Warriors and Politics: The Bitter Lesson of Stilwell in China

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One of the Army's most bitter battles in World War II was waged not between American GIs and the Axis Powers, but between two renowned American fighters: General Joseph W. (Vinegar Joe) Stilwell and General Claire L. (Old Leatherface) Chennault. The scrap was over which policy the United States would pursue in the war's most frustrating arena, the China-Burma-India theater. The referee was no less a figure than the President of the United States. And, each contestant had some important allies: in Stilwell's corner were General George C. Marshall and Secretary of War Henry Stimson; in Chennault's corner were presidential assistant Harry Hopkins, journalist Joseph Alsop (the President's cousin), the formidable Madame Chiang Kai-shek, and her husband, the Generalissimo.

The story of this policy conflict is fascinating for several reasons. For example, it illustrates President Roosevelt's famous "competitive management style" as applied to one important area of wartime foreign and military policy. Rarely one to abide by a strict chain of command, Roosevelt often provoked, mediated, shaped, and influenced conflict among his subordinates to maintain leverage and to protect his own power and options. Many admired the President's unique ability to inspire new ideas and create successful policy out of this chaotic decisionmaking "system," pointing to the great achievements in wartime domestic policy such as economic and industrial mobilization. Others, however, were appalled by the disorder it engendered.[1]

Perhaps of even greater interest, however, is this story's illustration of the extent to which war is a political enterprise in which it is increasingly difficult to separate what is "military" from what is "political." In forming America's wartime China policy, senior leaders, both civilian and military, failed to understand fully the interaction of political, social, economic, and

diplomatic elements of national power with the military element of power. The result was failure, frustration, and bitterness.

A Tale of Two Tactics

The battle that raged over China policy was neither a contest over political objectives nor over strategy, but rather over political and military tactics. The objective was clear: to make China a "great power" so that she could fulfill a strong postwar role as a principal stabilizing factor in the Far East.[2] President Roosevelt envisioned China as one of the postwar world's "Four Policemen," along with the United States, Britain, and the Soviet Union. This objective required a strategy that would both promote effective cooperation between the United States and China and reinforce China's position so that she could emerge from the war able to assume her enlarged role.

The President decided, therefore, that the United States would pursue a political strategy of supporting and strengthening Chiang Kai-shek's regime so as to keep China in the war against Japan and fully mobilize China's economic and military strength. In practical terms, this meant giving China the apparent status of a major power during the war, providing direct military and economic assistance to China and its armed forces, strengthening Sino-American military cooperation, and invigorating Chinese efforts to fight the Japanese.

The great policy disputes were over what political and military tactics would best carry out this strategy, and the Commander-in-Chief's competitive administrative style exacerbated heated conflicts among his subordinates. At the core of the debate was the problem of how to deal with Chiang Kai-shek. Dealing with the importunate Generalissimo was no easy task. Even to Roosevelt, famous for his ability to make a quick study and discern people's motivations, the Chinese leader was an enigma.[3]

Chiang's refusal to employ his best-equipped armies against the Japanese (using them instead to contain the Chinese Communist forces) and his reluctance to commit forces to offensive action were continuing sources of frustration for Roosevelt and the War Department.[4] Also, Chiang's frequent demands for increased aid and his occasional paroxysms of indignation (because China was not being treated as a "worthy ally"[5]) placed pressures and forced deadlines on the President's decisionmaking process. Chiang's persistent

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threatening claims that sinking Chinese morale might force his government to come to separate terms with Japan increased these pressures.

Roosevelt's initial policy approach toward Chiang had been championed by Lauchlin Currie, a White House assistant who handled lend-lease matters for China and who had developed a rapport with Madame Chiang and other key Chinese officials during a trip to China in 1941. Currie favored a liberal policy of freely conferred aid, with no strings attached. This approach emphasized noninterference in Chinese domestic affairs and was sensitive to any charges of infringement on Chinese sovereignty. Economic aid, materiel aid, advice, and persuasion were expected to encourage Chinese military performance and assure cooperation with American strategic designs.

Soon, however, considerations of military strategy involved field commanders in matters of political policy. The central figure was General Stilwell, who, as chief of the American military mission and Chief of Staff to Chiang Kai-shek, wielded considerable control over the implementation of America's China policy. Very important was his control over distribution of the lend-lease aid that arrived in China. He dealt face-to-face with the Generalissimo, while Stilwell's office, rather than the Ambassador's, was often the conduit through which presidential messages reached China's leader.

