

recollections of Margaret Thatcher's resolve and Ronald Reagan's humorous squashing of liberal idiocy, I kept thinking, "Yes, so it was, but why in that case have we ended up as we are?"

My notes are full of indignant squawks, as he skates elegantly past the manifold faults, bumbles, omissions, and errors of Prime Minister Thatcher and President Reagan. He is far too kind to Reagan, whose laughable idealist pacifism came close to bringing about Western nuclear disarmament at the Reykjavik summit. Likewise, he is much too generous to Thatcher, whose economic policies, which were intended to squeeze a swollen public sector, actually began by devastating much of Britain's manufacturing industry.

But above all he is silent on the complete failure by these two supposed conservatives to grasp that the Marxist enemy had shifted his ground. As the missiles and tanks withdrew or went to the scrap yard, the enemies of freedom and faith fanned out into the schools, the TV studios, the publishing houses, the judges' benches, the newspaper offices, and the academy. Liberated from the charge of disloyalty because their cause could no longer be identified with a hostile foreign power, they had never been so free to subvert our open societies. The unfettered market, the sale of public housing, the transformation of public monopolies into private ones were not answers to this powerful ideological opponent—all the more potent because so many of its ill-educated foot soldiers did not even know what cause they were serving. What did Prime Minister Thatcher and President Reagan do for the institution of marriage, rigor in education, adult authority, or the idea that people are responsible for their own actions? Far too little.

What did they do for the idea of national sovereignty without which no proper conservative positions can be defended? Well, Reagan was less to blame in this matter, but Thatcher repeatedly compromised with the European Union's aggrandizement, which is actually one of the major instances of real great-power aggression in our age. She

began the betrayal—now almost complete—of Britain's own people in Northern Ireland, and even became involved in the campaign for liberal intervention in Yugoslavia, a foreign-policy impulse that led directly to the Iraq fiasco.

By contrast, the pope and his less-beloved but more dogged successor did hold fast against the satanic optimism of the free market and opposed both vain-glorious Gulf Wars despite the unpopularity it caused them. I am by no means sure that, had they survived in office into the current era, Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan would have been able to resist the rush to attack Saddam Hussein or the current attempt to inflate Iran into a global threat. Just as importantly, I think their moral and cultural failures at home would have become more evident. In that case, would the apparent alliance between pope, premier, and president have been sustainable? Could their stories have been contained in one book suggesting they were all traveling parallel paths? I rather doubt it.

Had they been as successful as is now claimed, it is odd that so much of the supposed Reagan-Thatcher legacy has proved so easy to dismantle. The incompetent, extravagant Bush administration has probably sunk political conservatism in the U.S. for ten years to come, and perhaps longer. The British Conservative Party nowadays hopes to save itself by adopting the spending habits and social programs of its Labor opponents and shrinks like a prodded mollusk when asked to pronounce on issues of absolute morality or national independence. In both countries, actual and moral illiteracy are epidemic, and the liberty of the individual is in serious danger. The power of the Western alliance, once apparently unchallenged, has plainly passed its peak. The world has certainly changed since 1980, and to begin with, it seemed to be changing for the better. But can we now be so sure of that? It is too soon for such confident eulogies as this. ■

Peter Hitchens is a columnist for the London Mail on Sunday. He is the author of The Abolition of Britain.

[*Nixon and Mao: The Week That Changed the World*, Margaret MacMillan, Random House, 432 pages]

Middle Ground in the Middle Kingdom

By **Nikolas Gvosdev**

MARGARET MACMILLAN'S *Nixon and Mao* tells the story of an American president visiting the capital of a country whose regime had gone unrecognized by Washington for more than two decades. There, he met with a leader who espoused an ideology antithetical to free-market democracy, who claimed the right to spread his revolution across the globe, and who actively supported an insurgency in a neighboring country directed against a U.S.-backed regime and U.S. military forces. The president did so against the wishes of an influential lobby that argued strongly against any sort of engagement and still clung to the belief that a group of offshore exiles might yet achieve regime change.

Well, sort of.

It is difficult to look back on the "week that changed the world"—Feb. 21-28, 1972 to be exact—without benefit of hindsight: the successful normalization of U.S.-China relations, the strategic alignment that contained the USSR and helped to contribute to its collapse, and China's present-day economic miracle. "Only Nixon could go to China" is such a cliché that even MacMillan ends her book with Mr. Spock quoting this famous "Vulcan proverb" in "Star Trek VI." It seems so easy—all it takes is for two implacable foes to "reach out" and everything falls into place.

