were critical of Bush's refusal to do so in the name of international stability, Engel judges Bush's reaction to the crisis as "comparatively weak." (178). But many have interpreted Bush's response as both a long- and short-range success. Rather than issue a knee-jerk response that would please his political base, Bush, no less revolted by the events in Tiananmen than were any of his critics, opted for a mild, patient response that kept the severely strained Sino-American relationship intact. This, like the *pauza*, can be seen as a strong, activist response—the response of a president with a long-term plan.

After Tiananmen, Engel returns to Europe. His eight chapters on the final implosion of communism in East Germany, Eastern Europe, and ultimately the Soviet Union form the largest section of this book. In these pages, Engel presents a Gorbachev who is completely different from the man he describes in the beginning of the book. Now faced with the dissatisfaction of his satellites abroad and a sinking economy at home, Engel's Gorbachev evolves from a "Prometheus" to a rather reactive leader, one who faces pressure not only from his erstwhile opponents on the world stage, but from the right wing of his own party at home. In Engel's telling, Gorbachev proved to be an ineffective manager of the post-Cold War world, reduced to begging for money from Bush and his NATO colleagues as the communist world crumbles around him.

Engel tells the story of that crumbling well. His conclusion—that Bush approached the management of the disintegration of European communism with the desire to avoid another Tiananmen uppermost in his mind—is convincing, but Engel confuses the reader by arguing that the basic conditions in Beijing and East Germany were the same, then giving three reasons why they were not (255). I side with the latter position. Much like his treatment of the bloodbath at Tiananmen, Engel's telling of the high drama of the piercing of the borders and the opening of the Berlin Wall make for gripping reading, and his use of Ambassador Jack Matlock's memoir and reminiscences to offer first-hand testimony of the action is quite effective.

In the chapters on the unification of Germany—presented by Engel and most other observers as Bush's signal foreign policy accomplishment as president—Engel makes it clear that unification was far from a *fait accompli*. Everyone but Helmut Kohl—who comes to life here as he does in few other works—feared a united Germany: Gorbachev most of all, but closely followed by Thatcher. Engel shows that it was the decisions and machinations of Kohl that drove the process forward, and his claim that once the Germans had decided to unify, the issue was settled, is credible. (322). So it comes as a surprise to the reader when Engel abruptly asserts that Bush, "as much as anyone else, and certainly more than any other foreigner, can lay claim

to being the father of modern Germany" (334)—a conclusion that his own evidence does not support.

Through his August 2, 1990, invasion of Kuwait, Iraq's Saddam Hussein would be the first to test the stability of the post-Cold war world. Engel does not pretend to offer a comprehensive military history of the Gulf War. Instead, he widens the historiographical offering by providing greater development of several incidents that have been underreported in the literature on the war. Engel analyzes the role of April Glaspie, the American ambassador to Iraq, and refutes the oft-leveled accusation that she inadvertently gave Hussein the "green light" to invade Kuwait by urging a speedy resolution to the crisis (381-383). He also documents, using declassified NSC minutes, how the administration needed to convince itself to come to the defense of a country it had little use for—except for its oil (386). By this point,

Engel's Gorbachev has become a pitiable figure, reduced to an attempt to regain relevance by lobbying Bush to agree to a Soviet-sponsored diplomatic measure to calm the crisis. Gorbachev was coolly rebuffed by Bush, and Engel rightly concludes that Gorbachev was, himself, ultimately a casualty of the Gulf War.

The story of Gorbachev's 1992 fall from power, and the concurrent dénouement of the Soviet Union, is told by Engel in four fast paced chapters. As with other crises, Engel tells the story of the aborted 1991 coup against Gorbachev with flair, once again letting the

documentary evidence tell the tale of the Keystone Cops-like venture that left Gorbachev humiliated and in power in name only. Boris Yeltsin, Gorbachev's foil and eventual successor, is not painted as fully by Engel as one might feel he deserves, especially since Gorbachev eventually lost his country to Yeltsin, who, in Engel's telling, "wanted to move past both socialism and *perestroika*" (441). Engel convincingly argues that Gorbachev's fate was sealed when Bush refused to give a final shot of economic aid to the Soviet Union. The question that has plagued historians of this moment has been why Bush, certainly no fan of the mercurial Yeltsin, chose not to bail Gorbachev out. Engel concludes that it was the American domestic economy that led Bush to keep from giving Gorbachev a final shot of aid. He quotes the president as saying that "there is no economic logic in lending now" (448).

