

James Lilley, Man of Talk

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Jim Lilley was the last-of-the-great in several categories. The last of the great postwar China hands (raised there before the war; steeped in its culture; a patriot). The last of the great dashing covert intelligence operatives (Blackford Oaks come to life). The last of the great self-assured Establishment WASP Yalies (admittedly fortified by some Catholic family history). To me he was great in another tradition that derives from these three but that I hope is not petering out. He was a great practicing Habermasian.

Jürgen Habermas is the eminent German philosopher whose complex teachings may be summarized as follows: the highest aspiration of social and political life should be to keep the conversation going. Conversation not in the conventional formulation, as the means for ever-closer approach to some ultimate truth, but rather conversation for its own sake—for understanding our own circumstances, views, and values in the context of the variegated circumstances, views, and values of others, and for averting entrenchment in misinformed dogma and fanaticism. Such conversation may yield further benefits—peace, commerce, a scientific breakthrough—but in any event is an end in itself and, actually, as good as it gets.

Jim Lilley was first a man of action at the CIA, then a man of diplomacy and strategy at the departments of State and Defense, then a man of ideas at the American Enterprise Institute. When I knew him, during the third phase, his biggest idea and overarching policy prescription, which I imagined was the sum of his career experiences, was to keep talking, to keep the conversation going. This was his essential proposition especially for the problems between Taiwan and China, but also for those between China and Korea, America and China, America and Korea, and for every other trouble-spot and tinder-box he was familiar with.

Now this may seem a very mild proposition, perhaps a vestige of cookie-pusher State Department days. And there were times when it rankled some of his AEI colleagues, who could document America's miserable negotiating failures and see enormous risks in the recurring proposals for more blah-blah as a device for postponing hard decisions on obviously urgent actions. But Jim, if you listened carefully, was entirely cognizant of the failures of the past and the dangers of poorly framed talks.

He was, after all, a man of action throughout his government career, not only during his CIA days, which included a portion of kinetic activity as well as talk and information gathering, but during his ambassadorial days. He was frequently on the side of additional arms sales to Taiwan—although, interestingly, not only to help Taiwan defend itself but also, and primarily, to give the Taiwanese the confidence to expand their talking and trading with the Mainland Chinese. In the immediate aftermath of the Tiananmen Square massacre of June 1989, Ambassador Lilley rescued China’s pre-eminent dissident, Fang Lizhi, and his wife and harbored them at the U.S. Embassy for thirteen months—at great cost to his relations and effectiveness with the Chinese—and then engineered their safe release. From his boyhood in China at the time of civil war and Japanese occupation, through his years in Taipei, Seoul, and Beijing, he lived and worked where society and diplomacy were shaped by force, sometimes imminent and occasionally exigent.

And Jim’s devotion to talk was not gauzy but organized and specific, predicated on the possibility of serious dialogue. In his conception there were three layers of talk with China, North Korea, and other authoritarian states.

The first layer was official party-line rhetoric, in his words “dreary commercials,” “stale,” “dogmatic,” and “rigid.” His words for the proper reaction were “sickening” and “infuriating”; he thought that taking the claptrap seriously and attempting to engage with it was a cardinal failure of American diplomacy.

The second layer was complaint, when the hostile self-serving boilerplate would shade into hostile self-serving criticism of those not present for the immediate *démarche*. The North Koreans, the Chinese would say, are pigs who get drunk every night so that nothing ever gets done. That is why WE are making no headway—can’t YOU do something to help? Insensibly, the political was becoming personal, and therefore conversational.

The third layer was the move from complaint to conversation, to an exchange of accounts of the constraints facing both sides, then to a discussion of underlying forces and motivations, and then—just possibly—to an exploration of mutual interests and opportunities. Here the potential for manipulation remained, especially when dealing with people as smart and subtle as the Chinese. The secret was to keep the conversation going.

Jim was himself a master at moving from rhetoric to complaint to conversation, in part because of his upbringing in China and in part because of his innate interest in people and personalities, which came through in every discussion of current events and is evident throughout his wonderful autobiography, *China Hands*.

