This essay explores the views on China and broader Asian affairs of the self-made Texas cotton millionaire William L. Clayton. Throughout the 1950s, until his death in 1966, Clayton suggested that the United States should recognize the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and minimize its ties to the Republic of China on Taiwan. During this period, variants of his views were not uncommon within top policymaking circles in the United States. This essay uses Clayton as a focus through which to consider whether, as some American scholars have suggested, the United States did indeed lose a chance to normalize and improve its relations with the mainland in the years between the PRC’s establishment and the reinstitution of relations which began under President Richard Nixon. This essay also places Clayton’s outlook within the wider context of the U.S. foreign policymaking elite and assesses the significance this elite played in shaping policy toward China in the 1950s and 1960s. A study of Clayton’s views on China can perhaps serve as a timely reminder, if such be needed, of the degree to which international developments are the products of interactions among many states and of the degree to which national foreign policies are often affected by domestic political considerations.

The presence in the United States of a coterie of influential policy advisers relatively favorable to the recognition of China helps to illuminate the vexed question of whether there was indeed a “lost chance in China.” In the early 1980s, Nancy Bernkopf Tucker and Warren I. Cohen propounded the thesis that, had it not been for the Korean War, in which U.S. troops confronted mainland Chinese forces, it seemed likely that the United States would have recognized the People’s Republic of China relatively soon. They laid particular emphasis upon the policy views of President Harry S. Truman and Dean Acheson, his influential secretary of state, who believed that in the long run a combination of economic advantage and PRC disillusionment with the Soviet form of quasi-colonialism would lead mainland Chinese lead-
ers to turn toward the United States. Although one may argue that Acheson was ultimately proved right, albeit in a decidedly extended time frame, most mainland Chinese scholars, and quite a number of Americans, have been skeptical as to the likelihood of a Sino-American rapprochement in the early 1950s. Such scholars have stressed how Mao Zedong and other Chinese Communist leaders felt a deep sense of ideological kinship and revolutionary fraternity with their comrades in the Soviet Union, making them reluctant to dilute their socialist zeal by moving closer to the United States. These factors impelled China's new masters to regard the United States with suspicion and to "lean to one side," that of the Soviet Union. American opposition to the emergence of a Communist state on the Chinese mainland and incomprehension of the deep resentment that a century of Western exploitation and humiliation had generated in China's new leaders compounded the problem. Although intra-Communist bloc Sino-Soviet tensions existed, in 1950 these were capable of resolution, whereas mutual incomprehension virtually ensured that those between the United States and mainland China were not. These scholars also draw attention to the numerous internal contradictions that characterized the decidedly confused American policies on China, and to the relative intransigence of U.S. attitudes toward the new Chinese regime, which in their view precluded possibilities of any real breakthrough in relations. Even U.S. recognition, they suggest, would have brought little more than the notably cool relations enjoyed by those NATO allies such as Britain that moved speedily to resume relations with the new mainland regime. Yet even such a limited rapprochement would undoubtedly have been a very different scenario from