This, as well as other instances referred to by Engel, might lead the reader to conclude that Bush was an activist president—one with a pronounced desire and ability to activate the political system, regardless of his personal style. In fact, rather than joining the chorus of observers who see Bush as vision-challenged, Engel gives Bush credit for having a broad world view, arguing in his conclusion and elsewhere that Bush's policies finally put into practice Franklin D. Roosevelt's vision of a postwar world held together by a common belief in collective security (419). However, Engel stops well short of giving Bush the label of activist. Instead, he muddies his own waters when he makes many asides claiming that Bush's "doing nothing when there was no clear choice suited his general approach" (259) and that Bush merely "rode the stream of history" (484).

These comments would lead one to conclude that Engel sees Bush as a passive guardian president, but that thesis (popularized by David Mervin in his *George Bush and the Guardianship Presidency* [New York, 1996]), would seem to be at odds with the vast majority of Engel's evidence. Perhaps Bush's presidency had both qualities; perhaps Bush tended to be both a guardian president and an activist in the FDR

mold. Perhaps that is what Engel was trying to say. But he does not say that, and the reader is left to come up with a judgment on this key issue on their own.

When *the World Seemed New* would have benefited from a closer stylistic edit. Engel's use of contractions and his fondness for clichés (calling Bush's attempts to meet with as many world leaders as possible while attending the funeral of Emperor Hirohito "diplomatic speed dating," for example) are examples of his penchant for drifting into a casual tone that feels out of place for a serious monograph (112). Likewise, his aggravating use of disaggregated sentences for emphasis (for but one example: "Nemeth wanted to open the border. To everyone.") also detract from what is clearly a serious work (240).

While one can wish that Engel had taken a stronger stand on the matter of George Bush's activism, or the lack of same, this is on balance a fine book. Engel offers first-rate scholarship, a clear survey of events, a wide reading of the available sources, a close and interesting use of the telling quote, and an ability to bring the reader into the heart of a crisis. It will, for quite some time, stand as the indispensable first text on the diplomacy of the first Bush.

**Review of Jeffrey A. Engel,  
*When the World Seemed New:  
George H. W. Bush and the End of the Cold War***

Dustin Walcher

During the 1988 presidential campaign, comedian Dana Carvey developed what came to be the defining impersonation of then-Vice President George H. W. Bush. Playing the Republican nominee as an empty suit, he simply repeated vacuous phrases such as "stay the course" and "a thousand points of light." Although Bush won the presidency in an electoral college landslide, Carvey's caricature—repeatedly featured on *Saturday Night Live* over the course of the next four years—captured the public imagination. Carvey's Bush was and remains to a considerable degree the country's vision of Bush—an affable and probably well-meaning but ultimately goofy and somewhat intellectually dull chief executive. It was among the best material *Saturday Night Live* ever produced.

The Bush that Jeffrey Engel's well-researched book portrays was far more commanding and successful, possessed better instincts, and was ultimately more interesting than Carvey's version. But it is unlikely that *When the World Seemed New* will reach the same mass audience that Carvey did from his perch at *Saturday Night Live*. A masterpiece combining presidential and foreign policy history, this book will be a touchstone for future scholarship on the forty-first president. It provides a detailed examination of Bush's handling of the end of the Cold War, with emphasis on the president's ideas, policy formulation, and, notably, the international context in which his administration acted. It is, to a great extent, the culmination of Engel's past research on the Gulf War, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and Bush's experiences in China.

Engel carefully paints a thorough personal and political portrait of Bush. The picture that emerges of an experienced and careful policymaker will not surprise most *Passport* readers. Significantly, "Bush believed in the universality of American values," writes Engel, "and in their eventual acceptance around the world—in time—and he believed that the United States, and only the United States, could safely shepherd the world to that ultimate, more peaceful and prosperous destination" (479). But the characteristic that emerges as Bush's defining trait (and would probably surprise Dana Carvey the least) is prudence. Engel writes

that "[f]aced with uncertainty, and unsure of the best response, [Bush] paused, considered, and learned" (477). He was conservative in the classic sense; he appreciated the limits of U.S. power and the exercise of restraint in its application.

Bush also comes across as having had a reasonably clear vision for a globally engaged role for the United States in the aftermath of the Cold War. The president was determined to maintain the country's international footing and its commitments after the demise of the Soviet threat. The United States must not make the mistake that it made after World War I and retreat from the world; positive U.S. power had forged two generations of peace in Europe and secured liberal capitalism around the world. Continued engagement also functioned as an end in itself. The president may have had difficulty explaining what the United States should do in the future, particularly militarily, but he consistently maintained that although he could not foresee the precise crises of the future, U.S. power would always be necessary to maintain order and stability. In the face of domestic calls for a peace dividend, Bush held that maintaining a future of peace and prosperity required that the United States remain engaged. That was, Engel argues, the fundamental lesson that Bush and others of his generation took from the experience of the Second World War.