Marshall had hand-picked his friend Stilwell for the mission to China. Stilwell spoke Chinese fluently and had extensive experience in that country. However, his contempt for Chiang, whom he called "Peanut," was widely known.[6] Nor was he a fan of President Roosevelt, whom he called "Old Softy."[7] Considering himself a professional military man with only soldierly concerns, Vinegar Joe found the Burmese mud preferable to the muck of politics in Washington and Chungking. He confided in his diary: "I don't trust politicians."[8] But his position placed him unavoidably in a role of importance in Chinese domestic politics as well as in American foreign policy toward China.

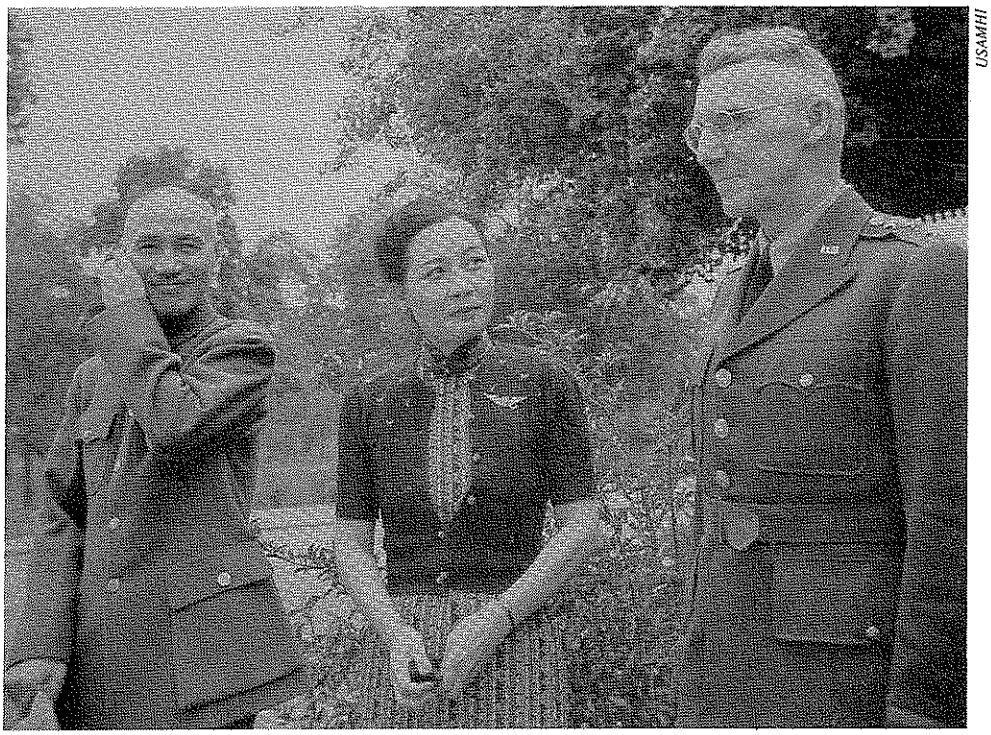
General Stilwell's frustration with Chiang and the Chinese army in the first Burma campaign in the spring of 1942 convinced him that considerable reform and reorganization of the Chinese army were essential.

According to Stilwell, this was for Chiang's own benefit, but the Chinese leader unfortunately suffered from "nonrecognition of enlightened self-interest."[9] It is most likely, though, that Chiang believed such reforms would threaten the delicate political relationships and balance of power that ensured his paramount position in the Chinese army and government. Stilwell was certainly as aware as anybody of China's need for vastly increased aid—and he constantly pressed for it—but he was convinced that the only way to deal with Chiang was to demand a quid pro quo in return for American aid. Lend-lease and American military activities in the China theater could serve as levers to budge Chiang in the direction of necessary political and military reforms and force Chinese military action against the Japanese. In Washington, General Marshall and Secretary of War Stimson, concerned primarily with facilitating military victory, sympathized with Stilwell's problems and supported this hard-line approach.

President Roosevelt, however, agreed with Lauchlin Currie's objection to such a hard line and steadfastly refused to establish a quid pro quo. It is important to note that Marshall at this time had not yet fully gained ready access to the President and the extensive influence he would later wield. In rejecting a harsh War Department draft which asked Chiang for a reorganization of the Chinese army in return for lend-lease aid, the President wrote to Marshall: "I wish you would talk the proposed reply [to the Generalissimo] over with Currie. Perhaps you can tone it down."[10]