Because the gamble worked, we might lose sight of the fact that success was not foreordained, and MacMillan works hard to show the reader every pitfall, every possible point before and during the visit when the entire project

could have gone off the rails. To take one example, MacMillan details how difficult it was for both sides to come to an agreement on the final text of the Shanghai Communiqué. In the final hours before its release, the U.S. and Chinese sides were still negotiating over its precise wording. At one point, Chinese Deputy Foreign Minister Qiao Guanhua, having called a break in the talks with National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger, was advising Premier Zhou Enlai to dispense with the document altogether and simply conclude that President Nixon had come to China “as a tourist”—which would have been a humiliating setback for the president.

A PROFOUND REALISM ON BOTH SIDES AIDED THE 1972 INTERACTION.

So how did they pull it off?

Timing helped. The threat of a Soviet invasion, which intensified after the 1969 border clashes, forced the Chinese leadership to decide whether it was in Beijing’s best interests to be simultaneously hostile to both superpowers. The United States, bogged down in Indochina and much less confident of its ability to contain Soviet expansionism, was much more willing to accept the Biblical injunction, “He who is not against us is for us,” and reach out to the Communists in Beijing. As MacMillan notes, much of the fire had gone out of the “China lobby,” which still believed in a Nationalist restoration from Taiwan, giving the Nixon administration a greater degree of flexibility.

Technology helped too—but only to a point. Live coverage could be beamed by satellite back to the United States, transmitting the images Nixon’s Chief of Staff Bob Haldeman wanted the country to see. But the Nixon team did not have to cope with more recent advances that would have made it nigh impossible to successfully stage-manage the visit. What would have happened if *National Review* editor William F. Buckley had been able to transmit in real time his opinion that Nixon’s toasting of the Chinese leadership in the Great Hall of the

People was as if the Nuremberg prosecutors had “descended to embrace Goering and Goebbels and Doenitz and Hess, begging them to join . . . in the making of a better world”? A good deal of the luster of the visit could easily have been tarnished. Keeping the preparations secret would have been much more difficult in today’s media environment.

In Zhou’s toast at the opening banquet, he spoke of the masses as the motive force of history, but the opening to China succeeded in large part because of specific individuals. Kissinger and Zhou, in all of their dealings—beginning with Kissinger’s secret visit to Beijing—were able to forge a

working relationship that enabled them to navigate around the bumps in the road. Their accomplishment probably could not have been duplicated by two other people wearing the hats of the NSA and premier.

But it is important to qualify this point. Certainly Vice President Spiro Agnew and a pro-Soviet Chinese leader like Marshal Lin Bao would not have found common ground so easily. Mao’s reluctant admiration for “rightists”—much more pragmatic and less likely to engage in debates about morality—raises the question of whether JFK, had he survived, would have been able to go to China a decade earlier than Nixon. Even if the vote count had gone differently in Illinois in 1960 and Nixon had become president then, the Mao and Nixon of the early 1960s would not have been able to meet, given their worldviews at that time.

A profound realism on both sides as to what was achievable aided the 1972 interaction. No one had any illusions that there might be some sort of “convergence” between the Chinese and American systems. At no point did Nixon relinquish his antipathy and fundamental dislike of Communism. Mao, a Marxist version of the Chinese Emperor Qianlong, who declared to the

British envoys in 1792 his lack of interest in trading with the West, had no desire to discuss economic questions or engage in academic exchange with the Americans. Both sides wanted to stop being enemies; they did not expect to become friends. In one of history’s greater ironies, many of the Chinese elite of today have been educated in the United States, and the two countries’ economies are now so delicately intertwined.

A desire to improve relations did not change the fact that “there exist great differences between the Chinese Government and the United States Government,” as Zhou pointedly noted at the opening banquet for Nixon. Mao told Nixon that the Chinese press would continue to be quite critical of the United States, as he expected the American media would be of China. Difficulties, most notably Taiwan, were acknowledged and assessed. The hope that deferral would take such questions off the table because “time heals all wounds” has not proven to be the case for Taiwan.

What happened was that both countries reached a “Westphalian moment”: each side agreed to a modern version of the classic phrase, set down in the 1648 treaty, “*cuius regio, eius religio*”—“whose rule, whose religion.” As Nixon put it to Mao, “We can find common ground, despite our differences, to build a world structure in which both can be safe to develop in our own ways on our own roads.” Whereas the United States had previously refused to recognize the People’s Republic of China and Chinese propaganda routinely predicted the eventual “liberation” of America by the forces of revolution, both sides now took as the organizing principle of their relationship that no country should be in a position to impose its social system on another. To the extent that the United States has itself begun to repudiate the Westphalian principles of state sovereignty, Nixon’s visit to China begins to appear to us today as something from another age, just as a Dickens novel has a slightly archaic ring to its language.

