
The George C. Marshall Lecture in Military History
1947–48: When Marshall Kept the
U.S. Out of War in China*



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Abstract

The course of the Cold War was channelled by a small number of close decisions. One was the U.S. decision not to become actively involved in the Chinese Civil War, which was largely a decision by Secretary of State George C. Marshall.

ANYONE who studies history has to confront questions about the relationship between individual choices and anonymous forces beyond the control of any individual. No one can contend that history is simply a product of individual choices. Even Thomas Carlyle, author of the famous statement, "history is the biography of great men," wrote also, in his history of the French Revolution, "*would-have-beens* are mostly a vanity; and the World's History could never in the least be what it would, or might, or should, by any manner of potentiality, but simply and altogether what it is."¹ Even Karl Marx and his disciples conceded that actions by individuals, or at least accidents to individuals, could divert in some degree the near term outcomes dictated by dialectical materialism. Trotsky asserted in retrospect that the post-Lenin Soviet Union would probably have been guided by him rather than Stalin had he not had the misfortune to fall ill of fever as a result of a duck shooting expedition.² And there are many positions in between these two extremes.

1. Thomas Carlyle, *The French Revolution, A History*, ed. K. J. Fielding and David Sorensen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 2:445.

2. Edward Hallett Carr, *What Is History?* (London: Macmillan, 1961), 129.

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The long history of the Cold War is a wonderful laboratory for exploring the question of when and how individual choices interfere in the course of events. The Cold War itself was probably inevitable. Russia and the United States had long represented despotism and democracy. After the Russian Revolution of 1917, the new Soviet Union was the chief example and exponent of communism, the United States the foremost example of capitalism. When the defeat of the Axis in 1945 left these two nations as the principal surviving superpowers, directly in confrontation in Europe and Asia, natural power rivalry was added to political and ideological rivalry. In the jargon of social science, the Cold War was "overdetermined."

Yet on many occasions decisions made in Moscow or Washington or some other capital determined exactly how the Cold War developed. Many decisions that have provoked debate among historians were not in fact decisions of this character. Shelves of books, for example, attack or defend the U.S. "decision" to use the atomic bomb against Japan in 1945. But the more closely one looks at the details, the harder it is to detect any moment at which any decision maker could seriously have considered an alternative that might have made the future different. Indeed, I put "decision" in quotation marks because it is hard even to detect a moment when President Truman thought he had any option other than to let the bombing of Hiroshima proceed.³ A smaller body of literature concerns the decision by President Truman in the winter of 1949-1950 to proceed with work on a hydrogen bomb. This was a genuine decision. Truman could have accepted the recommendation of those advisers who said that a hydrogen bomb would be too powerful to serve any legitimate military purpose. Had he done so, however, he would not, in all probability, have caused any major shift in the drift of the Cold War, for the U.S. government would soon have known that the Soviet Union had made an independent decision to develop the hydrogen bomb, and Truman or his successor would then have seen no choice except to do likewise.⁴

3. Barton J. Bernstein, "Understanding the Atomic Bomb and the Japanese Surrender," *Diplomatic History* 19 (Spring 1995): 227-74, is an essay by a historian who has studied Hiroshima for decades, who once was convinced that Truman had made a decision that he should not have made but who has come increasingly to think that the President actually saw little or no choice before him. (Most of that issue of *Diplomatic History* concerns the first use of an atomic bomb, and much of it illustrates the ability of historians to argue at length about what is essentially a moot point.)

4. Richard Rhodes, *Dark Sun: The Making of the Hydrogen Bomb* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), is the latest and most detailed study and is wonderful reading, but, as an analysis of a decision, it adds nothing to the treatment in McGeorge Bundy, *Danger and Survival: Choices about the Bomb in the First Fifty Years* (New York: Random House, 1988), chapter 5.

The moments that make the Cold War a collection of Petrie dishes for studying the relationship between individual choice and anonymous forces are ones in which decision makers genuinely hovered between one choice and another and in which it seems plausible that the subsequent course of history would have been significantly different.