Because of the fundamental differences in their tactical approaches toward relations with the Chinese leader, Currie was among the strongest of Stilwell's critics. After a trip to China in the summer of 1942, during which Chiang expressed his displeasure with the feisty American general, Currie recommended to the President that Stilwell be sacked. Roosevelt, optimistically assuming that the problems with China depended "largely on the problem of personalities,"[11] agreed. He sent Currie to Marshall to suggest Stilwell's relief, but the White House staffer met a cold response from the Army Chief of Staff.[12] The President persisted and wrote to Marshall on 3 October: "What is the situation in regard to Stilwell in China? Apparently the matter is so involved between him and the Generalissimo that I suppose Stilwell could be more effective in some other field."[13]

Marshall and Stimson were annoyed by Currie's interference and persuaded the President that no suitable successor could be found to replace Stilwell. The Army Chief wrote to Roosevelt that, in order to carry out military operations planned for the CBI theater, Stilwell's post called for "a troop leader rather than a negotiator or supply man who would only serve to promote harmony in Chungking." Thus he focused on perhaps the major difference between the Currie and Stilwell approaches. Currie's plan might serve better to "promote harmony" between Washington and Chungking, but it would be less effective in carrying out the military objectives which were, naturally, the



Lieutenant General Stilwell with Generalissimo and Madame Chiang Kai-shek in Maymyo, Burma, on 9 April 1942.

overwhelming concern of the War Department. General Marshall questioned Currie's judgment: "I know that Mr. Currie feels that Stilwell should be relieved, but I do not believe Mr. Currie realizes what this is going to mean towards the accomplishment of our military objective in Burma."[14]

While Roosevelt acquiesced on the relief matter, he was wary of humiliating China's head of government and therefore persisted in rejecting Stilwell's hard-line tactics. In a forceful letter to General Marshall, the President wrote:

> Stilwell has exactly the wrong approach in dealing with Generalissimo Chiang . . . . [T]he Generalissimo came up the hard way to become the undisputed leader of four hundred million people—an enormously difficult job to attain any kind of unity from a diverse group of all kinds of leaders . . . . [Chiang] finds it necessary to maintain his position of supremacy. You and I would do the same thing under the circumstances. He is the Chief Executive as well as the Commander-in-Chief, and one cannot speak sternly to a man like that or exact commitments from him the way we might do from the Sultan of Morocco.[15]

The President thus continued to heed the soft-line approach that Currie advocated, but the War Department had won a key victory in keeping

Stilwell on board. The battle between Currie and the War Department continued during 1942, but, as military crises and strategy took up more and more of the President's time, Currie found himself being edged out.

Even as Currie's influence in the White House waned, the President continued to resist War Department entreaties to try Stilwell's quid-pro-quo approach. However, a new option emerged in the fall of 1942 from a controversy that had started to rage in China between Stilwell and General Claire L. Chennault. The President's administrative style played a key role in bringing the controversy from the field to Washington, where the bitter clashes between Stilwell and Chennault in China were paralleled by those between George Marshall and Harry Hopkins.

Chennault's Alternative Plan—And Palace Intrigues

General Chennault, commander of the 14th Air Force, enjoyed a close relationship with Generalissimo and Madame Chiang and was an ardent supporter of vastly increased aid to the China theater. Having won brilliant tactical victories over the Japanese with his volunteer air group, the "Flying Tigers," during a time when most victories were being chalked up by the Axis Powers, he was an important hero with a strong following among the American public. He was respected for his tactical genius within the War Department, but his maverick methods, his lack of appreciation for complex logistical operations, his vocal criticism of Stilwell and American strategy, his having worked as a private citizen for Chiang, and his bucking of official command channels caused much resentment among high-level War Department officials, including Marshall and General "Hap" Arnold, Chief of the Army Air Force.

Chennault's grandiose plan envisioned the defeat of the Japanese through an increased air effort against Japanese supply lines, shipping, and air forces. Since supplies carried over the mountainous "Hump" from India to China were scarce, this plan called for a reallocation of aid from Stilwell's program of rebuilding and reforming the Chinese army to provide equipment, planes, and fuel for Chennault's air arm. The Generalissimo strongly supported Chennault's plan—most likely because, unlike Stilwell's plan, it would avoid the necessity of reforming the Chinese army (which might threaten Chiang's hold on power), and it allowed Americans to do most of the fighting.

Stilwell and Marshall strongly opposed the Chennault plan primarily for military and strategic reasons. They felt that airpower alone could not defeat the Japanese and that, as soon as the Japanese started incurring heavy losses from Chennault's attacks, they would respond with a ground offensive against American air bases in eastern China. Such offensives could only be stopped by a strengthened and aggressive Chinese ground army.

Furthermore, reallocating supplies to Chennault's air force at the expense of Stilwell's army restructuring program would forestall the very action

required to make China an aggressive partner against Japan. What was urgent, according to Stilwell and Marshall, was a continued effort to reform the Chinese army, to reestablish a land logistical route capable of vastly increasing the flow of supplies to China through northern Burma, and to force a resistant Chiang to take the steps necessary to achieve these objectives.

