

Destiny and Power: The American Odyssey of George Herbert Walker Bush

Jon Meacham (Random House, 2015), 864 pp., notes, bibliography, photos, index.

Reviewed by Thomas Coffey

The category into which Jon Meacham's book about George H. W. Bush fits is debatable: the author says the book is neither a full life-and-times account nor a history of the Bush family, but rather a "biographical portrait" of the 41st president. This portrait's heavy reliance on diary entries and oral history, though, give it the feel of a memoir or a co-written autobiography, despite Meacham's stating the former president had no editorial authority over the book's content. The methodology behind *Destiny and Power* makes for a flawed, if well written and somewhat interesting, account of an underrated and historically important public servant.

Destiny and Power comes on the heels of the publication of *The Strategist*, the biography of Bush's former national security advisor and close friend, Brent Scowcroft, and the books adopt similar approaches.^a The author of *The Strategist* relied heavily on interviews with Scowcroft and the same holds for *Destiny and Power*, but Meacham adds Bush's diary entries dictated during his time as vice president under Ronald Reagan and then as president, from 1989 to 1993. As it happens, the diary recordings and interview comments are pretty bland; they are not tutorials in manipulation as are the transcripts of LBJ's conversations with domestic politicians and foreign leaders. Nor are the diary entries jaw-dropping in their mean-spiritedness and conniving, as are Nixon's White House transcripts.

The diary entrees are, instead, what you'd expect from someone who is pragmatic in his policy preferences and gracious towards others. Many of them appear aimed mostly at bucking himself up during difficult times. For instance, right before the ground war in Kuwait in February 1991, Bush dictated, "We can't stop now, we can't look back now, we can't pause now, we can't cease fire now. We can't fail in our mission." (461) After conceding the 1992 election to Bill Clinton, Bush noted, "I ache

a. The author reviewed *The Strategist* in the September 2015 issue of *Studies in Intelligence* (Vol 59, no. 3: 67–69).

and must now think: how do you keep your chin up, keep your head up through the couple of difficult days ahead?" (xv) However, Bush's recordings do contain some revelations, most of them dealing with the 1991 Gulf War:

- Bush was very concerned that Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Jordan preferred to reach an accommodation with Iraq after its invasion of Kuwait in August 1990. "There was a historical Arab propensity to try to work out deals . . . I had to wonder if, under pressure, they might be inclined to strike some kind of behind-the-scenes arrangement with Saddam." (427)
- Bush found British prime minister Thatcher tiresome: "She talks all the time in a conversation. It is a one-way street." (371) German Chancellor Helmut Kohl referred to Thatcher as "that woman."
- Concerned about the potential for Saddam Hussein to take US hostages during the troop buildup in Saudi Arabia, Bush was "determined that I could not be Jimmy Carter—an impotent, flicking US impotence in the eyes of the world." (438)
- Having failed to force Saddam to attend the signing ceremony that ended the Gulf War, Bush regretted never having a "Battleship Missouri" surrender, to make it akin to WW II, to separate it from Korea and Vietnam." (467)
- The dictations show a resentful side. When the ground war was shown to be going extremely well, Bush savored the moment. "It's going to be quicker than anyone ever thought. All the talking heads and all the worst case, and all the Congress and their pusillanimous views, look now to be wrong." (464)

The last quote highlights one of the traps of these books. Much as the incessant reliance on the after-the-fact, assured comments of Scowcroft give *The Strategist* a smugness of tone, the relentless quoting from the diaries makes Bush appear at times as grumpy, embattled,

All statements of fact, opinion, or analysis expressed in this article are those of the author. Nothing in the article should be construed as asserting or implying US government endorsement of its factual statements and interpretations.

and prone to sulking. It wasn't all "chin up" after losing the election in 1992. Bush, after noting the praise from foreign officials, dictated "Domestically, it's the same: you don't stand for anything, squandered your popularity, don't care about people, haven't done anything, and on and on it goes—and brutal in its intensity." Regarding the end of the Soviet empire and the departure of its famous infantry brigade from Cuba, Bush says, "What changes in the world, and yet who gives a damn?" (513) Indeed, his last diary entry as president was a rhetorical, "Who gives a damn now?" (535) Of course, diaries by their nature allow the diarist to vent, complain, and let off some steam. But it is their actions and publicly-spoken words that should define public figures; by relying so heavily on dictations, Meacham paints—no doubt unintentionally—a somewhat negative and misleading portrait of Bush.

