
INTRODUCTION

This is a book about a man who knew how the world worked and how it was changing throughout the twentieth century. He wished to save it and shared his insights with the most powerful people of his time. But they preferred his company to his advice. Usually, his foresights proved to be true when it was already too late to follow them. Time and again, he was on the right side of history.

A journalist, diplomat, and writer, William Christian Bullitt was a member of the American delegation to the Paris Peace Conference (1919), the ambassador to the Soviet Union (1933–1936) and France (1936–1940), and the Special Representative of the President of the United States in the Middle East (1940). His political role was significant; it was also controversial. In *The Wise Men*, a collective biography of several American statesmen who shaped the world of the late twentieth century, Walter Isaacson and Evan Thomas wrote about two men whose careers, as diplomats and political figures, were launched by Bullitt—George Kennan and Charles Bohlen, two world-shapers out of six.¹ David Fromkin, in his magisterial account of the interwar period in Europe, described Bullitt as a witness rather than an actor: “when important things were happening, he so often was there” but, according to Fromkin, played supporting roles and did not have an “intrinsic historical importance.”² In contrast, John Lukacs compared Bullitt to Henry Kissinger, who was in many ways his opposite: one was an idealist, the other a realist;

one became famous, another all but forgotten. Still, it was Bullitt rather than Kissinger, Lukacs wrote, who carried “both the vision and the force of the age, of the Pax Americana of the twentieth century.”³ Written by experts in international relations, several biographies of Bullitt criticize his political turns and twists but largely ignore his intellectual contributions—his novels, plays, essays, and unrealized projects.⁴ Yet, Bullitt spent most of his life as an intellectual rather than as an official. Taking seriously Bullitt’s words, foresights, and laments, this book addresses Bullitt as an original thinker and elucidates his role as a political actor.

The most cosmopolitan of American politicians of the era, Bullitt spoke several languages, lived in Europe for many years, and eagerly traveled through Asia. A Wilsonian Liberal who gradually became a Cold War Conservative, he was always engaged with the ideas of the Left. He was also a sincere patriot, who believed in the superiority of American values and had no doubt they should proliferate throughout the world. Bullitt adored France, disliked Britain, presciently understood the importance of China, and was deeply compassionate toward Poland. Throughout his life, he was professionally involved in Russian affairs. Always engaged with high politics but rarely invited to contribute to it, he regularly wrote about the missed opportunities that he believed could have made the world a better place. Often arrogant and always impatient he was, surprisingly often, right when so many others were wrong.

Part of the secret to Bullitt’s foresight was his network. He established personal relationships with some of the twentieth century’s most important people, including Vladimir Lenin, Franklin Roosevelt, Chiang Kai-shek, Charles de Gaulle, Sigmund Freud, and Mikhail Bulgakov. Particularly important was his short friendship and long rivalry with John Reed. In his photos, he is bald, assiduously dressed, and smiling: a personification of American success. But this conventional appearance belied a complex character. Vice-President Henry Wallace described him as “an unusually attractive personality” and a master of witty conversation; Wallace admired Bullitt’s knowledge of European “sophisticated pleasures” and the “anecdotal stories . . . of the many famous people abroad.”⁵ In similar fashion, Charles Bohlen, a leading diplomat of the Cold War who was once Bullitt’s protégé, wrote that Bullitt was a person who radiated light but was able to control it, turning his glow on or off at will.⁶ George Kennan, whose career Bullitt also launched from Moscow, attributed to him a “dangerous freedom—the freedom of a man who . . . had never subordinated his life to the needs of any other human being.”⁷ Rather undiplomatically, Kennan described Bullitt as a cold egoist but also

an impatient enthusiast. In Kennan's characterization, Bullitt was a man "full of charm and vivacity; also brilliant; but deeply unhappy, a species of Midas of the spirit, in whom all the golden qualities turned to stone because he never loved anyone as much as himself"; it was a startling but also cruel portrait. Still, Bullitt deserved more from his country than he received, Kennan said.⁸