Chennault was officially subordinate to Stilwell and Marshall in the military hierarchy. His access to the President was remarkable for a tactical commander but was characteristic of Roosevelt's competitive administrative style. Journalist Joseph Alsop played a major role in assisting Chennault's efforts to capture the President's attention. In addition to being the President's cousin, he was a personal friend of Harry Hopkins. Alsop attained an officer's commission with the President's help and procured a position on Chennault's staff in China.[16] He idolized his heroic boss and served as the general's personal propagandist in the American press. He persistently lobbied both Roosevelt and Hopkins in support of Chennault's quests for independent command (a move designed to remove Chennault from the control of Stilwell's staff) and for adoption of the air offensive plan.

In a series of personal letters remarkable for both their fawning admiration of Chennault and their vitriolic attacks on Stilwell, Alsop pressed Chennault's case directly on the White House—sometimes on Hopkins, often on the President himself. He persuaded Chennault to write also. The President welcomed the letters and even solicited further reports. This practice spanned two years starting in the fall of 1942. Letters were accompanied by precise instructions for the President's personal secretary, Grace Tully, whom Alsop knew well. "Dear Gracie," wrote Alsop in one such letter which touted Chennault's plan and expressed contempt for Stilwell's lack of "political astuteness,"

> General [Chennault] feels that he should make another report to the President, which I therefore enclose. . . . I hope that you can again arrange to have this report, like its predecessors, treated as being for the President's eyes alone. For I judge it will infuriate without educating the rather ineducable War Department, and while every word the General says is true, the purpose of the letter is merely to bring the President personally up to date. . . . The President has asked [Chennault] to report direct from time to time.[17]

Hopkins, persuaded by Alsop, Chennault, and T. V. Soong (the Generalissimo's brother-in-law, who befriended Hopkins while representing China on lend-lease matters), became the chief White House proponent of the Chennault plan. His differences with Marshall over China policy became so severe that they no longer spoke to each other about the subject.[18]

The President was receptive to these exhortations on behalf of Chennault's plan despite the strong misgivings of Marshall, Stimson, and Arnold.[19] Moreover, Chiang Kai-shek—dramatically warning of a possible collapse in Chinese morale—was pressing strongly for it and asked the President to call

Chennault back to Washington to discuss his ideas in person. This attempt to maneuver over Stilwell's head infuriated Marshall, who, in order to insure that Stilwell's arguments were also consulted, warned Roosevelt that a dangerous precedent could be set if an ally was allowed to interfere with the American chain of command.[20] Roosevelt therefore agreed to hear both men and, in April 1943—just prior to the Churchill-Roosevelt conference in Washington on Allied strategy (Trident)—summoned Stilwell and Chennault to the White House.

Marshall and Stimson instructed Stilwell to inform the President of the arguments against the Chennault plan. Stilwell prepared a memorandum outlining his position, but his attitude and manner of presentation were unimpressive and inarticulate—to Marshall's chagrin—and prompted the President to ask if he was ill.[21] Chennault, on the other hand, displayed a forceful and impressive confidence in outlining his own plan.

Roosevelt, under pressure from Chiang and on the brink of the Trident Conference with the British, overruled the War Department and sided with Chennault. Several factors influenced this decision. Among these were the realization that Churchill opposed a major ground effort in Burma and that preparing to open a second front in Europe precluded adequately supporting large-scale ground operations in the CBI theater for the time being. Furthermore, Chennault promised an easier and immediately doable alternative that would appease pro-China critics who complained about the low priority given the China theater.

While the War Department was entering the realm of foreign policy in recommending pressure tactics against the Chinese government, it was arguing primarily from a military and strategic viewpoint. However, Barbara Tuchman has pointed out that Roosevelt continued to resist Stilwell's quid-pro-quo policy largely because he felt a political obligation to support Chiang unconditionally:

> What motivated the President in his decision was policy not strategy. He was not concerned with making some historic choice between air and ground action but with pursuing his concept of China's status as a great power. Support for Chennault was what China's Chief Executive wanted, whereas Stilwell's insistence on reforming the Chinese Army detracted from the great power image . . . . Roosevelt did not want to insist on mobilizing China's forces against the will of China's leader.[22]

Roosevelt's support for the Chennault plan continued throughout most of 1943, clearly angering Marshall.[23] To the Chief of Staff, Chennault's plan was "nonsense."[24] Stilwell confided his own views in a private memoir:

> Continued concessions have confirmed Chiang in the opinion that all he needs to do is yell and we'll cave in. As we are doing. . . . But what's the use when the World's Greatest Strategist is against you [a clear dig at Roosevelt].[25]

The President's promises to Chiang for support of Chennault's air offensive were given so freely that they could not be kept—which led to further protests from the Chinese leader. The War Department, strapped with high-priority commitments elsewhere, fell short of the promised aircraft and 10,000 tons of supplies a month over the Hump.

