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Editorial

James I. Matray

Editor-in-Chief

jmatray@csuchico.edu

Historian Gary R. Hess has argued that President Franklin D. Roosevelt was determined to achieve a number of objectives after the Allies defeated the Axis in World War II. He wanted to maintain cooperative relations with the Soviet Union, elevate China as a great power capable of fostering stability in Asia, and free all nations from colonial rule. Perhaps his most important goal, however, was to have the United States assume a leading role in creating and becoming a member of a new international security organization, thereby redeeming its mistake of refusing to join the League of Nations. Rather than continued collaboration, the United States and the Soviet Union would wage a Cold War after World War II, while a civil war would rage in China leading to the Communists seizing power. But the United Nations would become a reality. On 25 April 1945, Harry S. Truman, who became president upon the death of Roosevelt less than two weeks earlier, delivered the welcoming address to delegates from 46 nations who would establish the United Nations. They would sign on 26 June the UN Charter that defined the new organization's prime purpose as "to take effective collective measures for the prevention and removal of threats to the peace." Just five years later, the United Nations would confront the first major test of whether it could fulfill this self-imposed responsibility when North Korea launched a massive military offensive to conquer South Korea and reunite the peninsula. While historians have offered conflicting judgments about whether UN participation in the Korean War provided an example of effective collective security, its decision to intervene in this conflict and its subsequent efforts to limit the fighting and achieve an armistice were successful. In doing so, the United Nations achieved its mission to take action to prevent and remove threats to the peace.

For Roosevelt, the United Nations would be the driving force in creating a new peaceful and just world order. On 14 August 1941, he and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill had identified the principles that would guide this transformation when they announced the Atlantic Charter. One of its eight promises was that nations "would work for a world free of want and

fear.” Roosevelt certainly could claim that his New Deal provided proof of his commitment to realize this goal because it successfully reduced the suffering of the American people during the Great Depression. However, his reform efforts did not extend to helping African Americans gain economic opportunity, political rights, and social equality. In fact, some of his programs even perpetuated the pattern of racial discrimination. After World War II began in 1939, African Americans were the last to obtain jobs and at lower wages in the defense industry. Also, the U.S. military remained segregated. By early 1941, A. Philip Randolph, African American president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, had become a vocal critic of Roosevelt’s failure to promote Black equality. To embarrass the president and force him to act, he scheduled a march on Washington for 27 June to demand equal rights to work, desegregation of the military, and an end to racial discrimination. After failing to persuade Randolph to cancel the march, Roosevelt issued an executive order establishing the Federal Fair Employment Practices Commission to end discrimination in hiring in the defense industry. But then, just six months after he signed the Atlantic Charter, Roosevelt created want and fear for Japanese Americans when he issued the order for their wartime incarceration. Seok-Won Lee, in the first article of this issue titled “An Insider’s Response to Racism: Abe Fortas and the Japanese Question during the Asia-Pacific War, 1941–1945,” describes the actions of one U.S. administrator who opposed this decision.

Lee describes the actions that Abe Fortas, who later became an associate justice on the U.S. Supreme Court, took during World War II to protect the civil rights of Japanese Americans as undersecretary in the Department of the Interior. He first briefly summarizes his early life and career, explaining how Fortas became the protégé of Secretary of the Interior Harold L. Ickes and shared his “zeal for social reform and an international perspective.” After the United States declared war on Japan, the War Department assumed primary responsibility for Hawai’i from the Interior Department and the territorial governor proclaimed martial law. Dominating the attitude of U.S. military officials toward Japanese Americans was distrust of their loyalty, but Fortas saw “racial prejudice” as motivating their harsh and unconstitutional treatment of them. In August 1942, he negotiated an agreement with the War Department to protect Japanese American civil rights in Hawai’i, providing for restoring civilian jurisdiction in legal cases not directly related to military governance. Not only was the Interior Department “consistently critical of establishing an emergency martial law government in Hawai’i,” as Lee details, it opposed President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s decision to incarcerate Japanese Americans on the mainland. In February 1944, Roosevelt ordered the Interior Department to close the internment camps and Fortas supervised implementation of this directive.

White administrators opposed relocation of freed Japanese Americans to their cities, especially in California. Fortas, Lee writes, firmly believed “that racial prejudice was intolerable at the administrative level.” Under his direction, the War Relocation Authority issued publications denying Japanese American disloyalty, emphasizing the wartime service of the all Japanese American 442nd Regiment. “Fortas’s responses to and critiques of U.S. policy regarding the Japanese question,” Lee concludes, “reveal the intertwined dynamics of how white racism developed and challenges against it at the governmental level.”

Unlike Abe Fortas, most U.S. leaders thought that Japanese Americans were disloyal and therefore threats to national security. That this was untrue eliminated any justification for the unconscionable decision to intern them during World War II. Many historians have argued that similarly exaggerated fears led American leaders to overreact in response to the Soviet challenge to U.S. efforts to remake the postwar world after 1945. For example, the United States deployed military bases and personnel in many regions, including such East Asian nations as Japan, the Philippines, South Korea, Taiwan, and South Vietnam. This would result in the violation of another principle in the Atlantic Charter that upheld the right of self-determination for all people because U.S. personnel were immune from local punishment when they committed crimes. As Chiou-Ling Yeh explains in the second article of this issue titled “Anti-American Expressions: The 1957 Taipei Incident and Chinese in the Philippines, Thailand, and Hong Kong,” the U.S. government after World War II “granted Asian countries (except for Japan) significantly inferior criminal jurisdictional agreements when compared to the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).” The NATO SOFA allowed for “concurring jurisdiction” over an American who violated the laws of the host country with the nature of the offense determining which nation had “primary” jurisdiction. In Japan, a SOFA resulted in 1957 in the U.S. Army surrendering a U.S. soldier for trial in a local court after he killed a Japanese citizen collecting scrap metal on a U.S. shooting range. However, the United States would not agree to SOFAs with the Philippines, South Korea, and Taiwan. “Since these host countries had no power to rein in the criminal behavior of U.S. military personnel,” Yeh writes, “their offenses, which included traffic violations, rapes, and murders, often resulted in foreign relations crises.”

