

# Why Policy Makers Do Not Listen

BARBARA TUCHMAN

**W**E have gathered to honor a group of Foreign Service officers—represented in the person of Jack Service—whom history has recognized as having been right; and not only history, but even, by act if not by acknowledgment, the present Administration. Can there be anyone among that group who reported from China during World War II who, watching an American president journey in person to Communist China in 1971, was not conscious of an irony so acute as to make him shiver? Could anyone, remembering past attitudes, look at that picture of President Nixon and Chairman Mao in twin armchairs, with slightly queasy smiles bravely worn to conceal their mutual discomfort, and not feel a stunned

sense that truth is indeed weirder than fiction? When I was young, the magazine *VANITY FAIR* used to publish a series called "Impossible Interviews" by the artist-cartoonist Covarubbias in which he confronted Calvin Coolidge with Greta Garbo and John D. Rockefeller Sr. with Stalin, but last year's meeting in Peking outdid Covarubbias.

Yet it could have happened 25 years earlier, sparing us and Asia immeasurable, and to some degree irreparable, harm, if American policy had been guided by the information and recommendations of the staff of the Chungking Embassy, then acknowledged to be the best informed service group in China. It included the Ambassador, Clarence Gauss, the Counselor, George

Atcheson, both deceased, and among the secretaries and consuls stationed all over China, besides Mr. Service, such men as John Paton Davies, Edward Rice, Arthur Ringwalt, Philip Sprouse, and alternately in the field and on the China Desk, Edmund Clubb and the late Carter Vincent. Several had been born in China, many were Chinese-speaking, and some are happily here with us today.

For having been right many of them were persecuted, dismissed, or slowed or blocked in their careers, with whatever damage done to them personally outweighed by damage done to the Foreign Service of the United States. No spectacle, Macaulay said, was so ridiculous as the British public in one of its periodic



*John Service at the podium as the guests rise in a standing ovation. Marshall Green, Mrs. Service and William C. Harrop, center front. From the Detroit NEWS, "John Stewart Service has lived to see the day he thought he'd never see. . . . And it would be difficult to say who was more pleased—Service or the Foreign Service officials who dared put on the affair."*

*Historian Barbara Tuchman surrounded by some of the capacity crowd at the luncheon, of which an editorial in the Minneapolis TRIBUNE remarked, "History has recorded what happened to the official bearers of bad news from China. The purge that reached its sorry zenith in the McCarthy era shattered careers and deprived the US of some of its best government talent on China."*

fits of morality—and none, one might add, so mean as the American public in one of its periodic witch-hunts. Your colleagues and predecessors were hounded because able and honest performance of their profession collided with the hysterics of the cold war manipulated by a man so absolutely without principles as to be abnormal, like the man without a shadow. I shall not pursue that story now, however important it is to you and to every citizen, because what I want to get at is a problem perhaps more abiding, and that is, why these men were not listened to even before they were persecuted.

The burden of their reports taken as a whole was that Chiang Kai-shek was on the way out and the Com-



munists on the way in and that American policy, rather than cling in paralyzed attachment to the former, might be well advised to take this trend into account. This was implicit in reports from officers who had no contact with the Communists but were united in describing the deterioration of the Kuomintang. It was made explicit by those who saw the Communists at first hand, like Service in his remarkable reports from Yenan, and Ludden who journeyed into the interior to observe the functioning of Communist rule, and Davies whose ear was everywhere. They were unequivocal in judging the Communists to be the dynamic party in the country; in Davies' words in 1944, "China's destiny was not Chiang's but theirs."

This was not subversion as our Red-hunters were to claim, but merely observation.

Any government that does not want to walk open-eyed into a quagmire, leading its country with it, would presumably re-examine its choices at such a point. That after all, is what we employ Foreign Service officers for: to advise policy-makers of actual conditions on which to base a realistic program. The agonizing question is, why are their reports ignored, why is there a persistent gap between observers in the field and policy-makers in the capital? While I cannot speak from experience, I would like to try to offer some answers as an outside assessor.

In the first place, policy is formed by preconceptions, by long-implanted biases. When information is relayed to policy-makers they respond in terms of what is already inside their heads and consequently make policy less to fit the facts than to fit the notions and intentions formed out of the mental baggage that has accumulated in their minds since childhood. When President McKinley had to decide whether to annex the Philippines in 1898, he went down on his knees at midnight, according to his own account, and "prayed to Almighty God for light and guidance." He was accordingly guided to conclude "that there was nothing left for us to do but to take them all, and to educate the Filipinos, and uplift and civilize and Christianize them, and by God's grace to do the very best we could by them, as our fellowmen for whom Christ died."

Actually the main impulse at work was the pressure of the "manifest destiny" school for a stepping stone across the Pacific, but the mental baggage of a President in the 1890s required him to act in terms of Almighty God and the White Man's Burden just as the mental fix of his successors in our time has required them to react in terms of anti-communism. Closer observers than Almighty God could have informed McKinley that the Filipinos had no strong desire to be Christianized or civilized or exchange Span-

ish rule for American, but rather to gain their independence. This being overlooked, we soon found ourselves engaged not in civilizing but in a cruel and bloody war of repression, much to our embarrassment. Failure to take into account the nature of the other party often has an awkward result.