Maintaining order was a critical objective of policy throughout the Bush years. Bush, Secretary of State James Baker, and National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft valued order and stability in a democratic and capitalist international system. More than some in the country, they were prepared for the United States to underwrite the security of the "New World Order." They were less prepared to underwrite a significant degree of the financial costs of bringing post-communist economies into the liberal international order. Bush was characteristically cautious about the use of U.S. power, and he understood that unintended consequences—sometimes detrimental to U.S. interests and the ordered system that he sought to forge—often accompanied interventions, or even careless statements. Restraint and "Hippocratic diplomacy," where policymakers first took care to do no harm, characterized the sensibly cautious administration.

That caution usually served the Bush team well as it confronted a rapidly changing world. Contrary to the views of those who believed that political, economic, and especially military power was sufficient to bend the course of history to America's will, Bush and his top advisors understood that events around the world were powered by their own dynamics. But from Bush's perspective, the trends were positive, and he was confident that increasing swaths of the world were moving toward democratic capitalism. His job was to avoid derailing that process. In particular, he must not give hardliners in the Soviet Union an excuse to reverse course on Gorbachev's reforms. He must not, in other words, "dance on the wall" (268).

One of the more interesting themes to emerge in Engel's book centers on the importance of personal relationships. The theme is highlighted in connection with the president's relationship with Baker and Scowcroft. Their friendships and the professional respect they had for each other engendered a high degree of trust and confidence that translated to the policymaking process. Engel develops the relationship between Baker and Bush especially well. He surveys their political partnership and examines their complementary qualities. Bush, for example, was better with people, whereas Baker was a strong tactician and a fierce negotiator.

Personal relationships with foreign leaders also mattered. The incredibly important Bush-Gorbachev relationship was not especially warm. Bush ultimately supported the Soviet leader's reform efforts—albeit without the financial resources that Gorbachev required—but

they had little personal chemistry. The president enjoyed better personal ties with leaders in China, ties that he had cultivated since his diplomatic posting to Beijing as chief of the Liaison Office (the equivalent of ambassador to a government that the United States did not formally recognize) under President Gerald Ford in 1974. Bush knew Deng Xiaoping; the two visited each other even when Bush was out of office. The strength of that and other personal relationships facilitated progress in and at times inhibited the collapse of the bilateral relationship.

Indeed, Engel's treatment of the Sino-American relationship is one of the book's best features. The lasting relationships with leading members of the Communist Party of China that Bush began to develop during the 1970s paid dividends after he became president. When China violently repressed pro-democracy demonstrations in Tiananmen Square in June 1989, Bush faced nearly overwhelming domestic political pressure to denounce the Chinese leadership. While he was privately outraged by the events in Tiananmen Square, he was reluctant to sever the bilateral ties that had been meticulously constructed since Richard Nixon occupied the Oval Office. In typical fashion, Bush adopted a measured response that included public criticism, albeit so limited that it never satisfied China's U.S. critics, combined with private letters delivered through backchannels that drew upon personal connections.

Significantly, Engel stresses not only the considerations of Bush and his advisors, but the politics of China's Communist Party leadership. Chinese officials were certain that the only way to ensure the survival of the regime was to use violence to eliminate the opposition. Military leaders brought in troops from outlying areas whom they expected to be less sympathetic to the urban protesters. The tactic worked; the provincial Chinese troops attacked the protestors ruthlessly. Despite international condemnation, the regime survived and indeed prospered in subsequent decades.

Bush held fast against domestic pressure and continued to back China's inclusion in the World Trade Organization (WTO). The strained-but-not-broken relationship between Bush and Chinese leaders paid dividends when Bush needed the PRC, at a minimum, to abstain from key United Nations Security Council votes during the Gulf crisis. A Chinese veto would deny Bush the legitimacy that the supranational body could confer over an interventionist policy in Iraq. China abstained.

As the summary of Engel's treatment of Sino-American relations suggests, *When the World Seemed New* successfully situates U.S. policy in its broader international context. Insofar as Engel gives detailed and sustained attention to events and policymakers around the world, his accomplishment is unusual for studies that focus on presidential leadership, even when such studies concentrate on foreign policy. His greatest emphasis is on events in China, the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, and the leading Middle East participants in the Gulf War. He stresses the policymaking process and politics in these states, and highlights the myriad ways in which dynamics in other parts of the world shaped policy formulation in the United States. The internationalist methodology also permits Engel to examine how U.S. actions were interpreted abroad. As a result, his ultimate assessments of the Bush administration's leadership emerge as much more firmly grounded.