Several such moments involve General Marshall. For example, Marshall seems to have been sorely tempted in 1942 to back away from his earlier commitment to a Europe-first strategy.⁵ The British seemed so disinclined to risk forces for even an emergency landing on the European continent that Marshall indicated to them, and to associates in Washington, that he might side with Admiral King in assigning first priority to the war against Japan. If Marshall had in fact partnered with King and if they had carried the day with the President, there could have been enough diversion of resources to the Pacific theater to enable the Soviets to end the war occupying larger stretches of Central Europe or, alternatively, for Europe to have seen a new Nazi-Soviet pact. In 1947, had General Marshall been slower to appreciate the parlous condition of Western Europe, or had he not framed the Marshall Plan in ways that ensured broad public and congressional support and broad support in Europe itself, or had the Soviet government decided to test more strenuously the question of whether or not the Marshall Plan would provide aid to communist governments, subsequent events might have been quite different.

Here, I want to focus on Marshall's decision in 1947-48 not to involve the United States in the Chinese civil war. There were many pressures within the U.S. government and from the Congress and the public for active support of the Chinese Nationalists against the Chinese Communists.⁶ Indeed, it is not hard to argue that the chief reason why the United States did not extend this support was General Marshall's conclusion that such a course of action would be imprudent. Nor is it hard to argue that the whole course of the subsequent Cold War would have proceeded differently, abroad and at home, if Marshall had not personally acted to bar involvement in the Chinese civil war.

5. Maurice Matloff and Edwin M. Snell, *Strategic Planning for Coalition Warfare, 1941-1942* (Washington: Office of the Chief of Military History, Department of the Army, 1953), 268-72, presents the evidence in detail. Marshall told his biographer that his threat had been a bluff: Forrest C. Pogue, *George C. Marshall: Ordeal and Hope, 1939-1942* (New York: Viking Press, 1966), 340-41. But bluffs can be called.

6. See A. T. Steele, *The American People and China*, published for the Council on Foreign Relations (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), 33-37; Ross Y. Koen, *The China Lobby in American Politics* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974); Stanley Bachrack, *The Committee of One Million: "China Lobby" Politics, 1953-1971* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), 3-48; and T. Christopher Jespersen, *American Images of China, 1931-1949* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1996).

Pressures for involvement were so strong that, had another person been President Truman's principal adviser on national security policy, they could have been irresistible. The United States had supported Nationalist China all through World War II. Roosevelt had taken pains to treat the Chinese Nationalist leader, Chiang Kai-shek, as an equal. He had at one time spoken of the postwar order being maintained by "four policemen"—the United States, the Soviet Union, Great Britain, and China. At the Yalta conference of 1945, he had pressed Stalin to accord Chiang's China the status of a fourth member of the "Big Three."⁷

During and after the war, concern had grown in Washington about the continuing conflict between Chiang's regime and the rival Chinese Communist regime that controlled stretches of northern China bordering on the Soviet Union. Most U.S. representatives in China had a low opinion of Chiang and his associates. General Joseph Stilwell, longtime chief of the U.S. military mission in China, contemptuous of Chiang, whom he called "the peanut," bemoaned the fact that the Generalissimo was so concerned about possibly strengthening rival factions that he would not allow Nationalist soldiers to be properly trained and equipped for combat with the Japanese. The small number of Americans posted as observers with the Communists in northern China rendered a more favorable judgment on their fighting qualities, but warned that they were genuine Communists certain to be allied after the war with the Soviet Union.⁸

Late in the war, it became U.S. policy to try to arrange a compromise that would unify China with Chiang as head of government and the Communists as minority participants in the coalition. To seek such an outcome, Roosevelt replaced Stilwell with Lieutenant General Albert C. Wedemeyer, a man more likely to get along with Chiang, and sent as his ambassador General Patrick Hurley, an Oklahoman who had been in Herbert Hoover's cabinet and who could win Republican support for compromise arrangements in China, if they could be effected. Hurley stepped off his plane in China, flourished his Stetson, and emitted an Indian war

7. Herbert Feis, *The China Tangle: The American Effort in China from Pearl Harbor to the Marshall Mission* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1953), is still the best chronicle, but see also Michael Schaller, *The U.S. Crusade in China, 1938-1945* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979).

