

NEWS

Guest at dinner for Xi Jinping says Chinese leader's affection for time in Iowa apparent

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Just how much Chinese President Xi Jinping remembers about his first trip to America and his stay in Muscatine nearly 40 years ago was in full evidence when he met with a group of Iowans this week, says Kenneth Quinn, former ambassador to Cambodia and former president of the World Food Prize.

The group of Iowans who hosted his 1985 visit – affectionately referred to by Xi as his “old friends” – met in private with him Wednesday night before a banquet in his honor at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit in San Francisco.

“He even remembered the address of the ... home where he stayed,” said Quinn, one of the invited guests.

Xi was just a local official from Hebei Province back then – not the leader of the world's largest economy. But Quinn said the Iowans were the first of several groups to meet with him before joining hundreds of others for the dinner, where the South China Post reported business moguls paid as much as \$40,000 to sit at Xi's table.

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“If you think about all the people that were in this room (during the formal dinner) – business CEOs, governmental officials – and that everybody wants something from President Xi Jinping, from the (Chinese) government, except ... some of the old friends who have never wanted anything from him, only remembering and being sentimental about the nice interaction they had when he was 31 years old,” said Quinn.

As a member of the Iowa Sister States committee, Sarah Lande helped arrange Xi's trip to get a look at American agriculture and, along with her late husband Roger, hosted him on a second visit to Muscatine in 2012, shortly before he became president.

Quinn said if there is ever book written on “citizen Diplomacy,” Xi's trip and the improbable long-term bond formed between him and his hosts should be the leading example.

“Here's a young guy who shows up, not anybody special, and yet he gets treated nicely and ... he's so surprised on his first visit outside China and his first interaction with foreigners,” Quinn said.

Quinn says Xi sees choice between partnership and conflict

Despite having a long day, Quinn said, Xi gave a long and substantive speech during Wednesday's dinner that centered on improving relations between China and the United States.

“China sees the future and the relationship that China is prepared to have, which is sort of like peaceful coexistence, collaboration of doing things together,” Quinn said. Xi “always likes to use the phrase ‘win-win situations’ so it benefits for both parties. That's his view of how he wants the U.S.-China relationship to be, and that China is prepared to do its part and work towards that end.

“But then he said the key fundamental question is, are we going to be adversaries or partners? So that is the fundamental question. I wrote that down because I thought, ‘This is this is indeed the main issue,’” he said.

As an Iowan with a front-row seat to the 2024 U.S. presidential race, with the GOP candidates sharply criticizing China as they campaign ahead of the Iowa Caucuses, Quinn said it may be difficult to change attitudes regarding relations between the two countries.

“It it's not so easy to see changes coming on the U.S. side in terms of attitudes towards China, because those remarks and statements by political figures are usually directed toward not... the people or the country of China but toward the Chinese Communist party,” he said.

Quinn said he believes Xi is “putting his best foot forward” and came to the summit with a genuine interest in forging a new direction.

“I think Xi came in with a message of, ‘Let's paint a picture for the future and what's it's going to be,’ which is indeed a very, very significant question,” he said. “And to me the headline of the dinner was that we have to decide which it's going to be. And when we make that decision, that will dictate what happens, what we do together, how much we can collaborate, how many other issues we can address.”

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