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The Failure of the China White Paper

Abstract
The China White Paper, released by the Truman administration in 1949, aimed to absolve the U.S. government of responsibility for the loss of China to the Communists. However, instead of silencing domestic critics of the administration's China policy, it provided fuel for further criticism at home and an opportunity for anti-American propaganda in China, thereby hurting U.S. interests.

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The Failure of the China White Paper

Bill Rintz

Upon reading the China White Paper prior to its publication, George Kennan declared it the greatest state document ever created by the American government.[1] However, following its August 1949 release, the report, officially called *United States Relations with China*, sparked significant controversy and inspired such vehement opposition that it is not unreasonable to call it a complete failure. Published by the Truman administration with the intent of absolving the United States of responsibility for the fall of Chiang Kai-shek and the victory of the Chinese Communists, the document had far-reaching consequences that fell far from its original intent. Not only did the White Paper fail to mollify domestic detractors of the U.S.'s China policy, it inspired far more criticism than would have existed without the report's release. Furthermore, its publication increased already fervent anti-Americanism within China, hurt the causes of the Chinese liberal forces the U.S. purported to support, and gave the Chinese Communist Party fuel for virulent attacks on the United States.

By 1949, in the eyes of the United States, the situation in China was dire. A country which had traditionally been an American ally seemed all but lost to Communist control. The man whom had received the backing of the U.S. government, Chiang Kai-Shek, leader of the Nationalist regime, was found to be completely unreliable as a tool of opposition to the Chinese Communists. Not only had Nationalist military campaigns resulted in defeat after defeat, but reports of corruption and dictatorial behavior among the Nationalist regime were rampant. Although the Truman administration had long-since given up on Chiang Kai-Shek, on June 2, the Truman administration failed to extend the China Aid Act in support of the Nationalist regime, a final symbol of the dashed hopes of blocking the Chinese Communists road to power. The menacing prospect of a communist China was inevitable.

The Truman administration faced extreme heat for what was seen as the loss of China. Most of the criticism was facilitated by the China Lobby, which was "composed of people from a whole political spectrum, from the far right to the far left, who had only one thing in common: … they were in complete support of Chiang Kai-Shek and the Nationalists."[2] Because of Chiang Kai-Shek's popularity within the U.S. as a perceived symbol of American ideals, sentiment among the public, the press, and certain members of Congress was that the U.S. government had abandoned America's only hope in saving China.

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[1] Nancy B. Tucker, ed., *China Confidential: American Diplomats and Sino-American Relations, 1945-1996* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 62.

[2] *Ibid.*, 62.

The Truman administration felt it was imperative to respond to such accusations. Hence, the idea of the White Paper, as a refutation of such criticism, was conceived by members of the State Department, who broached the possibility with Secretary of State Dean Acheson. Acheson then consulted with President Truman, who became "enthusiastic" about the project, giving his approval to begin work in the compilation of the important document.[3]

The purpose of the White Paper was to set the facts straight on the difficult situation in China, primarily in regards to U.S. policy. As State Department official John S. Service later said, "[those in the administration] were going to counterattack and defend themselves, prove they had done everything to support Chiang, that it was not our fault that the Communists were winning. It was Chiang's own failings."[4] Another State Department official, John Melby, who compiled much of the actual report, likewise sensed that the purpose of the White Paper was to "call off the dogs from the China Lobby."[5] Truman felt that because the government had previously been hesitant to reveal information to the public, it had opened itself up to the distortion and misrepresentation if its China policy. He therefore stated that his primary purpose in releasing the report was to inform the public of the facts, with the goal of creating "informed and intelligent public opinion."[6] Truman intended the report to be an objective, frank record of U.S. involvement in China, feeling that full disclosure would be enough to absolve his administration of the current situation.

Work began on the White Paper in the spring of 1949. The head of the project was to be Director of the Office of far Eastern Affairs, John Butterworth, who delegated most of the responsibility to lower State Department officers, one of whom was John Melby.[7] One indication of the high priority placed on the project was Melby's claim that he worked on the project 18 hours a day from March until August, combing through hundreds of thousands of documents. With the State Department working with all deliberate speed, the report was nearly finished by late June.[8]

The resulting White Paper was over one-thousand pages in length, mainly composed of documents that had previously been classified. The only documents contained within the report came from State Department files for

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[3] *Ibid.*, 61.

[4] *Ibid.*, 63.

[5] *Ibid.*, 62.

[6] *Department of State Bulletin*, (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1949), 21: 236.