The same failure afflicted President Wilson who had a mental fix opposite from McKinley's, in favor of progressivism, reform and the New Freedom. So fixed was his mind that when the reactionary General Huerta carried out a coup in Mexico in 1913, Wilson became obsessed by the idea that it devolved upon him to tear the usurper off the backs of the Mexican people so that Mexico might be ruled by the consent of the governed. "My passion is for the submerged 85 percent who are struggling to be free" he said, but the reality was the submerged 85 percent were cowering in their huts unable to distinguish a difference between Huerta and his rival Carranza. Wilson however sent in the Marines to seize Vera Cruz, an intervention that not only appalled him by costing American lives, but succeeded only in deepening the turmoil in Mexico and drawing the United States into further intervention two years later against that man of the people, Pancho Villa. Political passion is a good thing but even better if it is an *informed* passion.

Roosevelt's bias too was in favor of the progressive. George Kennan has told how, when the Embassy staff in Moscow began reporting the facts of the Stalinist purges of the 1930s, revealing a tyranny as terrible as the Czars', the President discounted the reports as the product of what he considered typical State Department striped-pants mentality. It was not only inconvenient but disturbing to be in receipt of reports that would have required a change of attitude toward the Soviet Union (foreign policy obeys Newton's law of inertia: it keeps on doing what it is doing unless acted on by an irresistible force). Rather than be discomfited by these disclosures, which Roosevelt's own bias caused him to believe were biased, the Russian Division was closed down, its library scattered and its chief re-assigned.

This desire not to listen to unhappy truths—"Don't confuse me with facts"—is only human and widely shared by chiefs of state. Was not the bearer of bad news often killed by ancient kings? Chiang Kai-shek's vindictive reaction to unpleasant news was such that his ministers gradually ceased to bring him any with the result that he lived in a fantasy.

Your reports must also pass through a screen of psychological factors at the receiving end: temperament, or private ambitions, or the fear of not appearing masterful, or a ruler's inner sense that his manhood is at stake. (This is a male problem that, fortunately does not trouble women—which might be one advantage of having a woman in high office. Whatever inner inadequacy may gnaw at a woman's vitals, it does not compel her to compensate by showing how tough she is. You might cite Golda Meir in objection, but one gets the impression that her toughness is natural rather than neurotic, besides required by the circumstances.)

Proving his manhood was, I imagine, a factor pushing President Nasser of Egypt into provoking war with Israel in 1967 so that he could not be accused of weakness or appear less militant than the Syrians. One senses it as a factor in the personalities of Johnson and Nixon in regard to withdrawing from Vietnam; there was that horrid doubt, "Shall I look soft?" It was clearly present in Kennedy too; on the other hand it does not seem to have bothered Eisenhower, Truman or FDR.

A classic case of man's temperament obscuring the evidence is brought out by John Davies in his recent book, "Dragon by the Tail." Stalin's greatest error, he points out, was to underestimate Chinese Communism. "He was deceived by his own cynicism. He did not think Mao could make it because, astonishingly enough, of his own too little faith in the power of a people's war."

Of all the barriers that reports from the field must beat against, the most impenetrable is the disbelief of policy-makers in what they do not want to believe. All the evidence of a German right-wing thrust obtained by the French Gen-

eral Staff in the years immediately preceding 1914, including authentic documents sold to them by a German officer, could not divert them from their own fatal plan of attack through the center or persuade them to prepare a defense on their left. In 1941 when the double agent Richard Sorge in Tokyo reported to Moscow the exact dates of the coming German invasion, his warning was ignored because the Russians' very fear of this event caused them not to believe it. The same principle dominated Washington's reception of the reports from China in the 1940s. No matter how much evidence was reported indicating that the collapse of the Kuomintang was only a matter of time, nothing could induce Washington to loosen the silver cord tying us to Chiang Kai-shek nor rouse the policymakers from what John Service then called an "indolent short-term expediency."

National myths are another obstacle in the way of realism. The American instinct of activism, the "can do" myth, has lately led us into evil that was not necessary and has blotted the American record beyond the power of time to whiten. Stewart Alsop made the interesting point Sunday [January 28] in the *NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW* that American Presidents since Roosevelt have disliked the State Department and leaned heavily on the military because the military tend to be brisk, can-do problem-solvers while senior Foreign Service officers tend to be "skeptical examiners of the difficulties"; and worried uncertain presidents will prefer positive to negative advice. You will notice that this reliance on military advice coincides with the era of air power and has much to do, I think, with the enormous attraction of the easy solution—the idea that a horrid problem can be solved by fiat from the air, without contact, without getting mixed up in a long dirty business on the ground. The influence of air power on foreign policy would make an interesting study.