Naturally, Engel provides detailed analysis of Soviet conditions and politics. Mikhail Gorbachev's reform strategy—*perestroika*—sought to restructure the Soviet

political and economic system while maintaining a fundamentally communist system. It was a difficult balancing act that reflected the dire economic straits of the country. Even when Gorbachev retained enormous popularity throughout the West, food shortages and poor economic conditions caused great strife within the Soviet Union, and his popularity at home waned. Engel does a good job of explaining the competing centers of power that emerged, with particular emphasis on the conflict between Gorbachev and Russian President Boris Yeltsin. The multiple and competing pressures on Gorbachev underline the precarious political position the Soviet leader was in throughout his tenure in office.

Despite the book's length and Engel's careful attention to the global context in which Bush's decisions were made, there remain important issues that are given short shrift. The most relevant one for a book on Bush and the end of the Cold War is the cursory attention paid to events in Central America. The Latin American Cold War of the 1980s wreaked havoc on the region. Engel surveys the Iran-Contra affair and emphasizes Bush's limited role in the scandal. However, the details of the Iran-Contra affair highlight the significance of the Cold War in Central America, and that larger story is not developed in *When the World Seemed New*.

The Bush administration ultimately reversed the Reagan administration's intractable opposition to peace initiatives pursued by Latin American leaders, many of whom were friendly to Washington. The results were striking. Democracy returned to Nicaragua and El Salvador (the process was slower in Guatemala) as the Bush administration stopped opposing a process meant to produce reconciliation between left and right. Civil wars in which the United States had provided substantial assistance to the political right (which was fighting against the government of Nicaragua and controlled the government of El Salvador)—sometimes in violation of U.S. law—came to an end. The change in policy was significant, as it permitted the peace process to proceed. The result was the emergence of democratically constituted governments and an end, at least for the time being, of widespread political violence in the region. Events in Central America constitute a Cold War story that would have dovetailed well with Engel's larger narrative. The omission is substantial.

Another area of opportunity for future scholars centers on the analysis of the structure of the international system as the Cold War came to a conclusion. Engel is interested in policymakers, their ideas, the decisions they made, and the consequences of those decisions. Left uninterrogated is the underlying structure of the international system in which those leaders operated. As a result, Engel tells an effective story of the ways in which policymakers—especially those within the Bush administration—reacted to and shaped events while in office. Bush was, at the same time, a product of the postwar liberal international consensus. As Engel makes clear, he had little interest in questioning basic assumptions about the U.S. role in the world. Historians can question the construction of those underlying structures, however. Doing so was not an objective of this book; future scholars are left with the opportunity to examine critically the structures in which Bush, Gorbachev, and other leaders operated.

Engel also covers a variety of other events that I do not have the space to recount in detail here. He surveys the Bush administration's intervention in Panama. He provides a wonderful survey of the diplomacy of the German unification, emphasizing the fact that Bush was the only

major leader (aside from Helmut Kohl) who truly desired a united Germany in the heart of Europe. And he provides a detailed account of the decision to go to war against Iraq. Notably, he highlights the administration's initial near-indifference to the Iraqi invasion. Bush eventually decided that Iraqi President Saddam Hussein had acted like a latter-day Adolf Hitler and therefore must be confronted, but it took him some time to come to that conclusion. Engel also argues that the Gulf War symbolized the end of the Cold War, as the Soviet Union acquiesced to the U.S.-led coalition that crushed a onetime Soviet regional partner, and such an outcome in the Middle East would have been unthinkable in earlier years.

In the final analysis, Bush presided over the United States at a time of transition in a deeply unsettled international system. His greatest virtue was understanding that the United States possessed far greater capacity to do harm than it did to bend the world to its will. Another president might have "danced on the wall" in November 1989, done irreparable harm to the Sino-American relationship after Tiananmen Square, played into the hands of hardliners in the Soviet Union, or expanded the mission in the Gulf War from liberating Kuwait to regime change in Iraq. Indeed, both Bill Clinton and George W. Bush exercised considerably less restraint than did George H. W. Bush in international affairs. In light of the records of his successors, Bush's prudent, Hippocratic diplomacy has aged well. Unfortunately, too many people in Washington have had too much difficulty internalizing the fundamental lessons that the Bush administration offered.

**Review of Jeffrey A. Engel, *When the World Seemed New: George H.W. Bush and the End of the Cold War***

Fritz Bartel

"The stream of history": it is a phrase with a rather vintage ring to it, one that harkens back to the historicism of Hegel and Marx, the strategic musings of Bismarck, the revolutionary confidence of Lenin, or the realist meditations of Niebuhr. More recently, Francis Fukuyama provoked scholarly sensibilities with the claim that the stream had reached its end, and Barack Obama roused Americans to the polls with the assurance that the stream's long arc bent toward justice. But the question of whether history's waters can be directed to particular ends, are destined for some utopian ocean, or are simply full of hopelessly fallible actors navigating a permanently unpredictable current has not been at the forefront of historical debate for quite some time. Indeed, in the postmodern academy, the very idea that history maintains enough coherence to be called a stream (rather than raindrops, or smog, perhaps?), would probably be met with more than a few skeptical looks.