Through his informal channels of communication, the President continued to be bombarded by messages from Chennault, Alsop, and T. V. Soong seeking more aid for the air war and complaining that the War Department was not delivering promised equipment. They accused Stilwell of failing to support the President's decision and of seriously damaging Sino-American relations with his thinly disguised contempt for Chiang. Stilwell's critics continued to press for his relief. One of Alsop's letters to Hopkins, particularly vicious in its attacks on both Stilwell and the War Department, suggested continuing direct communications between Chennault and the White House "since I doubt if anything like the true picture can reach you, as they say, through channels."[26]

Hopkins, no doubt recognizing that knowledge of Alsop's end run would further infuriate Marshall, gave it to Roosevelt with the following memorandum attached:

> Dear Mr. President: Here is a very interesting private letter from Joe Alsop to me. I hope you will not give it to anybody, because it would make an ungodly amount of trouble for Joe, to say nothing of Chennault.[27]

Marshall continued to stress the need to open the Burma Road to increase the flow of materiel into China and to end the Hump route's drain on transport aircraft needed in Europe. He argued that Stilwell was indispensable for this task and that Stilwell's quid-pro-quo approach was the only way to induce Chiang Kai-shek to make needed reforms and employ his forces aggressively.

A Turn to Stilwell—And More Frustration

After the Cairo Conference in November-December 1943, the President started gradually to adopt Stilwell's hard-line approach. A series of piecemeal decisions revealed the shift in Roosevelt's attitude. Several reasons may have contributed to this shift. First, Chiang Kai-shek's continued refusals to take the offensive, his exorbitant demands, and his hinted threats of a separate peace may have finally frustrated the President. Second, Stalin's promise at Teheran to enter the war with Japan after Germany's defeat and the successes of MacArthur's Pacific island-hopping campaign vastly decreased the military importance of China for defeating Japan. Third, the Chennault air offensive was falling far short of promised results, while Stilwell's campaign in Burma appeared to be achieving tactical success.[28]

Specific indications of the shift toward pressure tactics included a refusal to provide a billion-dollar loan demanded by Chiang in January 1944 or to accept a vastly inflated exchange rate in financing American military activities; a decision to press Chiang to support Stilwell's offensive in Burma; and a decision, ultimately abandoned, to press Chiang in the summer of 1944 to appoint Stilwell as commander of the Chinese army.[29]

It was Chiang's refusal to take the offensive at a critical point in Stilwell's Burma campaign that gave Marshall ammunition to urge the President toward a harder line. In a harshly worded radio message to Chiang on 3 April, Roosevelt used the same condescending tone for which he had previously criticized Stilwell:

> It is inconceivable to me that your Yoke forces with their American equipment would be unable to advance against the Japanese 56th Division in its present depleted strength. . . . If they are not to be used in the common cause our most strenuous and extensive efforts to fly in equipment and furnish instructional personnel have not been justified. . . . I do hope you can act.[30]

Shortly thereafter, Marshall instructed Stilwell to inform the Chinese government that if the designated forces did not take the offensive, lend-lease supplies to them would be cut off.[31] Whether this first use of the quid-pro-quo policy had the President's prior blessing is not clear, but Marshall never received instructions to rescind the order. On 14 April the Chinese forces were ordered by Chungking to advance.

No doubt the President was uncomfortable with using outright pressure tactics. Hopkins continued criticizing both Stilwell and the quid-pro-quo policy, and letters came pouring in from Chennault and Alsop questioning the wisdom of the Burma campaign, promoting Chennault's plan, and attacking Stilwell and the War Department for a lack of vision, tact, and political judgment.[32] "The Generalissimo will need American encouragement and support," Chennault wrote the President. "Close coordination of Chinese and American activities . . . can hardly be obtained in an atmosphere of mutual suspicion and contempt."[33] Roosevelt vacillated, again adopting a softer line that replaced a tone of frustration with one of approbation. In June he wrote Chiang that "China's achievements in the face of tremendous obstacles inspire faith and hope in free men of all countries."[34]