As late as 1985, Irving Kristol could declare in the first issue of *The National Interest* that the task of American foreign policy was not to make the world “safe for democracy” but to create conditions “so that the nations of the world can have the opportunity to realize whatever potential for popular government and economic prosperity they may possess or come to possess.” That is a far cry from today’s attitude that the United States not only has the right but a national security obligation to spread democracy around the globe.

No 2008 presidential candidate would likely endorse the sections of the Shanghai Communiqué in which the United States declared, “No country should claim infallibility and each country should be prepared to re-examine its own attitudes for the common good”; and that nations should be able to make their own decisions regarding their social and political systems “free of outside pressure or intervention.”

Our attitudes about diplomacy have also changed. Nixon could visit China despite the number of unresolved issues left on the table and without preconditions being met (such as termination of Chinese support for the North Vietnamese) because of his view that communication, even between countries with profoundly different ideologies and aspirations, was necessary to “lessen the risks of confrontation.” Contrast that with an attitude today that the very act of talking with opponents is a sign of weakness. For America’s chief diplomat, bargaining with North Korea and Iran over nuclear issues is unthinkable: “That’s not diplomacy; that’s extortion.”

This makes it much more difficult for any future administration to repeat Nixon’s accomplishment with other implacable foes of the United States. MacMillan’s work is therefore likely to be relegated to the “history” pile rather than plumbed for advice by the current foreign-policy establishment. ■

Nikolas Gvosdev is the editor of The National Interest.

[*Strictly Right: William F. Buckley Jr. and the American Conservative Movement*, Linda Bridges and John R. Coyne Jr., John Wiley & Sons, 358 pages]

Buckley’s Paradise Lost

By Robert W. Merry

FOR CONSERVATIVES who recall William F. Buckley Jr. in his prime and the American conservative movement in its emergence, this book will likely generate nostalgia—and perhaps some political *ennui*. In rendering a tender but honest insiders’ narrative of Buckley and *National Review*, the authors inevitably lead the reader to a depressing comparison between the fervent and coherent conservatism of yesteryear and the fractured and often misguided movement of today. Just as naturally, the reader might compare the vibrant, pertinent, brilliantly packaged *National Review* of Buckley’s day with the scattered, unfocused, sometimes ill-mannered magazine we see now. One element of the story that doesn’t change is Buckley himself.

But *Strictly Right* isn’t, strictly speaking, a biography. It lacks the personal focus and depth of research to qualify for that designation. Rather, it presents a half-century of American political history from the perspective of *National Review* and its remarkable leader. On those terms, it succeeds admirably.

The authors are veterans of the magazine and the movement they write about. Both were recruited from academe to the magazine’s rarefied precincts by Buckley himself. Bridges has devoted just about her entire adult life to the magazine, including ten years as managing editor. Coyne, *NR*’s leading political writer before bolting to Washington to write speeches for Spiro Agnew and Richard Nixon, has nurtured a *National Review* byline for the better part of four decades.

Relying in part on their memories and the lore they know so well, they sprinkle

their narrative with amusing and telling anecdotes that give life and meaning to the central players. They enrich the oft-told story of Buckley and his magazine with fresh sketches and insights.

Of particular value is the authors’ portrayal of Buckley’s brilliance not just as polemicist and political showman but also as executive, strategist, and leader. It wasn’t simply automatic that *National Review*, once founded, would have a profound impact on American politics. The 29-year-old Buckley took charge of an intellectually motley crew that, while in agreement about the Western crisis posed by Russian bolshevism and domestic collectivism, agreed on just about nothing else. The players included, as the authors note, “libertarians and Burkeans, free-marketeters and Southern Agrarians, Madisonians and European monarchists.” It fell to the young man to forge a degree of coherence out of these powerful sentiments.

He did so with unsentimental adroitness. The idea for the magazine had originated with William S. Schlamm, a refugee from both Austria and Henry Luce’s Time-Life empire, who also had identified the young Buckley as the right man to head the enterprise. But when Schlamm and another magazine stalwart, James Burnham, became embroiled in irreconcilable ideological disputes, Buckley sided with Burnham and allowed Schlamm to storm off. It was the right choice, notwithstanding that Schlamm’s worldview matched Buckley’s more closely than Burnham’s did. Burnham soon emerged as a powerful force at the magazine, second only to Buckley in his contribution to the journal’s ultimate success.

Buckley displayed similar shrewdness in crafting the magazine’s positions on delicate issues of the day. He boldly excoriated John Birch Society head Robert Welch for splitting the conservative movement with the “extravagance” of his accusatory rhetoric. He did so, however, with characteristic political deftness, only after getting a nod of assent from Barry Goldwater himself. When his staff became hopelessly split over whether it should support or spurn the 1960 presi-