It was, therefore, a welcome surprise to see the phrase confidently resting at the heart of Jeffrey Engel's compelling new monograph, *When the World Seemed New: George H.W. Bush and the End of the Cold War*. From almost the first page to the very last, the stream of history is the primary interpretative thread Engel uses to weave his narrative and shape his argument. George H.W. Bush went "with rather than against the stream of history, content to ride its current rather than speed recklessly at a faster clip," Engel writes approvingly in his introduction (10). The president "rode the stream of history," he concludes in the book's final sentences, "and we all survived the Cold War's surprisingly peaceful end" (484). In between these bookends, references to history's current run through the account like, well, a stream.

This recurrent reference to history's course fittingly reflects the strengths and shortcomings of Bush's worldview and points to the ironic relationship that he had to the global event that defined his time in office: the end of the Cold War. Both subjects are given equal weight in *When the World Seemed New*, which is both a history of the Bush administration's foreign policy and an international history of the end of the Cold War. Engel offers detailed explanations (and groundbreaking evidence) not only of decision-making in Washington, but also of machinations, anxieties, and decisions made in the ruling circles of Beijing, Moscow, East Berlin, and Baghdad, to name just a few of the world capitals he covers. Although it is based entirely on sources available in English, *When the World Seemed New* is stronger because of its broad international scope. This is a credit to the breadth of Engel's research and the judiciousness of his conclusions, but it is also a testament to the people and institutions who have long sought to make the international history of the end of the Cold War accessible through English translations of countless foreign sources. The most ardent practitioners of international history will likely come away frustrated by the linguistic limits of Engel's sources, but the internationalist scope of the narrative nevertheless strengthens the book's insights and—clearly important in a work aimed partially at a popular audience—broadens the reader's understanding of the world beyond America's shores.

The most important of these insights is simple yet fundamental: the U.S. presidency is at once the most powerful institution in the world and at the same time severely limited in its ability to influence the course of world events. As Engel notes in his introduction, because of the precipitous collapse of the Eastern Bloc and the Soviet Union, George H. W. Bush had become "the most powerful man in human history" (4) by the end of his term in office. But Bush himself, and the U.S. government which he led, had done very little to cause this stunning turn in history's course. The most the president could do, as Engel aptly describes it, was pursue "Hippocratic diplomacy" and aim to avoid any misstep that would interrupt the onrush of events that were turning toward U.S. national interests. "Domestic forces invariably dictate events within any country, especially a revolutionary one, far more than foreign influences," Engel concludes in a section on China (193). This was a conviction shared equally, one senses, by his chief protagonist.

That is not to say that Bush lacked confidence in the ability of American capitalism and democracy to transform the world. "We know what works," Bush said in 1989. "Freedom works. We know what's right: Freedom's right" (73). Engel concludes that Bush believed American power and prosperity were "exportable" (22) and that the American system worked "for all" (73). Bush's perpetual confidence in the ultimate triumph of freedom, democracy, capitalism, and the United States' leadership of the world order is the clearest takeaway from Engel's portrait of the nation's forty-first president.

Bush has often been called a realist, but *When the World Seemed New* should make such a label untenable. Engel's use of "the stream of history" as an organizing principle clarifies why. Bush certainly shared the realist skepticism of individuals' and governments' ability to steer the stream of history, but he diverged widely from realists' understanding of the stream's final destination. Where realists saw (and see) a future defined by recurrent conflict and immutable national differences, Bush saw a future in which the world would one day be remade in America's image. Indeed, his ability to resist the presidential urge to alter the course of history directly depended on his steadfast confidence that the United States' values and interests would eventually prevail in every corner of the world. Where realists preach modesty in the face of

history's stream because they believe the stream leads to nowhere, Bush practiced modesty in the midst of history's stream because he was unwaveringly confident that the stream had only one possible destination: a U.S.-led world order comprised of democratic governments and capitalist economies. Was George H.W. Bush a prudent purveyor of American influence in the world? Absolutely. Was he a realist? No.

Such a distinction may appear to be of only academic importance, but it in fact helps us understand some of the most important decisions of Bush's presidency. Engel demonstrates that in these moments it was Bush's belief in the long-term power of capitalism and democracy to transform the world rather than realism that steered his course. First, when Bush faced a cacophony of domestic critics urging him to respond severely to the Tiananmen Square crackdown, he fell back on the fundamentals of his worldview to defend his policy of continued engagement with China. "As people have commercial incentive," he told the American public, "the move to democracy becomes more inexorable" (180).