Roosevelt sent Vice President Henry Wallace to Chungking in June. Wallace spent eight days in China, meeting with Chiang, Chennault, and Alsop but not with Stilwell, who was preoccupied with the fighting in Burma. Chiang requested through Wallace that a personal emissary from the President be assigned, through whom he could gain direct access to Roosevelt without having to go through the State or War Departments. Chiang also expressed his "lack of confidence" in Stilwell's judgment.[35] Wallace promptly recommended

Stilwell's relief in a telegram to the President which the ubiquitous Alsop claimed to have composed.[36]

But Marshall's influence was very strong by this time. Operation Overlord and the successes that followed in Europe added to his already considerable prestige and to the President's confidence in his judgment. He stood steadfastly by Stilwell. Moreover, while the softer, generous, cajoling approaches toward Chiang advocated by Currie and Chennault had appealed more to the President's manner, they did not seem to curb Chiang's threats and demands. On the other hand, the hard-line approach, in the few instances in which it had been used, at least seemed to get immediate results.

Furthermore, the Chennault air offensive was not only falling way short of its promised destruction of Japanese shipping and supply lines, but it had indeed provoked the massive Japanese offensive against American air bases that Marshall had predicted in 1943. The Chinese armies, which Chiang had claimed could protect the bases, seemed to disintegrate under Japanese pressure and were denied reinforcements and supplies by Chiang (who did not want to risk losing more).[37] This Japanese offensive threatened the China-based B-29 bases which were then critical to the Very Long Range Bomber project against Japan.

Marshall proposed forcing Chiang to place Stilwell in unfettered command of the Chinese army. This, as everyone knew, was precisely the opposite of what Chiang wanted—which was to be rid of the general who was the principal advocate for exacting a quid pro quo. To strengthen his case, Marshall secured the concurrence of all the Joint Chiefs and brusquely summarized for the President the ill effects of having pursued the Chennault plan. Supporting Chennault, he said, had been a "poorly directed and possibly completely wasteful procedure."[38]

Marshall also drafted a stiff cable to Chiang, suggesting that Stilwell be placed in command and implying that Chiang was not competent to command himself. The frustrated President signed it without revision. The blunt message, sent on 6 July, clearly marks a complete reversal of Roosevelt's earlier tactics:

> I think I am fully aware of your feelings regarding General Stilwell, nevertheless . . . I know of no other man who has the ability, the force and the determination to offset the disaster which now threatens China . . . . I recommend for your most urgent consideration that you . . . charge him with full responsibility and authority for the coordination and direction of the operations required to stem the tide of the enemy's advance. . . . I assure you there is no intent on my part to dictate to you in matters concerning China; however, the future of all Asia is at stake . . . . Please have in mind that it has clearly been demonstrated in Italy, in France, and in the Pacific that air power alone cannot stop a determined enemy.[39]

This message—which Chiang did not answer—was followed by several months of highly strained relations between the United States and China. The tone of the message would have generated resentment from any national leader, and it produced a serious clash of political wills, for which President Roosevelt was apparently unprepared.

Chiang requested an intermediary, and, despite Marshall's disapproval, the President complied. General Patrick Hurley was dispatched as a special envoy "to promote efficient and harmonious relations between the Generalissimo and General Stilwell."[40] But when Chiang, in September, still had not appointed Stilwell to command and further threatened to pull his troops out of Burma—just when it was appearing that the Burma Road might soon be opened—the President again opted for the hard-line approach. The quick decision was made in the middle of a session involving Roosevelt, Churchill, and the Combined Chiefs of Staff at the second Quebec Conference on 16 September. Marshall, joined by the other American military chiefs, came in and handed the President the text of a tough reply to the Generalissimo. Roosevelt signed the message then and there.

Stilwell, who gloated about the experience in his diary, happily delivered the President's message word for word to Chiang Kai-shek, despite Hurley's advice to soften it. The message warned Chiang:

> I have urged time and again in recent months that you take drastic action . . . . [T]he only thing you can now do . . . is to reinforce your Salween armies immediately and press their offensive, while at once placing General Stilwell in unrestricted command of all your forces. The action I am asking you to take will fortify us in our decision . . . to maintain and increase our aid to you. . . . It appears plainly evident to all of us here that all your and our efforts to save China are to be lost by further delays.[41]

But the President evidently had not thought through the implications of his ultimatum. He had been frustrated by the results of following the soft-line approaches and had moved toward Stilwell's pressure tactics against his earlier instincts and the advice of Hopkins, Alsop, and Chennault. Now US-Chinese relations had deteriorated perhaps beyond repair. In the midst of the crisis, when Chiang refused the President's ultimatum and demanded Stilwell's relief, Roosevelt backed down and rejected a Marshall-drafted rejoinder to Chiang. The "Stilwell Option," like those that preceded it, was abandoned. Hurley had warned the President that "if you sustain Stilwell in this controversy you will lose Chiang Kai-shek and possibly you will lose China with him."[42] Although the prospect of "losing China" in this way was unlikely, the President, having chosen to invest support in Chiang Kai-shek—to whom at the time no alternative leader or group of leaders was apparent—was not prepared to take the risk. While Marshall was inspecting the front in France in

early October 1944, the President decided to recall Stilwell. Marshall was so informed upon his return.