8. See Barbara W. Tuchman, *Stilwell and the American Experience in China, 1911-1945* (New York: Macmillan, 1970) and a pro-Chiang rebuttal: Liang Ching-ch'un, *General Stilwell in China, 1942-1944: The Full Story* (Jamaica, N.Y.: St. John's University Press, 1972). On Americans in touch with the Communists, see Kenneth E. Shewmaker, *Americans and Chinese Communists, 1927-1945: A Persuading Encounter* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1971), and Carole J. Carter, *Mission to Yanan: American Liaison with the Chinese Communists, 1944-1947* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1997).

whoop designed to herald a powwow. As might have been predicted from this moment forward, Hurley made little headway with either Chinese faction. Frustrated, he resigned but publicly blamed the failure on pro-Communists in his embassy and in the State Department at home.⁹

Truman reacted to Hurley's dramatic resignation by calling General Marshall out of retirement and sending him to China as a mediator. While it was Marshall's mission to push for a compromise, he insisted that the President face the question of what was to be done if compromise could not be effected, and he departed with secret instructions, which he himself had drafted. They said, "in the event that I was unable to secure the necessary action by the Generalissimo, which I thought reasonable and desirable, it would still be necessary for the U.S. government, through me, to continue to back the National Government of the Republic of China."¹⁰

Marshall's mission did fail. The Nationalists would make no real concessions, and the Communists only pretended to do so. Marshall returned to the United States in early 1947 to become Secretary of State.¹¹

The period of decision for U.S. policy toward the Chinese civil war ran from the beginning of Marshall's tenure in the State Department to the autumn of 1948, when Nationalist military forces either melted away or took refuge on Taiwan, and Communists became masters of the entire mainland. The critical choices came in the winter and spring of 1947-48.

The difficulty of making the decision that Marshall actually made is hard to overstate. Almost every interested party in the United States, including Marshall himself, shared two presumptions. The first was that the Chinese Communists were controlled by Moscow. The second was that Chinese Communist success in China would be a serious blow to the United States worldwide. These presumptions were prominent in almost all press commentary on the Chinese civil war. Henry Luce, the publisher of *Time* and *Life*, was an ardent and uncompromising supporter of Chiang, and so were almost all publishers and editors of major dailies and almost all regular radio news commentators.¹²

Such views were stridently echoed on Capitol Hill. In 1946, Republicans had swept both houses, and most key committees were headed by men who thought the Democratic administration soft on communism

9. See Russell D. Buhite, *Patrick J. Hurley and American Foreign Policy* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1973), 110-41.

10. Truman to Marshall, 15 December 1945, U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States [FRUS], 1945*, 9 vols. (Washington: GPO, 1967-69), 7:770-73.

11. The story is reviewed in detail, and from many angles, in Larry I. Bland, ed., *George C. Marshall's Mission to China, December 1945-January 1947* (Lexington, Virginia: George C. Marshall Foundation, 1998).

12. H. Bradford Westerfield, *Foreign Policy and Party Politics: Pearl Harbor to Korea* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1955), 254-64.

both abroad and at home. The chairman of the powerful Senate Appropriations Committee, Styles Bridges of New Hampshire, took the position that no objective in the world was more important to the United States than success by Chiang in China. In the House, great influence was wielded by Walter Judd, a former missionary, whose position was similar to that of Bridges.¹³

The military establishment, both uniformed and civilian, united in advising that the United States provide active military support to Chiang. The heads of Army, Air, and Navy missions in China bombarded Washington with proposals for providing advice and arms to Chiang's forces. Major commanders in the area, including General Douglas MacArthur, the U.S. consul in Japan, and Admiral Charles M. Cooke, chief wartime Navy planner—nicknamed “Savvy” Cooke—now head of the Pacific Fleet, not only endorsed proposals from the missions but added counsel that preservation of a non-Communist China was vital to U.S. security.¹⁴