Six months later, as the haunting history of fascism and world war hung over the prospect of a unified Germany, Bush—alone among Western leaders and first in his own administration—welcomed the prospect because he believed that the Federal Republic's experience with postwar democracy under the umbrella of American security had transformed the German people for better and for good. While Margaret Thatcher echoed the realist perspective in resisting German unity—"national character basically doesn't change," she told reporters—Bush believed that "forty-plus years of democracy could not easily be overturned" (278).

Similarly, while analyzing Bush's decision to refrain from invading Iraq to topple Saddam Hussein at the end of the Gulf War, Engel writes that Bush was comfortable leaving Saddam in power because he believed the Iraqi dictator's days were numbered anyway. Democracy was destined to arrive in the Middle East eventually, Bush believed, because its residents were "as subject to the stream of history as any other" (438). Bush was uniquely responsible for each of these decisions, which set the course for the United States' engagement with Asia, Europe, and the Middle East in the post-Cold War world. Engel's nuanced account demonstrates that these decisions were underwritten by a boundless belief in the destiny of free-market capitalism and electoral democracy to transform the world.

In the late 1980s, of course, Bush was far from alone in this conviction, and the stunning course of world events appeared to only strengthen the claim. The democratic transitions from communism in East-Central Europe, the fall of the Berlin Wall, German unification, and the collapse of the Soviet Union itself presented the world with astounding evidence that perhaps the future really did belong to democratic capitalism. No one could be sure why all these events were transpiring across the globe at the same time, so perhaps there really was a stream of history steering events toward an enlightened end.

In Engel's account, we get a full sense of this perception that the world was taking a democratic and capitalist turn, but we get less of an explanation for the turn itself. If it was this stream of history that ultimately produced the peaceful end of the Cold War, what forces propelled that stream forward? If Bush and the U.S. government were not the bellows behind the "breeze of freedom" (94) that blew so strongly in these years, then what was? *When the World*

*Seemed New* does not offer an overarching explanation for history's benign turn during the Bush period. In this way, Engel's work contrasts with Hal Brands's recent monograph, *The Making of the Unipolar Moment: U.S. Foreign Policy and the Rise of the Post-Cold War Order*, which is more explicit in its attempt to evaluate the structural shifts in global politics and the world economy that brought about the end of the Cold War. To be sure, Engel provides detailed, concise, and persuasive accounts of the causes of each of the events he narrates (no small task considering the geographic scope of the book), but he refrains from making an argument about the causes of the end of the Cold War at a global level. Perhaps this was intentional, and Engel believes that what looks from afar like a coherent pattern in global history was in fact just a fortuitous confluence of disparate events. But it is difficult to know for sure. What we gain in *When the World Seemed New* from Engel's use of the "stream of history" in understanding Bush, we lose in understanding the nature of the stream itself.

There is another cost to Engel's approach as well. Because he largely shares Bush's conviction that presidents should refrain from boldly attempting to alter history's course, he is less attentive to and largely uncritical of the opportunities that Bush missed to improve the international order. The most glaring of these missed opportunities lay in the field of nuclear weapons, an issue that scarcely appears in *When the World Seemed New*. As Thomas Blanton has shown elsewhere, Bush had a unique chance upon entering office to build on the successful nuclear diplomacy of his predecessor and work with Mikhail Gorbachev to radically reduce nuclear weapons or even eliminate them from the planet.<sup>1</sup>

But because of their ingrained distrust of their erstwhile Soviet adversary, Bush and the top members of his administration showed scant interest in pursuing this opportunity that the stream of history had bequeathed to them. After dawdling on the issue for over two years, Bush finally signed the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) in the summer of 1991, long after Gorbachev had lost the authority within the Soviet Union to pursue more radical measures. The START treaty receives a passing mention in *When the World Seemed New*, but the diplomacy of arms control is not discussed at all.

When dealing with the countless moving parts that comprised the end of the Cold War, Engel surely could not include them all and understandably had to cut some topics that he would have liked to address. But the omission of nuclear weapons and arms control does seem to influence the book's overall portrait of Bush. Scholars like Blanton who have considered the issue in greater depth have come away with a far less benign view of the forty-first president. Rather than looking like a leader prudently aware of the limits of his office and content to ride the waves of history, Bush appears in Blanton's work as an obstructionist who impeded progress towards a more peaceful world. As the leading expert on the Bush presidency, Engel surely has important opinions on this issue, but they do not appear in his final text.