Drawing Lessons from the Tangle

The dynamics of decisionmaking about China policy from December 1941 to October 1944 provide a curious case for study. The President allowed ambiguous jurisdiction of authority, gathered information informally, solicited the views of lower-level officials, fostered a clash of wills among his key advisors, bypassed important officials and instrumental agencies such as the State Department, and kept himself in the position of final arbiter and court of appeals. Clearly this is an example of the competitive management style often attributed to Roosevelt.

But whereas this competitive process brought Roosevelt considerable success in the realm of domestic policy, wartime policy toward China was a shambles. The President's China policy was vacillating and unsure. Policy options advocated by various individuals were attempted piecemeal and each was subsequently abandoned. During 1941-1942, the President preferred the "Currie Option." For most of 1943, particularly after the Trident Conference, he preferred the "Chennault Option." After the Cairo Conference in late 1943, he showed an increasing tendency to follow Stilwell's quid-pro-quo approach, but he abandoned this too when Chiang called his bluff. While officially the objective of making China a great power remained in force, after Stilwell's recall Roosevelt maintained grave doubts as to China's prospects.[43] With the death of Roosevelt, the end of the war with Japan, and the increasing threat from Mao's forces, there would be new battles over China policy during the Truman Administration. They, too, would end in disaster.

Beyond its historical interest, one can draw from this story many conclusions about wartime decisionmaking. Some officers might react, as did Stilwell, with disgust over the infusion of "purely political" objectives and tactics into strategic and operational decisions. It has been argued forcefully that, had Stilwell's plan been pursued sooner and more consistently, the failure that followed President Roosevelt's vacillating policies might have been avoided.[44] Also, it is clear that Stilwell had a vastly greater understanding of China and its weaknesses than any of the presidential envoys (e.g. Currie, Wallace, Hurley) dispatched by Roosevelt. Therefore, one might pardon the reaction of some military professionals who would lay blame for failure in this case entirely at the feet of politicos whose constant meddling and failure to support the senior American field commander made his job extraordinarily difficult. There is more than a little justification for such a view.

But it is unrealistic to expect that military policy at this level could have been divorced from either short-term or long-term political objectives. Chiang would not have allowed that, even if Roosevelt had. Despite Stilwell's

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disdain for politics and politicians (which is amply and bitterly expressed on many pages of his diary), he was up to his neck—and, eventually, over his head—in high-level political battles requiring negotiation, compromise, and coalition-building. He was ill-suited to this task, which ultimately caused his relief. Had he been more adept at operating in a political environment, perhaps he could have enjoyed more success in pursuing the military objectives he sought. Instead, he returned home as perhaps the most frustrated general on the winning side of the war.

It is indeed a reality of modern national security affairs that, like it or not, senior military officers operate in a political environment. Despite the views of some who cling righteously and naively to the idea that "warrior leaders" ought not to sully their professionalism by descending into the political arena, a sophisticated awareness of political, social, economic, and diplomatic factors that affect and are affected by military policy is essential for today's senior uniformed decisionmakers. Perhaps General Stilwell's fascinating diary should be required reading at the war colleges.

NOTES

1. Excellent discussions of Roosevelt's management style can be found in Alexander L. George, *Presidential Decision-making in Foreign Policy: The Effective Use of Information and Advice* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1980), pp. 148-51; and James MacGregor Burns, *Roosevelt: The Soldier of Freedom* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970), p. 351.

2. State Department Memorandum, 3 April 1945, *Foreign Relations of the United States 1945 (China)* (Washington: GPO, 1969), p. 82.

3. Edgar Snow, "Fragments from FDR," *Monthly Review*, 8 (January 1957), 397.

4. This frustration is reflected in many of Stilwell's dispatches to Marshall, as well as in diplomatic correspondence from China. See, for example, Memorandum, Cordell Hull to FDR, 2 December 1943, President's Secretary's File (Diplomatic Correspondence)/China 1943 folder/Container #38, FDR Library, Hyde Park, New York.

5. Correspondence which reached the President from the regime in Chungking reflects this as a constant theme. For example, see President's Secretary's File (Diplomatic Correspondence)/China/"Lauchlin Currie Cables" folder/Container #38, FDR Library, Hyde Park, New York.