[7] *The China White Paper* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1967), intro.

[8] *Ibid.*.

the sake of speed, because the hope was that the report would be issued as soon as possible. The White Paper addressed U.S. policy towards China since 1843, although the highest degree of attention was placed on the period 1944 to 1949. In thirteen chapters, the voluminous record covered everything from Nationalist-Communist relations, to George Marshall's mission, to U.S. economic aid in support of the Nationalist regime. The administration hoped that the record would speak for itself, displaying earnest U.S. attempts to support Chiang Kai-Shek, and demonstrating that the failures of the Nationalist regime were entirely their own.

Despite this hope, a fourteen-page letter of transmittal from Secretary of State Dean Acheson's to the President was included at the beginning of the White Paper. As the letter was essentially Acheson's interpretation of the record contained therein, it became the most controversial part of the entire document. Acheson emphasized the fact that assistance to the nationalist regime had been "pursued vigorously."[9] However, he likewise stressed the point that over the course of the war, the Nationalists "had sunk into corruption, into a scramble for place and power, and into reliance on the United States to win the war for them and to preserve their own domestic supremacy."[10] Acheson found the many reasons leading the Nationalist failure detailed in the document; none of them, he claimed, having to do with lack of U.S. aid. Along with exonerating the U.S., Acheson also depicted the Chinese Communists as an agent of Soviet imperialism. As the traditional friend of the Chinese people, he determined the U.S. had done all it could to prevent this foreign domination. However, there was nothing further within the U.S.'s power, Acheson expressed, which could have altered such results. The Secretary of State concluded with an indication towards future U.S. policy, stating that "the democratic individualism of China" would reassert itself, and the U.S. would continue to support this group to throw off foreign domination.[11]

Even before the White Paper's release, there was much controversy and skepticism surrounding it. Those within the U.S. government who were able to read the document prior to its release did not all share George Kennan's appraisal of the report's merit. Many reservations were expressed to the administration, either about the content of the report or the timing of its release. There existed the fundamental question as to whether the release of the White Paper was within the U.S.'s best interests. For instance, the National Military Establishment's position was that by "exposing the only group in China

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[9] *Ibid.*, *xi*.
[10] *Ibid.*, *xii*.
[11] *Ibid.*, *xvi*.

which we could assist, we are destroying that group."[12] The sentiment was that it would be extremely unwise to discredit the Nationalists as long as they were still fighting to contain the Communist forces. The Joint Chiefs of Staff expressed similar concerns in that the White Paper, in extensively explaining the failures of the Nationalist government, made the CCP appear relatively blameless, giving the Communists opportunity for propaganda.[13]

Colonel Henry A. Byrode, who had aided George Marshall in his mission to China, shared his own reservations with Acheson. Although acknowledging that the Nationalist forces would surely fall, he likewise felt that as long as they were fighting the Communists, there should be no criticism that might hasten their collapse. Therefore, he suggested a delay in the White Paper's publication until further developments took place, such as the expected fall of Canton to the Communists. Byrode was furthermore concerned about the general affect of the White Paper on the Far East. He was of the opinion that the White Paper gave the impression that the U.S. was washing its hands of China, which would result in feelings of discouragement in the region and open the door for the further spread of communism.

Acheson forwarded some of these reservations to Truman prior to the White Paper's release in a July 29th memorandum. Despite giving consideration to the aforementioned concerns, Acheson ultimately determined that the publication of the report should go forward, feeling that "the basic necessity of informing Congressional and public opinion regarding the facts… is believed to outweigh the risks involved."[14] The only consideration affecting the timing of the White Paper's release was that the Ambassador to China, Leighton Stuart, should receive an exit permit from Chinese authorities and be outside of China at the time of release. However, any additional lapse of time, Acheson felt, was unnecessary. Therefore, with the President's approval, the White Paper was released at noon on August 5, 1949.[15]

Immediately, there were a multitude of domestic criticisms levied against the Truman administration and the State Department. Despite the intention of warding off the China Lobby, the White Paper instantaneously had the opposite effect of igniting even more virulent criticism in the press. One *New York Times* editorial called it "a sorry record of well-meaning mistakes."[16] *Time* referred to it as a "lawyer's brief."[17] Alfred Kohlberg, an active member

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[12] *Foreign Relations of the United States 1949: The Far East: China* (Washington: United States Governrnent Printing Office, 1974), 9:1376.

[13] *Ibid.*, 1380.

[14] *Ibid.*, 1389.

[15] *Ibid.*, 1392.