Whatever the minor omissions of *When the World Seemed New* may be, the clearest impact that the book has on its reader is to signal just how different the world at the end of the Cold War was from the one we currently inhabit. In this way, Engel's book is the first that makes the end of the Cold War really feel like history, rather than simply a preface to the contemporary moment. This effect has less to do with how Engel composed his book than with how the

world changed in the years he spent composing it. For most of the post-Cold War period, the copious quotes from Bush and other officials espousing an unquestioned confidence in the superiority of free markets and democratic politics would have sounded familiar and contemporary to Engel's reader. Today, they read instead like the naive musings of a bygone era.

Engel's lessons about the constrained power of the U.S. presidency and the dangers of American ideological overconfidence clearly applied to the two and a half decades that followed the Cold War. During those years, the greatest mistake an American leader could make was indeed to brashly reach into the stream of history and try to alter or accelerate its course. This was because history, if it could only have been left alone, appeared to be heading toward a largely democratic peace and a mostly capitalist prosperity. Only the crimes and blunders committed by those who thought they could steer history's course—the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and the U.S. invasion of Iraq being the two most prominent of this era—could divert the stream from its liberal end.

But then, in a whirl of orange hair, tweeted vulgarity, and American carnage, the stream of history dramatically changed its course. Future historians will attach many descriptors to the global history of the post-2016 world, but reflexive confidence in the superiority of democratic institutions, free markets, and American leadership of the international system will not be one of them. In a world dominated by Trump, Xi, Putin, Erdogan, Duterte, el-Sisi, Kaczyński, et al., the idea that history inevitably flows toward the values that Bush and many others so blithely took for granted has been exposed for the mirage that, in reality, it always was. Of even greater consequence, the values themselves are now profoundly and globally in doubt. Were it only so that the United States president faced a world in which his or her biggest challenge was simply allowing history to run its course. Were it only so that the United States had a president who was interested not in riding history's benevolent waves, but in resisting its pernicious turns. Such a world, to put it mildly, is not the one we currently inhabit.

This does not make the thrust of Engel's conclusion about the benefits of riding the waves of history wrong. It merely suggests that, like all the lessons of history, it applies only to certain times and certain places. Context, as always, matters. Through deep research, lively prose, and wise conclusions, *When the World Seemed New* offers those who occupy or study the U.S. presidency an important lesson in the merits of modesty, but it is a lesson that would have been best applied in the post-Cold War era that has recently come and gone. The world, once again, seems new. But this time, what's new bodes ill, and the stream of history must be actively resisted.

Note:

1. Thomas Blanton, "U.S. Policy and the Revolutions of 1989," in *Masterpieces of History: The Peaceful End of the Cold War in Europe, 1989*, ed. Svetlana Savranskaya, Thomas Blanton, and Vladislav Zubok (Budapest, 2010).

### Response to *Passport* Roundtable on *When the World Seemed New*

Jeffrey A. Engel

There is no greater honor for a scholar than the serious engagement of peers. This is especially the case with colleagues as esteemed and thoughtful as the reviewers commissioned by *Passport* for this roundtable. That they found more to commend than to criticize within *When the World Seems New* provides a level of personal

satisfaction as well (and, of course, relief), and I appreciate this opportunity to honor their serious thinking with a few comments, offered less in the spirit of refutation than of conversation.

Replete with insights, the reviews offered by Professors Bartel, Greene, Schwartz and Walcher share to my eyes three particular points in common. First is recognition of the book's main purpose, which despite the large visage on its cover was never to reframe the foreign policy of a relatively recent president. It was instead to integrate a deep dive into one nation's records and history alongside an equally emphasized international history of the period. The Cold War's end offers a rich target for this approach. Records produced by the United States government remain a quarter century after their production still largely inaccessible. But they are coming. Similar rich archival reservoirs to the East and West of old Cold War divides already exist, explored by specialists trained to understand their national particularities.

This plethora of new and surveyed source material provides the opportunity to reconsider a tumultuous time in global affairs from a variety of national perspectives, from the halls of power down to the streets where so much of the action occurred. I thus encourage other *Passport* readers and fellow-travelers, no matter the strata of society they study, to dive headlong into this period. As several of the reviewers note, and I return to their sage observation later, *When the World Seemed New* was composed with an international eye, but is hardly universal. Guides exist in the form of regional and national experts whose work can now be synthesized as never before due to the interconnection of scholarly communities around the world. To abuse the prior metaphor to the fullest, perhaps it is better to call them lifeguards, providing experience for those eager to plunge headlong into the histories of more lands, with more languages, than any one person could hope to master in a lifetime, while also telling us when to stay off the ropes. Come on in, the water's fine.