6. The best illustration of the vital but bitter relationship between Stilwell and Chiang is found in Barbara Tuchman, *Stilwell and the American Experience in China 1911-45* (New York: MacMillan, 1971), passim.

7. Joseph W. Stilwell, *The Stilwell Papers*, ed. Theodore H. White (New York: William Sloane Associates, 1948), p. 339.

8. Ibid., p. 343.

9. Stilwell, quoted in Tuchman, p. 307.

10. Memorandum, FDR to Marshall, 15 September 1942, President's Secretary's File (Departmental Correspondence)/ War Department/Marshall folder/Container #106, FDR Library, Hyde Park, New York.

11. Memorandum, FDR to Currie, 12 September 1942, Official File 150/"China 1942" folder, FDR Library, Hyde Park, New York.

12. Tuchman, p. 324.

13. Memorandum, FDR to Marshall, 3 October 1942, President's Secretary's File (Diplomatic Correspondence)/China folder/Container #38, FDR Library, Hyde Park, New York.

14. Memorandum, Marshall to FDR, 6 October 1942, President's Secretary's File (Diplomatic Correspondence)/China folder/Container #38, FDR Library, Hyde Park, New York.

15. Charles Romanus and Riley Sunderland, *Stilwell's Mission to China* (Washington: Department of the Army, 1953), p. 279.

16. Letter, Alsop to FDR, 6 April 1944, President's Secretary's File (Subject)/Alsop folder/Container #115, FDR Library, Hyde Park, New York.

17. Letter, Chennault to FDR (with cover letter by Alsop), 27 June 1944, President's Secretary's File (Departmental Correspondence)/War Department/Chennault folder/Container #105, FDR Library, Hyde Park, New York.

18. Tuchman, p. 370.

19. Arnold felt that Chennault and Chiang did not appreciate the difficulties of logistics, particularly in maintaining airfields and supplying fuel. H. H. Arnold, *Global Mission* (New York: Harper, 1949), pp. 407, 409, 413, 417-27.

20. Tuchman, p. 366.

21. Ibid., p. 367.

22. Ibid., pp. 360-61.

23. Interview, Marshall with Romanus and Sunderland, 13 July 1949, in *Two Interviews with General Marshall*, unpublished document on file at the Office of the Chief of Military History.

24. Ibid.

25. Stilwell, pp. 204-06.

26. Letter, Alsop to Hopkins, 14 January 1944, President's Secretary's File (Diplomatic Correspondence)/"China 1944" folder/Container #38, FDR Library, Hyde Park, New York.

27. Memorandum, Hopkins to FDR, 7 February 1944, President's Secretary's File (Diplomatic Correspondence)/"China 1944" folder/Container #38, FDR Library, Hyde Park, New York.

28. Tang Tsou, *America's Failure in China 1941-1950* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1963), pp. 109-10.

29. Ibid.

30. Charles Romanus and Riley Sunderland, *Stilwell's Command Problems* (Washington: Department of the Army, 1956), p. 310.

31. Ibid., pp. 312-14.

32. See, e.g., letter from Chennault to FDR, 27 June 1944, President's Secretary's File (Diplomatic Correspondence)/"China 1944" folder/Container #38, FDR Library, Hyde Park, New York.

33. Ibid.

34. Message, FDR to Chiang, 10 June 1944, President's Secretary's File (Diplomatic Correspondence)/"China 1944" folder/Container #38, FDR Library, Hyde Park, New York.

35. Tuchman, pp. 464-65.

36. Cable, Wallace to FDR, 28 June 1944, President's Secretary's File (Diplomatic Correspondence)/"China 1944" folder/Container #38, FDR Library, Hyde Park, New York. See also Tuchman, p. 465.

37. See Riley Sunderland, "The Secret Embargo," *Pacific Historical Review*, 29 (February 1960), pp. 75-80.

38. Tuchman, p. 469.

39. Ibid., p. 470.

40. Letter, FDR to Hurley, 18 August 1944, President's Secretary's File (Subject)/Hurley, Patrick J. folder/Container #153, FDR Library, Hyde Park, New York.

41. Tuchman, pp. 492-93.

42. Cable, Hurley to FDR, 13 October 1944, President's Secretary's File (Diplomatic Correspondence)/"China 1944" folder/Container #38, FDR Library, Hyde Park, New York.

43. Tsou, p. 86.

44. See Tsou, passim, and Eric Larrabee, *Commander in Chief: FDR, His Lieutenants, and Their War* (New York: Harper and Row, 1987), pp. 509-78.