Another Look at the Marshall Mission to China
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The rapid capitulation of Japan after Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August of 1945 left the direction of American foreign relations with China in serious doubt. During World War II, American policy had been to make China a capable ally and eventually to install it as the stabilizing power in the region. To accomplish this, the United States sought the unification of the Chinese military forces and the eventual absorption of the Chinese Communists into a single stable government. During the war several separate military and diplomatic missions were sent to China with what was thought to be the necessary aid and guidance to stabilize the politics and economics of that country. The precise role of these missions was never accurately defined. They were often at cross purposes with each other and they ended in confusion and failure.

On 27 November 1945, one of the most flamboyant of those missions ended in failure with the resignation of General Patrick J. Hurley. His resignation, made publicly before a press conference, included claims of Soviet military connections with the Chinese Communists and accusations of personal betrayal by foreign service officers. American public opinion wanted the American troops, including more than several thousand Marines, brought home from the China theater. Attempts to verify Hurley’s claims produced nothing. Under these uneasy circumstances, President Harry S. Truman appointed General George C. Marshall as his personal ambassador to China on 27 November 1945. Marshall arrived in China on 21 December. Throughout 1946, Marshall labored to achieve the essentials of a military cease-fire, a constitutional convention and coalition government, and a stabilization of the Chinese economy and political system. Despite Marshall's efforts, it was clear by the fall of 1946 that a permanent impasse had been reached between the Chinese Communists and the Nationalist government. Neither party seemed interested in Marshall’s mediation, but only in the aid that was to accompany it. Marshall was recalled in January of 1947 to assume the
post of secretary of state, a post at which he served until 1949, when he retired due to illness.

Historiographically, Marshall’s mission to China was initially viewed as an unfortunate incident in an otherwise brilliant public career brought on by the overwhelming nature of China’s problems and Soviet duplicity.¹ It has been treated marginally in general evaluations of the post–World War II or mentioned only in passing by participants and observers alike. To date, a full-scale historical study of the mission has not been done. The revisionist trend of the 1960s and 1970s that looked at the broader context of the Cold War produced few works that provided an in-depth analysis of the mission.

One such work refuting the earlier image of the mission was made in 1963 by political scientist Tang Tsou in America’s Failure in China.² Relying heavily on the China White Paper³ and on secondary sources, Tsou provided a multivariate analysis that focused specifically on the ambiguous nature of America’s China policy throughout World War II and in the immediate postwar years. Tsou effectively put forth the thesis that American policy and actions in China had been unrealistic, not because of the scope of the problems, but because of the set of faulty assumptions upon which China policy was based. He argued that these assumptions did not take into consideration China’s goals, capabilities, and potentialities.⁴ Tsou concluded that the policy which grew out of these unilateral assumptions was bankrupt because America never intended that its military forces would be used to intervene in China. Such a policy was doomed to failure because the United States not only lacked any real knowledge of China, but also the will and the ability to see that policy to its logical conclusion of direct military and unlimited economic intervention. In this analysis, the Marshall mission was presented as another in a series of ill-fated, quasi-diplomatic interventions designed to guide China to a political and economic stability sufficient to satisfy American policy goals.⁵

In 1979, Michael Schaller presented another analysis of American wartime policy in China. He offered an interpretation of World War II that focused on America’s drive to secure the Pacific perimeter against the Japanese. He presented images of unfulfilled expectations

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³ U.S. Relations with China with Special Reference to the Period 1944–49 (Washington, D.C., 1949), 130–36; this volume came to be known as the China White Paper.
⁴ Tsou, America’s Failure, 45–48.
⁵ Ibid., 360–62.