

The Longest-Serving Governor in American History Will Soon Resign

In 1985, an up-and-coming Chinese official brought a delegation to the U.S. to work on a grain trade deal.

In order to get a better sense of the product about which he would soon be negotiating and the people who produced it, he spent the better part of two weeks actually living with the people in a rural Iowa community. In the process, he developed a rapport, not only with the Hawkeye State, but also with its Republican governor, Terry Branstad.

In 2012, then-Chinese Vice President Xi Jinping returned to Iowa—at the behest of his longtime friend, Branstad—and visited with many of the same Iowans who had welcomed him into their homes nearly 30 years earlier. Now, Xi is his nation's president, and he's about to see a lot more of his good friend, who has been tapped as President-elect Donald Trump's ambassador to the communist country.

President-elect Donald Trump announced he had picked Branstad to serve as U.S. Ambassador to China during a transition fundraising breakfast held Wednesday morning in New York City. As a result, the Iowa governor's tenure will end at slightly more than 22 years.

That makes him America's longest-serving governor at a time when many states have term limits for their chief executives. Branstad surpassed former New York Gov. George Clinton (1777-1795, 1801-1804)—who also was our nation's fourth vice president—almost one year ago, breaking a record for gubernatorial longevity that had stood for more than 210 years.

He served as the state's 39th governor from 1983 to 1999 and has been serving as its 42nd governor since 2011.

Initially, Branstad had resisted an offer to serve as ambassador to China, saying he had no desire to work full time in Washington, D.C., let alone outside the country, but instead had been trying to get his son, Eric, a job in the Trump White House. He is, however, perhaps the most ideal candidate to be America's voice to the Chinese people, particularly because of his close relationship with Xi.

Since leading his first delegation to Hebei Province in 1984, the governor has led six trade missions to China meeting with numerous provincial governors, ministerial leaders and local officials. He is considered an "old friend"—a culturally significant title of high honor—by Xi and has a long-standing relationship with Chinese Ambassador to the United States Cui Tiankai.

"I have known President Xi Jinping for many years and consider him an old friend," he said. "I look forward to building on our long friendship to cultivate and strengthen the relationship between our two countries and to benefit our economy. I am grateful for the opportunity I had to serve as Governor of Iowa, and I look forward to serving in this extraordinary new role."

Branstad collaborated with the Ministry of Agriculture for China, including meetings with Minister Han Changfu and has worked closely with Madam Li Xiaolin of the Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries to further relationships between states in America and Chinese provinces. But on the other side of the equation, he's also a strong supporter of Trump's mission to negotiate trade deals that put America's interests first. He will work with President-elect Trump's economic team to negotiate fair trade deals that create American jobs, increase American wages and reduce America's trade deficit.

As ambassador to China, he will also work with the president-elect's national security team to implement an America First foreign policy that will advance America's core national interests and promote regional stability.

"Governor Branstad's decades of experience in public service and long-time relationship with President Xi Jinping and other Chinese leaders make him the ideal choice to serve as America's Ambassador to China," Trump said. "He successfully developed close trade ties with China while serving as chief executive of the Hawkeye State. That experience will serve him well as he represents America's interests and further develops a mutually beneficial relationship with Chinese leadership."

After the announcement was made, Chinese Foreign Affairs Ministry spokesman Lu Kang stated:

"Branstad is an old friend of China, and [we] welcome him to play a bigger role in China-U.S. exchanges. The role of U.S. ambassador to China serves as an important bridge in communication between China and the United States, and no matter who is picked, China would like to work together with him to push forward healthy and stable development of China-U.S. relations."

President-elect Donald Trump used China as a political whipping post during the presidential election campaign. By appointing Branstad as his ambassador, he's sending a signal that he truly wants to work on a mutually beneficial relationship—and by having the Iowa governor in Beijing, there is a better opportunity to push for greater democratic reforms.

Branstad issued the following statement to the Iowa press following the official announcement Wednesday afternoon:

I love Iowa and I love my country. For 22 years, I have been honored and privileged to serve the people of Iowa as their governor. My family and I will always be grateful to Iowans

for trusting me to lead and putting their faith in me to serve.

America is at a crossroads, and the American people are looking for bold change to renew our position as the leader in the world. To once again hold America up as that “shining city upon a hill,” as President Reagan so proudly proclaimed. By electing President-elect Trump on Nov. 8, this message was sent loud and clear by the voters.

During our 30-year friendship, President Xi Jinping and I have developed a respect and admiration for each other, our people and our cultures. The United States-Chinese bilateral relationship is at a critical point. Ensuring the countries with the two largest economies and two largest militaries in the world maintain a collaborative and cooperative relationship is needed more now than ever. The President-elect understands my unique relationship to China and has asked me to serve in a way I had not previously considered.

After long discussions with my family, I am honored and humbled to be nominated to serve as the U.S. ambassador to China. I also accept President-elect Trump’s charge to prioritize collaborative policies that will “Make America Great Again.” This is an extraordinary opportunity. I believe the respect and admiration built over a decades-old friendship between President Xi and me give me an opportunity to help the President-elect and serve Iowa, the United States and the world for the better.

This new mission to continue serving my state and my country in a new role is essential to building a bright future for our children and grandchildren. With my wife, Chris, by my side, I look forward to the work ahead, but we will never have Iowa far from our hearts.

Following Xi’s second trip to Iowa, in 2012, Branstad said of his friend:

“He’s very personable. When we had the state dinner in Des Moines, about half or maybe even over half of his remarks were personal, off-script. I was impressed with that, and I think it was very sincere and very genuine.”

Once his nomination is confirmed by the Senate, Branstad would have to resign as governor, ending his record-breaking run. Lt. Gov. Kim Reynolds, who has served alongside him for the past six years, will assume the duties of governor until his term ends in 2019, becoming the state’s first woman governor.

Under the Iowa Constitution, there would be no replacement lieutenant governor. If anything should prevent Reynolds from fulfilling those duties before Branstad’s term ends, she would be replaced by incoming Senate President Jack Whitver.

Branstad had always said he was grooming Reynolds to take over for him but had also left open the possibility of running for a seventh four-year term in 2018. Reynolds is now likely to run for election then. {eo}