The Joint Chiefs of Staff (which included Dwight Eisenhower as Chief of Staff of the Army) weighed in with a formal memorandum characterizing the Chinese Communists as “tools of Soviet policy,” declaring that “the military security of the United States will be threatened if there is any further spread of Soviet influence and power in the Far East,” and hence recommending “carefully planned, selective and well-supervised assistance to the National Government.” This recommendation received backing from Secretary of War Robert Patterson and Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal (soon to be the first Secretary of Defense).¹⁵

Even in the State Department, the idea of small-scale intervention in behalf of Chiang had strong support. John Leighton Stuart, Hurley's successor as U.S. Ambassador to China, had been President of Yenching University, was a pronounced Sinophile, though with all the attitudes of a bearer of the White Man's Burden, and looked upon Chiang, a Christian convert, as potentially China's savior. To ensure Chiang's success in the civil war, Stuart had advised Marshall's predecessor, would be “the delicate but splendidly creative opportunity for American statesmanship.” To Mar-

13. Lee Edwards, *Missionary for Freedom: The Life and Times of Walter Judd* (New York: Paragon House, 1990), 161–69.

14. Stuart to Acheson, 21 March 1947, U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States [FRUS], 1947*, 8 vols. (Washington: GPO, 1971–73), 7:73–80; Murray to Stuart, 19 June 1947, *ibid.*, 864–871; Stuart to Marshall, 3 February 1947, *ibid.*, 944–945; Stuart to Marshall, 1 April 1947, *ibid.*, 953; and testimony by Cooke, 81st Cong., 1st and 2d sess., Senate Committee on the Judiciary, International Security Subcommittee, *Hearings: Institute of Pacific Relations*, pp. 1492–1515.

15. Memorandum by the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 9 June 1947, *FRUS, 1947*, 7:838–48; Minutes of Meeting of the Secretaries of State, War, and the Navy, 26 June 1947, *ibid.*, pp. 850–51.

shall, he recommended an economic and military aid effort "accompanied by a large measure of American control."¹⁶

The Department's own Far Eastern Bureau included men who had served with Stilwell during the war and were hence skeptical that Chiang could actually make effective use of U.S. aid. But these men tended to speak quietly, for Hurley's outburst in 1945, picked up by Judd and less responsible members of Congress, had already brought the beginning of a purge of "China hands." John Carter Vincent, former head of the Bureau, had been shipped off to Morocco.¹⁷

The dominant group within the Department, the career Foreign Service officers in or from the Bureau of European Affairs, might have been expected to question new commitments in China on the ground of their possibly distracting attention from Europe. But not so. The Department's Europeanists held, as an Army liaison group reported with satisfaction, that "we should preserve a position which will enable us effectively to continue to oppose Soviet influence in China. . . . [F]ailure to maintain this position would have the gravest effect on our long-range security."¹⁸

With all these pressures upon him from the news media and Congress, the military establishment, and his own department, Marshall responded in a way strongly suggesting that he intended to follow the advice of Eisenhower and the other chiefs of staff. He appointed a special emissary to visit China and come back with recommendations on whether or how to aid Chiang. His emissary was none other than General Wedemeyer, who had not only urged stronger support of Chiang when theater commander in China but who, in his more recent post as Chief of the Operations and

16. Stuart to Marshall, 8 May 1947, *FRUS, 1947*, 7:114-17; Stuart to Marshall, 10 June 1948, U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States [FRUS], 1948*, 9 vols. (Washington: GPO, 1971-76), 7:288-90. See Kenneth W. Rea and John C. Brewer, *The Forgotten Ambassador: The Reports of John Leighton Stuart, 1946-1949* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1981), and Yu-Ming Shaw, *An American Missionary in China: John Leighton Stuart and Chinese-American Relations*, published for the Council on East Asian Relations, Harvard University (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992).