[16] Editorial, "Inquest on China," *New York Times*, August 6, 1949.

[17] *China White Paper*, intro.

of the China Lobby, called it "the story of the American betrayal of the Republic of China."[18] However, there were none in the press who were quick to praise the White Paper, and the best reception it was given was its acceptance at face value.

The same reservations that existed prior to the White Paper's release now became public points of contention, and long-standing arguments of the China Lobby intensified now that the report provided a new source of material for the attack. Concerns over the timing of the White Paper's publication had been brought to the attention of Acheson but were disregarded. Now that the debate had entered the public domain, the White Paper was denounced as undermining ongoing Nationalist opposition to the Communists. Additionally, critics neither interpreted the document in the same way Acheson did nor in the way Truman hoped they would, rather claiming that the U.S. had not done all it could to aid the Nationalist government. Among the arguments were that more extensive U.S. military aid would have enabled the Nationalist regime to achieve victory, that George Marshall's mission to China had attempted to force the Nationalists into accommodation with the Communists, and even that pro-Communists were working against U.S. interests within the State Department.[19] Furthermore, despite the administration's earnest insistence on the report's impartiality, critics referred to the White Paper as an attempt at "self-justification, which certainly is the enemy of objective analysis."[20] It quickly became apparent that what was supposed to be a frank record of the facts was not seen as such.

From the outset, the White Paper had no chance at achieving its stated goals. Regardless of what the White Paper contained, it was doomed to be criticized. One of the concerns of the Joint Chiefs of Staff expressed prior to its release was that the contents of the White Paper should be carefully examined to make sure there was no information that might jeopardize American security, and that any such information should be removed. Although Acheson addressed these concerns and made necessary alterations based on the recommendation, the State Department became accused of omitting or suppressing information that did not coincide with the Truman administration's policy. Specifically, Walter Judd alleged before the House of Representatives that there were sixteen cases in which there was information omitted or distorted within the White Paper.[21] Such charges forced Acheson

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[18] Ross Y. Koen, *The China Lobby in American Politics* (New York: Octagon Books, 1974), 167.

[19] China *White Paper*, intro.

[20] "Inquest."

[21] *Department of State Bulletin*, 351.

to make public statements refuting any such allegations in order to defend the integrity of the report.

All in all, the Truman administration had failed in its goals and had badly blundered in its estimation of the White Paper's domestic reception. As Service later noted, "in hindsight it's remarkable that intelligent and experienced men in the [State Department], people like Dean Acheson and so on, had so little realization what a hot topic China was."[22] The State Department and the Truman administration had encountered heated criticism from the China Lobby before, but the White Paper had the effect of inspiring rather than quelling such arguments. However, despite the fact that the White Paper was intended to address the domestic political situation, the unintended consequences within China perhaps affected U.S. interests even more so.

Prior to the release of the White Paper, an "atmosphere of mutual distrust and antagonism" between the U.S. and the Chinese Communists had already been fostered over the preceding years. Such tension contributed to the events of mid-1949, when the CCP accused U.S. consul general Angus Ward of espionage in Shenyang, resulting in the expulsion of him and his staff from China.[23] In another case, vice consul William Olive was arrested for allegedly impeding a Communist procession and was severely beaten.[24] Despite this, general animosity for the United States was still not yet prevalent among the Chinese public. However, the release of the White Paper ensured that this would not remain the case for long.

With the issuance of the White Paper, Gordon H. Chang has noted, "previous sporadic expressions of anti-Americanism on the mainland became a nationwide campaign vilifying the United States."[25] As in the U.S, the document immediately resulted in widespread condemnation of U.S. intervention in China. Knight Biggerstaff, an American then living in China, wrote that the White Paper "touched off an almost hysterical outburst in the Nanking Press".[26] Indeed, the frenzied reaction was widespread throughout the entire Chinese press. Editorials on the White Paper, mainly focused on attacking Acheson's letter of transmittal, interpreted it as "a testimony of guilt"

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[22] Tucker, *Confidential*, 62.

[23] Hong Zhang, *America Perceived: The Making of Chinese Images of the United States, 1945-1953* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2002), 152.

[24] *Foreign Relations of the United States*, 8: 1201.

[25] Gordon H. Chang, *Friends and Enemies: The United States, China, and the Soviet Union, 1948-1972* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), 37.

