Washington Mandarins: FDR’s Personal Representatives to China

Introduction

The literature describes Franklin Roosevelt as a president who wanted to directly control foreign policy.1 He liked to conduct American diplomacy personally through meetings with other great power leaders. When he could not attend such meetings Roosevelt preferred to send confidants to represent him rather than trust the professionals in the State Department. The President wanted China to be a great power, so this was the way he conducted diplomacy with Chiang Kai-shek. Roosevelt sent a number of close advisers to China including Lauchlin Currie, Wendell Willkie, Henry Wallace and Patrick Hurley. These personal representatives ensured that Ambassador Gauss and other diplomats in China were rarely relied upon to deliver information or advice on the situation in China. The representatives that Roosevelt chose to send, however, lacked the qualifications and experience of Gauss and other State Department officials. The relationship with China suffered as a result of the substandard diplomacy that these representatives conducted.

It has been well noted that the use of personal representatives in China undermined the roles of Ambassador Gauss and General Stilwell.2 The impact that these representatives had on US public opinion and on FDR has been less extensively explored. The China Lobby, operating in Washington to promote Chinese interests, was greatly aided by the visits these men made to Chungking. The propaganda that they allowed to influence their advice to Roosevelt served Chinese interests more than they served those of the United States. The connection between US representatives sent to China and Chinese representatives

---

in the US is also more important than the impression given by the existing scholarship. US policy towards China was already greatly constrained by wartime alliances and military imperatives. By helping sway public opinion towards sympathy for China these missions further limited the policy options open to the President. This was clear by 1944, when the President was left with no option other than to support Chiang Kai-shek and hope for his success.

**US Diplomats and Envoys to China**

Franklin Roosevelt’s use of personal diplomacy to hold the Big Three together in World War II can be considered a great achievement. His diplomatic style was not so impressive, however, when it came to Sino-US relations. The result of Roosevelt’s use of men outside the State Department to conduct diplomacy with China was that public opinion trapped the President in an unsustainable policy. Personal representatives such as Henry Wallace and Wendell Willkie were not restricted by the State Department when speaking in public. They had, in fact, personal incentive to be outspoken. The messages they sent through speeches and press conferences hindered Sino-US relations by stirring public opinion in a direction that restricted US foreign policy. By convincing each of these representatives of the value of supporting him and China, Chiang was able to create a propaganda network to manipulate US public opinion. Although Roosevelt’s personal envoys were not the only ones that played a part in this outcome, their role was significant and requires closer examination.

There are several works that discuss FDR’s personal representatives as part of a group often referred to as the “China Hands.” These works tend to look at the representatives in a way that makes them appear to belong to a coherent group without treating each representative as individual examples of FDR’s method of dealing with China.3 These texts are also often informed by the anti-communist ideology of the Cold War era. Robert Koen, in *The China Lobby in American Politics*, points out that Hurley was different from the other China hands because he was not pro-communist.4 A study of the role that these representatives played in Sino-US relations free from the underlying assumption of the evil of Communism would be beneficial. These works also lack analysis of the connection between Roosevelt’s method of using personal

---