17. See Gary May, *China Scapegoat: The Diplomatic Ordeal of John Carter Vincent* (Washington: New Republic Books, 1979) and E. J. Kahn, *The China Hands: America's Foreign Service Officers and What Befell Them* (New York: Viking, 1975). My own "The China Hands in Perspective: Ethics, Diplomacy, and Statecraft," in Paul Gordon Lauren, ed., *The China Hands' Legacy: Ethics and Diplomacy* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1987), 97-123, makes the point that much of the "purge" occurred under Truman and Acheson, not Eisenhower and Dulles, and the additional point that a case can be made in favor of any administration's not keeping in place career officials who openly differ with its chosen policies.

18. Marshall S. Carter to Marshall, 14 August 1946, U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States [FRUS], 1946*, 11 vols. (Washington: GPO, 1969-72), 10:27-28; Hickerson to Marshall, 8 March 1948, *FRUS, 1948*, 10:779-80.

Plans Division of the War Department General Staff, had probably been the chief drafter of the memorandum from the Joint Chiefs.¹⁹

It may be that, at the time, in July 1947, Marshall himself inclined toward providing aid to Chiang. It may be, however, that he thought the selection of Wedemeyer left him some freedom of choice. Others proposed as special emissaries were mostly civilians such as former Under Secretary of State Dean Acheson. It was reasonable to expect that almost any envoy would come back recommending some level of support for Chiang. If the envoy were a military man, it would be easier for Marshall to override him.

In any case, that is exactly what happened. Upon returning from China, Wedemeyer presented Marshall with a memorandum urging not only that Chiang be given arms and supplies but that a few thousand U.S. military advisers be brigaded with Chinese Nationalist forces. Wedemeyer added a proposal that the United States seek to make Manchuria a U.N. trusteeship with the twin objectives of preventing the Soviets from gaining control and allowing Chiang to withdraw his own forces so as to concentrate them elsewhere in China. Telling Wedemeyer explicitly that he did not approve the recommendation regarding Manchuria, Marshall ordered that the report be kept under lock and key and that Wedemeyer not discuss it publicly.²⁰

During the autumn and winter of 1947–48, Marshall concluded that, while the United States could give Chiang arms and supplies, it would be unwise to assume any responsibility for the combat performance of his forces. Quite possibly, he arrived at this conclusion as a result of discussions with Robert A. Lovett, who had become his Under Secretary of State during the summer of 1947, for Lovett, managing negotiations on Capitol Hill to fund the European Recovery Program, feared that Bridges and like-minded members of Congress might subtract funds from that program on the ground that fighting the Chinese Communists should take priority.

In November 1947, Marshall appeared before a joint executive session of the House Foreign Affairs Committee and the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. He said that he could not state his views publicly because of the potential damaging effect on Chinese Nationalist morale but that it was his considered judgment that the Nationalists might lose the civil war and that any direct U.S. effort to prevent Nationalist defeat would entail

19. W. W. Stueck, *The Wedemeyer Mission: American Politics and Foreign Policy during the Cold War* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1984), is definitive.

20. Wedemeyer to Marshall, 19 September 1947, United States Department of State, *United States Relations with China, with Special Reference to the Period 1944–1949* (Washington: GPO, 1949), 764–814. Memorandum by the Director of the Executive Secretariat, 28 September 1947, *FRUS, 1947, 7:779*.

“obligations and responsibilities . . . which I am convinced the American people would never knowingly accept.”²¹

The House members, influenced by Judd, continued to press for active U.S. engagement on the side of the Nationalists. Members of the Senate committee did not. The most influential among them, Republican Arthur Vandenberg of Michigan, had respect for Lovett that verged on awe. Others, including Republican Henry Cabot Lodge of Massachusetts and Democrat Tom Connally of Texas, were almost equally deferential to Marshall. They developed a resolution which assigned a large sum of money to enable Chiang to buy arms, but it stipulated that there was no “express or implied assumption by the United States of any responsibility for policies, acts, or undertakings by the Republic of China or for conditions which may prevail at any time.”²² Though House members resisted conference committee approval of this language and Bridges tried to use the appropriations process to change it, Vandenberg and his colleagues prevailed. In effect, of course, it was Marshall and Lovett who prevailed.

