



Lilley, James R.: Files, 1981

Finding Aid Type

White House Staff and Office File Collections

Subtitle/Office

Political Affairs Directorate, NSC

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Record Type

Textual

Biography

Biography

James Roderick Lilley was an American intelligence operative and a diplomat who served as United States Ambassador to China at the time of the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests.

James Lilley was born on January 15, 1982 in Qingdao (Tsingtao) in coastal Shandong Province, Republic of China, to American expatriate parents. His father, an oil executive who had moved to China to work for Standard Oil in 1916, and his mother, a teacher, hired a Chinese nanny to help raise him. He spoke Mandarin fluently from a young age, in addition to French and English.

In 1940, soon after the outbreak of World War II, his family returned to the United States as fighting between Japanese and Chinese forces began to ravage the coastal regions of China. He attended Phillips Exeter Academy and served in the United States Army at Fort Dix 1945 to 1946.

After leaving the Army, Lilley earned a bachelor's degree from Yale University and a master's degree in international relations from George Washington University before studying classical Chinese at Hong Kong University and Columbia University. He began his career in government by joining the Central Intelligence Agency in 1951, at the beginning of the Cold War. Lilley remained at the CIA for nearly 30 years in a variety of Asian countries prior to becoming a diplomat.

Lilley worked in numerous countries, including Laos, Japan, Hong Kong, Taiwan and China. In Laos, he worked to undermine the Communist insurgency and helped to insert a number of CIA agents into China. In 1975, he was appointed to the position of national intelligence officer for China, which made him the highest-ranked expert on China in the American intelligence community.

Early in the administration of President Ronald Reagan, he was appointed to the National Security where he served as the senior expert on East Asia. From 1982 to 1984, he served as director of the American Institute in Taiwan, the United States' unofficial diplomatic liaison to the government of Taiwan. There, he resisted attempts to end arms sales to Taiwan, which the policy makers hoped would lead to better relations with China. Lilley's resistance resulted in a compromise in which the United States agreed to reduce arms sales to Taiwan but set no timeline for stopping them. The United States has continued the arms sales. Lilley delivered what came to be known as the [Six Assurances](#) to then-President Chiang-Ching-kuo.

In 1985, Lilley became the deputy assistant secretary of state for East Asian affairs. In the private sector, he taught about China at the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies and consulted for companies doing business in East Asia. In 1986, Reagan appointed him as the United States ambassador to South

Korea, where he served until 1989. His tenure in South Korea coincided with profound political change there; the year after his arrival, the country held its first real presidential election in nearly two decades.

Lilley was appointed by President George H.W. Bush to be ambassador to China in 1989, the only American diplomat to head diplomatic missions in both mainland China and Taiwan. Bush and Lilley had a longstanding friendship that began in the early 1970s, when Lilley was the head of station for the CIA in Beijing, and Bush was the chief of mission. That personal relationship meant that Lilley often had the ear of the president on issues relating to China, and many of his missives home were read directly by Bush. To gain a better understanding of what was happening on the ground, Lilley began to bike regularly through the streets of Beijing soon after his arrival. Thus, he was familiar with the grievances of Chinese students who participated in the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989 and sympathized with their interest in a more open government and society. He criticized the Chinese government after the violent suppression of those protests, which garnered widespread international attention and condemnation. In addition, he harbored the political dissident Fang Lizhi inside the American embassy for 18 months before the Chinese government allowed Fang to enter exile in the United States.

Despite his sympathy with the students' cause, Lilley argued against severe actions by the United States government such as severing ties with China, as he believed that such actions would not have the intended effect. He also arranged for a secret trip by two senior United States officials to reassure the Chinese government that the United States wished to continue its relationship with China. He did so, he later said, out of a belief that the United States "could contribute in constructive ways to a more open China."

On November 5, 1991, President George H. W. Bush nominated Lilley as the Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs. Lilley served in his final government position from December 12, 1991 to January 20, 1993.

After retirement, Lilley became a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, focusing on East Asian relations, and continued writing and speaking about the relationship between the United States and China. In 2004, Lilley published a memoir, *China Hands*, dedicated to an older brother who had committed suicide while stationed in Hiroshima, Japan in World War II.

Lilley was married to the former Sally Booth, and they had three sons.

Lilley died November 12, 2009 at Sibley Hospital, Washington, DC from complications due to prostate cancer.

Scope and Content Note

The James Lilley collection consists of two series: SERIES I: Chronological File and SERIES II: Subject File.

Series List

SERIES I: CHRONOLOGICAL FILE

SERIES II: SUBJECT FILE

Last Modified Date

2024-06-18

SERIES I: CHRONOLOGICAL FILE

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