Like *The Strategist*, the author of *Destiny and Power* comes across as a huge fan of its subject, which hurts the writing. Meacham pours it on a bit thick, describing Bush's appointment as CIA director in late 1975 (a political dead end for him) as reflecting his "duty to country, understood as compliance with the wishes of the President, was to trump the dreams of the individual." (194) Some of it is trite: "The political lesson of Bush's formative first years in public office was that the President of the United States—in this case Johnson—was neither wholly right or wholly wrong." (133) Or, "Bush sensed that transitions in public life would be made easier by courting those with whom you were to work and saying thanks to those with whom you had worked." (154) At points Meacham just can't hold back the praise: "George H. W. Bush was a uniquely good man in a political universe where good men were hard to come by." (596) And sometimes the reader is asked to swallow things whole: a case in point concerns the president's response to the Chinese regime's violent crackdown in June 1989 on demonstrators in Tiananmen Square. He chose essentially to overlook it, which undoubtedly made good geo-strategic sense; however, the author buys into the false administration narrative, quoting—approvingly—a draft press release that notes, "The encouragement of peaceful progress toward democracy and the assertion of American values would guide this administration in a remarkable period of change." (375) This of course must have come as news to the Chinese protesters.

The book, at nearly 900 pages, is twice as long as required, in part because Meacham has a habit of tying

up every new revelation with a bow of his own or introducing new sections with dedication-like statements. "Bush came to the Presidency a decent and caring man whose experience in life had taught him there were few simple problems and even fewer perfect answers." (355) Or truisms: "His presidency was shaped by all that he had met and all that he had done." (355) His windups and follow-throughs are too long, sometimes gratuitous, and it is often hard to tell where Bush's voice ends and Meacham's begins.

One final similarity with *The Strategist* is that both books traffic in the same criticisms of Bush 43's administration. The targets are predictably Defense Secretary Rumsfeld and Vice President Cheney. "Rumsfeld was an arrogant fellow and self-assured, swagger." (585) As for Cheney, the elder Bush attributed his "iron ass" reaction to the 9/11 attacks possibly to his wife, Lynne, who is "a lot of the eminence grise here—iron ass, tough as nails, driving." (589) Meacham, oddly coming across as a go-between, presented Bush's comments to Cheney, who gave the standard response to the standard criticism of his changing into more of a hard liner: essentially that times had changed since the first Bush administration—where he served as defense secretary—and the world became more dangerous. The father-son link between the two administrations and their different styles provides a much stronger rationale for inclusion in this book, but there is something pointless about the chapter. It does not add to our understanding of Bush the man or of his son's administration.

The chapter that should improve our understanding of George H. W. Bush, but does so only marginally, is the one on his time as the director of Central Intelligence. He did not want the job and there was some suspicion Ford's then-chief of staff, Donald Rumsfeld, had pressed to have Bush appointed DCI to remove a potential rival from the Republican national ticket in 1976. The Senate, wanting to prevent any politicization of the directorship, refused to confirm Bush as DCI without White House assurance that Bush would not run for vice president in 1976. Meacham suggests, quoting then-deputy chief of staff Cheney, that Bush actually got the job as a sop to Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, who much preferred Bush to the frontrunner for the job, Eliot Richardson, a former attorney general. And, as a former member of the House of Representatives, Bush was seen as a good fit to work with Congress.

Overcoming his initial doubts, Bush was soon in his element as DCI—this, despite being refused Cabinet rank as director—a decision Bush himself later condoned by denying the same rank to his DCI when he became president. Meacham quotes former first lady Barbara Bush who noted, “I must confess that he adores the work . . . he has never enjoyed a job more.” (198) One of Bush’s sons told this reviewer a few years ago that being CIA director was his father’s favorite job. Not that it was smooth sledding: Bush worked at mending the CIA’s relations with Congress in the wake of the contentious Church and Pike Committee hearings into Intelligence Community abuses. His amiability improved esprit de corps and put a more benign face on the Central Intelligence Agency. He was no pushover, however. According to former CIA officer Douglas Garthoff, Bush replaced 12 of the top 16 CIA officers; he also dealt with intense criticism from conservatives in the Republican Party that the CIA was downplaying Soviet intentions and capabilities by inviting some of them, dubbed Team B, to look at the classified information and come to their own conclusions. What Bush viewed as a case of competitive analysis, others

saw as politicization. Meacham, ever on the lookout for a positive take, quotes, in a footnote, from a previous biography of Bush: “Among CIA professionals, Bush earned high praise for his handling of the Team B matter. By letting outsiders in, he had reduced pressures that might have forced a greater politicization of intelligence estimates.” This is about as far as it goes in learning about this potentially revealing time, for Bush did not make diary dictations—perhaps for security reasons—and gave little insight into his thinking as director in the course of the author’s interviews with him.

Bush did want to stay on and serve under Carter, Meacham tells us, but the president-elect thought the current director was “too wedded to existing structure to be an agent of change,” a reference to the massive staff cuts soon to be undertaken by Stansfield Turner. Besides, Carter later joked, staying on as DCI would likely have prevented Bush from becoming president since a Republican who served under Carter would have been an unlikely candidate for the national ticket in 1980. The CIA’s loss was the country’s gain.