Passage of the noncommittal aid legislation (“three cheers for Chiang,” in language Vandenberg used behind closed doors) did not end the policy debate. Time and again, Ambassador Stuart or military representatives in China tried to get a reversal. At one point, the local U.S. Navy commander proposed that the United States defend the port of Tsingtao against the Communists and thus become involved directly in the civil war. The Joint Chiefs authorized him to do so, but Marshall and Lovett went immediately to President Truman, and the President rescinded the authorization. All of mainland China fell, with the United States having done no more than offer three cheers in the form of a dollar drawing account for Chiang.

Had Marshall and Lovett not taken such a strong position and held their ground, the Cold War could well have shifted in a different direction. Though in the winter of 1947-48 and the early spring of 1948, the Chinese Nationalists still appeared to have a numerical edge over the Communists and to hold a larger amount of territory, their strength was fast eroding. If the United States had assumed the commitment recommended by the Joint Chiefs and Wedemeyer and endorsed by Judd and Bridges and much of the news media, it would have seemed urgent to try to stabilize a battle front. That would at the very least have diminished the resources and attention available for Europe in the period when Communists took complete power in Czechoslovakia, did their utmost to win power in Italy and to frustrate Marshall Plan reconstruction in France and elsewhere, and sought to squeeze the Western powers out of Berlin.

21. *Executive Sessions of the Committee on Foreign Relations, Historical Series*, 80th Cong., 2d sess., Session for 4 November 1947, 517-18.

22. *Ibid.*, Session for 14 March 1948, 422-44.

Since Soviet plans for Berlin were already well advanced, their June blockade would probably have found the West without the planes necessary for an airlift. The Army staff, perhaps influenced by Wedemeyer, had already argued for pulling out of Berlin, given that it was totally indefensible. Only protests from General Lucius Clay, the U.S. military governor, had blocked this. When the blockade actually occurred, the Air Force staff resisted opening an airlift, saying that it would strip too much away from U.S. defenses elsewhere.²³ If Americans were actively supporting combat operations in China, it would have been much more difficult for President Truman to overrule the Army and Air Force and insist on supplying West Berlin as long as possible.

In China itself, while American-reinforced Nationalists might in fact have achieved some temporary success, it is highly unlikely that there would ever have been anything resembling Nationalist victory, and it is easy to imagine that, over time, public support would wane not only for the commitment to China but for any overseas military commitment anywhere. In other words, instead of inward-turning "McCarthyism" partly inspired by "loss of China" mythology, the United States might have experienced inward-turning malaise akin to that of the later post-Vietnam era.

Admittedly, even alternative short-range scenarios have a fanciful quality. Those just reviewed are only a couple among a number that is not only large but possibly infinite. As the great Italian historian and philosopher, Benedetto Croce, argued years ago, the moment one imagines any fictitious alternative to actuality, there is no logical limit to speculation, for nothing else needs to be held constant. If one supposes that the United States acts differently in China in early 1948, why not suppose that Stalin dies? Or Mao? Or that Truman follows the advice actually given by Winston Churchill—that he use America's existing stock of atomic bombs to destroy the Soviet Union while it still has no capacity for nuclear retaliation?

But the point here is not to try to describe what would have happened if General Marshall had made a different decision regarding China. It is only to point out that Marshall did make a decision, that it was a difficult decision, that he may actually have come close to choosing otherwise, and that, had he done so, the subsequent course of history could have been different. Indeed, if one supposes that Marshall does not oppose active aid to Chiang in early 1948, it is very hard to imagine events proceeding afterward exactly as they did, through the Berlin airlift, Truman's election, NATO, and so on, through to the Korean War. This story illustrates how an exercise of judgment by an individual can shape the course of the even such an "overdetermined" set of events as the Cold War.

23. See Ernest R. May, "America's Berlin: Heart of the Cold War," *Foreign Affairs* 77 (July-August 1998): 148-59.

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