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Burma: Thanks for the memoirs

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Despite numerous expressions of concern about Myanmar and its people when they were in office, few public officials were inclined to devote any space to Myanmar or its problems when they came to write their memoirs.

Graeme Dobell's recent post about the legacy of foreign policymakers has set me thinking about the nature of political memoirs and their value to Burma-watchers.¹

Such works are rarely reliable guides to the real issues that have preoccupied governments or particular statesmen and women. Individual egos aside, most seem to be written with an eye to the historical record and usually include ex post facto justifications for policies and actions that it is feared may reflect badly on them.

Even so, political memoirs can offer insights into issues that were considered important at one time, and for the handling of which the authors would like to be remembered.

1 Graeme Dobell, 'Foreign Policy: From Practice to Theory', *The Interpreter*, 10 January 2011, www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2011/01/10/Foreign-policy-From-practice-to-theory.aspx [page discontinued] [now at archive.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/foreign-policy-practice-theory].

In this regard, it can be just as interesting to note the subjects that are not broached in these publications as it is to see which ones are given most attention. Why are some issues, once claimed by national leaders to be of major importance, simply not addressed or only briefly passed over when they come to reflect on their terms in office?

Over the past year or so, memoirs have been released by a number of prominent Western politicians. George W. Bush has published an account of his time in the White House, as has his wife. Several other senior US officials have ventured into print, including Condoleezza Rice and Donald Rumsfeld. Elsewhere, Tony Blair, John Howard and Malcolm Fraser have recounted their political careers. There are doubtless others.

Following the 1988 prodemocracy uprising in Burma and a number of important developments since, the US, UK and Australian governments stated that the sorry state of affairs in Burma was a critical issue that demanded the world's attention. Albeit in different ways, they called for international action to replace the military government, end its human rights violations and assist the Burmese people to make the transition to a fairer and more prosperous society.

Yet, a quick survey of the latest batch of political memoirs reveals that Burma has been addressed by very few of them, and none in any detail.

Although he constantly railed against Burma's leaders when in office, George Bush does not even touch on the subject in his recent book *Decision Points*.² Tony Blair, too, is silent about Burma and its challenges in *A Journey: My Political Life*.³ The only mention of Burma in John Howard's memoir, *Lazarus Rising*, is when he lists the membership of ASEAN.⁴

Unsurprisingly, given her largely domestic focus, Condoleezza Rice does not mention Burma in *Extraordinary, Ordinary People: A Memoir of Family*.⁵ And, given the period it covers, Malcolm Fraser can be forgiven for not raising Burma in his *Political Memoirs*.⁶

2 George W. Bush, *Decision Points* (New York: Broadway Books, 2010).

3 Tony Blair, *A Journey: My Political Life* (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2010).

4 John Howard, *Lazarus Rising* (Sydney: HarperCollins Australia, 2010).

5 Condoleezza Rice, *Extraordinary, Ordinary People: A Memoir of Family* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2010).

6 Malcolm Fraser and Margaret Simons, *Malcolm Fraser: The Political Memoirs* (Melbourne: The Miegunyah Press, 2010).

It has not been released yet, but it would be very surprising if Burma is discussed in former US defence secretary Donald Rumsfeld's memoir, *Known and Unknown*.⁷

In omitting any reference to Burma, all these public figures follow a well-established pattern. For example, neither Bill Clinton in *My Life* nor former US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) chief George Tenet in *At the Centre of the Storm* make any mention of Burma, despite well-publicised US concerns about that country during their terms of office.⁸

Two exceptions to this rule spring to mind. In her aptly titled memoir, *Spoken From the Heart*, former first lady Laura Bush mentions Burma several times.⁹ As in her past public pronouncements on this subject, however, her comments reflect her personal feelings about the country and its people more than any real understanding of their complex problems.

The other exception is *Madam Secretary: A Memoir*, written by former secretary of state Madeleine Albright.¹⁰ In this book, Albright describes an official visit to Burma in 1995 (as the US ambassador to the UN) and expresses her admiration for Burmese opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

Granted, over the past 20 years, Burma has not been high on the list of national priorities for most countries. Its problems, while serious and continuing, would have always found it hard to compete for space in a tightly edited account of important and controversial issues like the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, Islamic extremism, the rise of China, nuclear proliferation, the Global Financial Crisis and global warming.

And, of course, not everyone shares my specialist interest in Burma.

Even so, given all the political rhetoric that has been heard about Burma since 1988 and the space devoted to its problems by the news media, it is curious that it has been accorded so little attention. One might have thought that Burma would receive at least a brief mention in these memoirs, perhaps in the context of China's growing strategic weight, ASEAN's internal tensions, fears of nuclear and missile proliferation, human rights violations, transnational crime or the challenges posed by rogue regimes.

7 Donald Rumsfeld, *Known and Unknown: A Memoir* (New York: Penguin Group, 2011).

8 Bill Clinton, *My Life* (New York: Vintage Books, 2005).

9 Laura Bush, *Spoken From the Heart* (New York: Scribner, 2010).

10 Madeleine Albright, *Madam Secretary: A Memoir* (Los Angeles: Miramax Books, 2005).

It is interesting to speculate whether greater attention might be paid to Burma should more Asian statesmen turn their hand to writing political memoirs. In *From Third World to First: The Singapore Story*¹¹—as in more recent conversations¹²—that country's Minister Mentor, Lee Kuan Yew, has already demonstrated that regional politicians can offer interesting and useful perspectives on the situation in Burma.

As the Canadian academic George Egerton noted some years ago, political memoirs 'have but a brief flowering in the attention of the public and popular media, finding resurrection, if ever, only as sources in the hands of curious historians'.¹³ Yet, for a period at least, the reminiscences of public figures can be influential in shaping perceptions of topical issues and in raising options for future consideration.

Burma is certainly one subject area for which informed reflections and fresh policy ideas from experienced senior officials could make a difference.

11 Lee Kuan Yew, *From Third World to First: The Singapore Story, 1965–2000* (New York: HarperCollins, 2000).

12 'Wikileaks: Singapore's Lee Says Burma "Stupid"', *Asian Correspondent*, 15 December 2010, asiancorrespondent.com/43697/wikileaks-singapore-lee-says-burma-stupid/# [page discontinued].

13 George Egerton, 'Politics and Autobiography: Political Memoir as Polygenre', *Biography*, Vol.15, No.3 (Summer), 1992, pp.221–242, at p.239. doi.org/10.1353/bio.2010.0368.

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