The Chinese, I learned in Jim's company on visits to the Republic of China and to the People's Republic of China, are the most talkative and sociable of people, in fact downright gossipy to Western ears until one realizes that fascination with conduct, expressed through story-telling and allegory, is the real coin of their realm. Jim seemed to know absolutely everything about the facts and events of ancient and contemporary Asian history, but his accounts always twinkled with the drama of personalities. In my experience his diplomatic exchanges, although always meticulously prepared for with research, thought, and specification of desired outcomes, invariably began with genuinely friendly banter of mutual acquaintances and colorful characters, and what were they up to now following this or that past triumph or disaster? This was not small talk. It was an effort to import social conversation into diplomatic conversation and thereby to enlarge the possibilities.

And Jim was the compleat realist regarding those possibilities. We know from *China Hands* that he was the bluntest of diplomats when the occasion called for it, and that he admired those such as Richard Nixon who could be blunt and artful at the same time. During his AEI days, the PRC embassy in Washington would occasionally request a meeting to seek his counsel on some urgent matter. Then the emissaries would arrive and pull out their index cards and begin robotically reciting their stupid talking points. Jim would waive them off and try move straight to conversation with a complaint of his own, explaining that they were doing everything wrong and making fools of themselves, and that the only way to advance their interests was a more adult approach which he would then proceed to outline in detail. Once I prepared a talk for a Chinese audience, arguing for greater freedom of speech and press in China without a single reference to human rights or liberty but instead grounded entirely in *raisons d'état*: more open debate and media would produce more informed, more effective government decisions and release political leaders from the information monopolies of self-serving ministries and the Party bureaucracy. Jim listened to my outline, then said matter-of-factly, "Well, that's exactly what they need to hear"—words that I still (obviously) cherish.

Blunt honesty, appeals to self-interest, and invocations of real society would frequently fail. On March 20, 2004, he and I and several AEI colleagues were sitting high atop Shanghai at a glittering dinner with a group of successful Chinese entrepreneurs. The authorities had permitted Rupert Murdoch's STAR TV, just this once, to broadcast news from Taipei, where the reelection of Taiwan's first opposition-party President, Chen Shui-bian, had provoked enormous, angry street demonstrations and fighting among opposing groups, all of it vividly reported on the television over the bar.

There wasn't a single Party or government official at the table, yet our hosts began to heap unanimous contempt on the messy, undignified way the Taiwanese were behaving, and to praise the order and stability of the Chinese system. Jim immediately responded, "Yes, I was at Tiananmen in June 1989, and remember that your system has a very different approach to settling political differences." This invitation to conversation was not reciprocated. But he never ceased trying and urging others to try. His vision of political progress was modest: two steps forward one step back, one step forward two steps back, a half-step forward three steps sideways.

Jim was raised in China not by missionaries but by a businessman, and his conception of the benefits of talk was closely connected to the benefits of trade, especially when it came to relations across the Taiwan Strait. In this case it would be highly desirable that talk and trade and tourism would kick the can of political action down the road. It would become progressively more difficult to sustain hostile prejudices on both sides; PRC vacationers would breathe the clear democratic air of Kaohsiung. In time it might even dawn on the Chinese that it would make little difference, really, whether Taiwan were a province or a nation or something in between. Okay that's me talking—Jim was doubtful—but anyway precious time would be bought, commerce and interdependence would increase, and the possibilities of practical rather than violent resolution would grow.

The emotional highpoint of our 2004 expedition to China (which would be Jim's last) was a visit to the city of Kiukiang on the Yangtze River, where he had lived as a boy in 1940. Much had changed in 64 years. Although Jim could describe his home—a large stately house on the Yangtze with columns and a second-floor balcony where he would gaze out over the river traffic—we doubted that it still stood or if it did that we could ever find it. But we drove up the river and suddenly Jim's car halted and he burst out in elation, shouting, "There it is!" Outside stood an aged sign announcing that the mansion had once been owned by Standard Oil—"capitalist exploiters"—but had since been taken over and devoted to Chinese purposes. In fact it was now an office building, devoted to capitalist purposes with Chinese characteristics. We were free to roam about, and discovered a few clear rooms that Jim remembered as this parlor and that bedroom. But behind most of the doors we found rows of small desks with several or dozens of people jammed in, running their businesses, animatedly talking with each other and on the telephone. In fact some of the rooms felt like a trading floor in a Western financial firm. Talking and trading, giving and taking, with luck maybe even growing and progressing—right there in the old Lilley home, the Lilley Method lived on.