Stepping down from my self-appointed soap-box I note a second theme consistently raised in this roundtable: the question of activism. Put simply, was Bush thoughtful, diligent, strategic, and ultimately capable of forming an agenda? No one can seriously contend he was not all of those things. But was Bush also an activist at the end of the day, pushing an agenda produced by the aforementioned qualities? Moreover, must an activist's agenda be original?

The answer to the last query, in Bush's case at least, has largely been settled. He was an implementer, not an innovator. Indeed, I leave this book more impressed than ever that the key ideas underlying his diplomacy were shared by all his predecessors and successors from 1945 until 2017. In this vein, *When the World Seemed New* does not offer a truly innovative revision of Bush's leadership, whose caretaker qualities—as Professor Greene and others note—was largely perceived by his contemporaries and the first scholars of his presidency. What is new, I like to think, is our deeper understanding of the quiet, subtle, and oftentimes behind-the-scenes way in which Bush put those key ideas into practice.

If the question of originality remains solved, how then might we define the necessary level of action within an activist agenda? Re-reading Professor Greene's thoughtful critique repeatedly, however, I remain uncertain how he might answer that question in regard to Bush. Does activism require that an agenda must be visibly pushed? As a noted scholar of Bush himself, I would value his answer. The clear activism Greene seems to yearn to see within my portrait of Bush I suggest is in fact displayed in multiple shades, but also to a different degree depending upon the context of each global crisis he faced in office. Bush at times led from the front (as in the Gulf War), from the shadows (as in German unification), or entirely out of sight

(in Tiananmen's wake). His was not the foolish consistency his fellow New Englander Thoreau once ridiculed. Indeed, like Thoreau—and here we can agree the similarities largely cease—Bush retreated from public view and also plunged into public debate not constantly, not even consistently, but instead situationally and thoughtfully.

One is tempted to employ the word “prudently” instead, even if my own attempt at that trait might leave readers to yearn for a more black and white presidential portrait. Reality requires a broader palate. One can be an activist, I contend, not only by acting, but also by recognizing that even limited action, even inaction, might produce the outcome one desires. This non-binary activism I consider Bush's greatest attribute. Believing the stream of history flowed in a generally beneficial direction, he chose to float when no clear destination for vigorous paddling appeared. Given what we have seen from his successors in particular, restraint appears increasingly admirable. To paraphrase the spirit of his initial successor, I would thus answer those who wonder if I consider Bush an activist president: it depends on your definition of activism. Newton argued that objects in motion tend to stay that way unless acted upon by an outside force. If said object approves of its direction, is it not an active decision to withstand the urge to steer, brake, or accelerate? What might appear lethargy or inaction to the outsider might well be the result of a decision to, well, just enjoy the ride.

That Bush never, that I saw, truly questioned the wisdom or the general desirability of the direction in which his stream of history flowed was also his greatest flaw. I am taken by the observation offered by Professors Bartel and Walcher in particular that my book focuses upon individuals and agency rather than broader structural change within the international system. I stand guilty as charged, and eagerly await what others more structurally-inclined might in time determine of this period. In weak defense I offer that my subject did not think structurally,

either. To search for tectonic answers for why the Cold War shifted ground as profoundly and rapidly as it did strikes me as laudable. To conduct that same search when trying to understand the individual thinking and decisions of global leaders mindful of the future yet largely consumed by managing the present, would have been less productive.

Third, and finally, each of these reviewers longed for more. For Professor Walcher it was for greater attention to Latin and Central America. Professor Schwartz wished the book continued through Bush's final year in office, even as Professor Greene wished both for a different emphasis within his first. Professor Bartel wisely noted the book's relative paucity on strategic nuclear issues.

Again I plead only for the court's compassion. When interviewing veterans of the Bush 41 administration I often found myself noting, silently of course, that I was surely the only one in the room glad that Bill Clinton won in 1992. The sentiment has nothing to do with my own political proclivities. It grew instead from the stark realization that if it took a decade-plus to compose a history of Bush's first term, I shudder at my ultimate age upon publication if he'd earned a second. Each of the reviewer's observations of where the book is thematically deficient—its scant attention paid to the Western Hemisphere, nuclear diplomacy, or I shall add the Madrid peace process—I clearly concede. I shall instead conclude with a poignant moment from its composition. Originally intended to be a comprehensive history of Bush's foreign policy, the manuscript's length soared to twice its current length...for my treatment of Bush's first year in office alone. Called onto the proverbial carpet by a terrified publisher, he asked the clarifying question: what do YOU really care about in this story? “The end of the Cold War,” I offered, “and the wonder that we all survived.” That is the story, framed as an international history, I attempted to offer. Or as Professor Greene would no doubt object to reading, it is in fact the story I attempted to offer. For everyone.