Yeh’s article “compares and contrasts the responses of Chinese in the Philippines, Thailand, and Hong Kong to the May 24th Incident of 1957, when 25,000 Chinese attacked the U.S. embassy and ransacked the U.S. Information Services Office in Taipei, Taiwan, due to the acquittal of a U.S. soldier of killing a Chinese.” She first describes how Asian nations hosting U.S. military bases viewed their inability to punish the misbehavior of U.S. personnel as a denial

of sovereignty and racial equality. When the May 24th Incident occurred, Chinese newspapers in the Philippines, Thailand, and Hong Kong condemned the verdict as unjust, but the government reaction to this varied as a result of “how anti-Chinese racism, domestic conditions, international relations, and Cold War politics affected [these] Chinese communities . . .” In the Philippines, where discrimination economically and in citizenship against Chinese already existed, the government and the Philippine press applied “multiple layers of suppression” against Chinese criticism of the acquittal in Taiwan because its national security in the Cold War depended on U.S. military and economic assistance. By contrast, Yeh explains, Thailand’s government, that received only modest U.S. aid after 1950, courted the People’s Republic of China “and domestic leftists while tolerating anti-Americanism.” Growing hostility toward the United States because of unfair trade policies and alleged involvement in election fraud “emboldened Thai Chinese to lambaste U.S. military injustice” as well. While the colonial government in Hong Kong “strove to remain neutral and ignore the Cold War,” it did not interfere with city newspapers universally decrying the Taiwan verdict as an example of U.S. “superiority and arrogance.” “While U.S. military and economic aid motivated recipients to rally behind the anti-Communist banner,” Yeh concludes, “geopolitics, domestic conditions, and anti-Chinese racism also played pivotal roles in determining whether the Chinese could voice or act upon their anti-American sentiment.”

As the U.S. military moved into East Asian nations after World War II and annoyed most of the local residents, European colonizers moved out, fulfilling Roosevelt’s vision for postwar decolonization. Roosevelt helped initiate this imperial retreat with his advocacy for ending U.S. colonial rule in the Philippines, although he would not live to see the islands gain independence on 4 July 1946. The Truman administration’s record on encouraging postwar decolonization in East Asia, however, was mixed. Regarding Burma, it urged Britain to grant independence to its colony quickly after World War II because it was prepared for self-government and its emerging leader Aung San opposed the Communists. By contrast, Truman and his advisors supported a continuation of British rule in Malaya to prevent the Communists from seizing power, resulting in an insurgency known as the Malayan Emergency that delayed independence until 1957. The Truman administration at first was neutral when the Netherlands acted to regain sovereignty over the Dutch East Indies after nationalists established the Republic of Indonesia in August 1945, but following two failed “police actions” a U.S. threat to cut off economic and military aid forced the Netherlands to grant independence in 1949. In the final article of this volume titled “Triangular Franks: The Eisenhower Administration’s Complicated Franco-American-South Vietnamese System of Foreign Aid to

Saigon,” Lori Maguire describes the consequences of the Truman administration’s gradual endorsement of continued French colonial rule in Indochina. As with the Netherlands, U.S. leaders wanted to ensure France’s support for its policies to block Soviet expansion in Europe, but also sought to champion decolonization. Maguire astutely defines “the dilemma in which the Americans found themselves—they desired to build ‘French prestige and influence,’ . . . while, at the same time, developing positive relationships with Asian countries.”

In her article, Maguire discusses the triangular relationship between the United States, France, and South Vietnam during the six years after the Geneva Conference ended in 1954, establishing how the Americans did not replace the French entirely in South Vietnam “at least not at first and not in the economic sphere.” She does so through a careful examination of the most prominent example of an Eisenhower administration system of foreign aid known as the “triangular trade” whereby “the U.S. government would sell U.S. agricultural surplus, usually wheat or cotton, to a developed country who would pay in its own currency [and] then would credit this money to a developing nation . . . as [U.S.] aid [to buy] goods or services from other developed countries.” Several West European nations were involved but France was the most active and many countries were beneficiaries but South Vietnam apparently was the largest recipient. U.S. officials managed the system “chaotically and often secretly” to “hide funding for certain projects from Congress.” A major motivation for the Eisenhower administration to accept “triangular francs” from France was to boost its weak economy and ensure it remained a reliable U.S. Cold War ally. The French accepted dependence on the United States under the system, although they complained about its complexity, because “triangular francs” allowed them to slow their declining economic interests in Indochina. Ngo Dinh Diem, after he became president of the Republic of Vietnam in 1955, criticized the system because South Vietnam had no role in deciding how much money it received and what it could buy. His complaints about how France regularly devalued its currency finally persuaded the United States in 1958 to reduce the amount of francs South Vietnam had to accept. “Saigon may have played a more significant role than the Americans in the decline of the French economic presence” in South Vietnam, Maguire concludes, showing that it “had more agency than previous scholars have assumed.”

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