During and after the First World War, Bullitt made a name for himself as the pioneering American expert in Russian and European socialism. The leading specialists on the Soviet Union of the next, post-Second World War generation developed under him. Yet, although he did study Russian he never mastered the language, and his knowledge of Russian history and literature, though substantial, always remained amateurish. At the same time, Bullitt had "a distinct bias against the British," his brother wrote; Orville Bullitt traced this attitude to impressions made on the brothers in childhood by revelations about British imperialism in Africa and stories of the American Revolution.⁹ British-Russian philosopher Isaiah Berlin, who knew Bullitt and befriended his disciples, wrote with surprise that in the United States, "the Anglophile and Russophile feelings move in inverse ratio. Up with the Russians, down with the British, in almost exact proportion."¹⁰ Bullitt exemplified this proportion, but he was hardly a Russophile. Socialist theories, Soviet practices, and the huge distances between them captured his imagination. In this respect, Bullitt's changing attitudes foreshadowed the general disenchantment with communism that came to characterize Western intellectuals much later. A political thinker, Bullitt was puzzled by his tragic century, had original and valuable insights, and tested many ways to implement his ideas.

Early in the twentieth century, Bullitt realized that the collapse of the old regimes in Europe was inevitable, and he became an intense though ambivalent observer of socialist movements. It was a popular sentiment; Leon Trotsky called such people "fellow travelers," a moniker that has endured even the collapse of the Soviet Union. It took Bullitt years of personal experience with Russia—an experience that few American fellow travelers had—to become disenchanted with the Soviet "God that failed." Ultimately, Bullitt's encounter with communism would turn him into a political conservative and a Cold War hawk. A witness to Wilson's "idealism" and Roosevelt's "gamble" in two world wars, Bullitt wrote that, in politics, wishful thinking was the worst vice.¹¹ But he did not accept isolationism. In fact, he saw American liberalism and European cosmopolitanism, two great Western legacies, as being deeply connected.

Brilliant and bitter, Bullitt was also mysterious. He did not like compro-

mises: though he had a knack for making and keeping friends, he was at times intolerant, pernicious, and eager to quarrel even with those upon whom he depended. He was always the subject of gossip, and the conjectures about him were vicious; Dean Acheson, for example, wrote that Bullitt's middle name, Christian, was "singularly ironic."¹² Even according to his brother, Bill was "a controversial person": some believed that he was a Bolshevik, others that he was a fascist; some thought he was a warmonger, while others saw him as an appeaser. In fact, Orville Bullitt saw his brother as a good American liberal: Bill had "deep feelings for the rights of man and an intense dislike for the rigidity of the ruling classes."¹³

Bullitt was controversial and inconsistent; the future demonstrated that sometimes he was right and sometimes wrong. It was his focus on the future that was invariable. He read history books and respected historians, but in his own writings and political advice he was interested in the future and not the past. He loved Homer's line "After the event even the fool is wise." There is no truer saying, he wrote, than the old French aphorism: "To govern is to foresee."¹⁴ Carefully choosing his own words, Bullitt wrote about "a terrible obligation to be right before the event": terrible indeed, because the risks of the arguments about the future in democratic politics are tremendous.¹⁵ But, he argued forcefully, "in world affairs, charm is not a substitute for foresight. The epitaphs of nations can often be written in the words: 'Too late.'"¹⁶ His eagerness to talk about the future was a part of his peculiar gift, which at times betrayed him. But, untypically for a politician, he was eager to take these risks.

Soldiers fight wars, but civilians start and end them. An intellectual and a diplomat, Bullitt respected the military but hated war. He took part in the negotiations that ended the First World War and those that failed to prevent the Second World War, and he was involved in discussions that determined the course of the Cold War and the building of the European Union. Much of his advice was ignored, but Bullitt did influence some key positions taken by the American administration between the two world wars. He fashioned a loose but identifiable school of thought, represented by "the Russian experts" of the State Department. His disciples and appointees played a crucial role at the beginning of the Cold War, which Bullitt anticipated and helped shape. He died in his beloved Paris but was buried in his native Philadelphia. Thus, even in death he revealed his particular ability to fuse cosmopolitanism with patriotism.