Activism in the past, the impulse to improve a bad situation, to seek a better land, to move on to a new frontier, has been a great force, *the* great force in our history, with positive results when it operates in a sphere we can control. In Asia

that is not the case, and the result has been disaster. Disregarding local realities, and depth of motivation, disregarding such a lesson as Dien Bien Phu, we feel impelled to take action rather than stay out of trouble. It would help if we could learn occasionally to let things seek an indigenous solution.

The costliest myth of our time has been the myth of the Communist monolith. We now discover happily if belatedly that the supposed Sino-Soviet unity is in fact a bitter antagonism of two rivals wrapped in hate, fear, and mutual suspicion. Our original judgment never had much to do with facts but was rather a reflection of fears and prejudices. Knee-jerk reactions of this kind are not the best guide to a useful foreign policy, which I would define as the conduct of relations and exercise of influence so as best to serve an enlightened self-interest.

The question remains, what can be done to narrow the gap between information from the field and policy-making at home. First, it remains essential to maintain the integrity of Foreign Service reporting, not only for the sake of what may get through, but to provide the basis for a change of policy when the demand becomes imperative. Second, some means must be found to require that preconceived notions and emotional fixations be periodically tested against the evidence. Perhaps legislation could be enacted to enforce a regular pause for rethinking, for questioning the wisdom of an accepted course of action, for cutting one's losses if necessary.

Failing that, I pass to a final suggestion which is not proposed as a joke: it is to abolish the presidency, because it seems to me that too much power and therefore too much risk is now subject to the idiosyncrasies of a single individual at the top whoever he may be. I would substitute a committee of five to be elected as a slate put forward by each party, and to have a single five-year term with a rotating chairman, each to serve for one year. The idea needs a little working out which I leave for the moment to anyone here who may want to consider it.

By a circuitous route I come to Jack Service, the focus of this

*It was a poignant occasion when several hundred officers of the United States Foreign Service gave a luncheon at the State Department last week in honor of a small band of their former colleagues who had been persecuted for being right. Here, in effect, was the last step in the vindication of the "old China hands," whose careers had been ruined or tarnished because they correctly predicted the victory of the Chinese Communists over the ineffective Kuomintang Government of Chiang Kai-shek.—Editorial, New York Times, February 4.*

meeting.

Mr. Service was born in China in the Province of Szechuan, the son of missionary parents serving with the YMCA. His youth was spent in China until he returned to the United States to attend Oberlin College from which he graduated in 1932. He also acquired a classmate as wife and anyone who knows Caroline Service will recognize this as an early example of Jack's good judgment. After passing the Foreign Service exams, he returned to China because no openings were available during the Depression, and entered the profession by way of a clerk's job in Kunming. Commissioned as a Foreign Service officer in 1935, he served in Peking and Shanghai, and joined the Embassy in Chungking in 1941. During the war years he served half his time in the field, seeing realities outside the miasma of the capital. This opportunity culminated when after being attached to Stilwell's staff, he served as political officer with the American Military Observers Mission to Yen-an, the first official American contact with the Communists. His series of conversations with Mao, Chou En Lai, Chu Teh, Lin Piao, and other leaders, embodied in vivid almost verbatim reports with perceptive comments, are a historical source of prime and unique importance. Equally impressive are the examples that show Service passionately trying to persuade and convince the policy makers, as in the brief prepared for Vice President Wallace in June 1944 and the famous group telegram to the Department, largely drafted by Service—a desperate effort by the Embassy staff to halt the Hurley drift down the rapids with Chiang Kai-shek. If there was passion in this it was at least informed passion.

Following arrest in the Amerasia affair in 1945, Service was exonerated and cleared, and promoted in 1948 to Class 2 officer—only to be plunged back under all the old charges in 1949 when the Communist victory in China set off our national hysteria, and put Senator McCarthy, in strange alliance with the China Lobby, in charge of the American soul. If Chiang Kai-shek were to keep American support it was imperative that the "loss" of China so-called, should be seen as no failure from inside but work of some outside subversive conspiracy. That spectre exactly fitted certain native American needs. Along with others, Service suffered the consequences. Despite a series of acquittals, he was pinned with a doubt of loyalty and dismissed from the Foreign Service by Secretary Dean Acheson in 1951, as Davies and Vincent were subsequently dismissed by Secretary Dulles. Six years of pursuing redress through the courts finally brought a unanimous verdict in his favor by the Supreme Court of the United States in 1957. He rejoined the Foreign Service but was kept out of any assignment that would use his knowledge and experience of China. When it was clear that the Kennedy Administration would offer no better, Service resigned in 1962 and has since served with the Center for Chinese Studies at the University of California in Berkeley.

Fortunately for the record and the reputation of the Foreign Service, the reports of Service and his colleagues from China in the 1940s are now where anyone can consult them—in the published volumes of "U. S. Foreign Relations, China Series." Under the inflexible verdict of history, they stand up.

I am honored to present to you Mr. John Service.