[26] Knight Biggerstaff, "The Nanking Press: April-September 1949," *Nanking Letters, 1949* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 1979).

by the U.S. government.[27] In an article in *Ta Kung Pao*, the author described the report as "a confession of the diabolical schemes on the part of American Imperialism for aggression on China."[28] The newspapers likewise printed the harsh critiques of the White Paper that were generated by public discussions held on the topic. As Biggerstaff noted, such articles and diatribes were ubiquitous for weeks, and only one issue of the official Communist newspaper failed to mention the White Paper in the span of a month. Extra pages were frequently necessary in order to make room for all the assaults.[29]

Mao Zedong himself responded as strongly as anyone, writing a succession of five articles "pointing out the illusions some Chinese still harbored about the United States, recounting the history and ultimate failure of American aggression against China, and dissecting the misperceptions, failures, and confusions plaguing American policy."[30] Mao was not hesitant to note the value of the White Paper to the Chinese Communists, declaring that "now an opportunity has been found in the discussion of the U.S. White Paper," even declaring that the Chinese should thank Acheson for his disclosure of U.S. intervention.[31] In effect, the Truman administration had given the CCP a chance to rally support for their cause, and in the process, generate virulent anti-American sentiment.

A study of newspaper articles reveals evidence of a broad increase in anti-Americanism. One such example is that while all trademarks and other public business had traditionally been conducted in English, following the issuance of the White Paper, the public use of English was seen as a colonial mentality, and the use of Chinese was thereafter adopted in many cases.[32] Additionally, foreign news agencies were forced to cease their operations, customs duties were required to be paid by any person owning American or British-owned vehicles, and the newspapers celebrated the fact that Americans

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[27] "The Ignominious White Paper," *U.S. Consulate Chinese Press Review*, *Shanghai: March 29-30, 1949- September 30, 1949.* Microfilm, no. 949.

[28] "There is No 'Friendship' Between China and American Imperialism," *Ibid.*, no. 961.

[29] Biggerstaff, "Nanking Press."

[30] Dorothy Borg and Waldo Heinrich, eds., *Uncertain Years: Chinese American Relations*, *1947-1950* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), 217.

[31] Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung, "Why it is Necessary to Discuss the White Paper," http://www.marxists.org/ reference/archive/mao/selected-works/ (accessed December , 2009).

[32] "Use of English," *U.S. Consulate Chinese Press Review*.

were flocking to apply for exit permits, indicating that anti-Americanism was becoming more widespread among different areas of Chinese society.

However, a more harmful consequence caused by the release of the White Paper lay in Acheson's reference to "democratic individualism," which sparked a firestorm of responses in the Chinese press.[33] Acheson's reference was to the so-called "middle forces," or those liberals in Chinese society who represented an alternative to both the Communists and the Nationalists.[34] By this point, most of the middle forces had been incorporated into the Communist revolution, and one such party, the Democratic League, even published its own article condemning the White Paper.[35] However, there remained some democratic liberals that were unallied with the Communists. Therefore, Mao Zedong repeatedly took up the issue in his series of five articles, using the opportunity the White Paper afforded to call upon them to join the Communist cause and to help win over any who had yet to take a side in revolutionary conflict.[36] Following his lead, journalists responded with additional editorials mirroring this sentiment.

By mentioning the middle forces in the White Paper, Acheson had been the one to expose them to such analysis. Furthermore, by pegging the U.S.'s hope on the middle forces to overthrow Soviet aggression in China, Acheson inadvertently hurt their cause. Acheson was informed of the opinion of one Chinese man that the reference to democratic individualism had weakened the middle force's position. It not only exposed them to allegations that they were receiving aid from the U.S., but it motivated some of them to denounce the White Paper in order to put themselves above suspicion.[37] Another such liberal identified himself and ten others whom the White Paper had caused to come under the suspicion of the CCP. It was reported to John Butterworth that "they question whether [the] USA wants them to continue their efforts by exposing them to danger."[38] Therefore, even such a seemingly innocuous comment within the White Paper had a significant negative impact on U.S. interests.

Regardless of intent, the evidence demonstrates that the consequences of the White Paper's release were far from what the Truman administration might have expected. From the outset, the administration was

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[33] *China White Paper*, *xvi.*

[34] Lutze, 2.

[35] White Paper of American Imperialism Analyzed by the Democratic League.

[36] Thomas D Lutze, *China's Inevitable Revolution: Rethinking America's Loss to the Communists* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 179.

[37] *Foreign Relations*, 8:1407.

[38] *Ibid.*, 8:612.

blinded themselves to the implications of the White Paper in an desperate effort to counterattack the China Lobby and to absolve themselves of responsibility for the loss of China to the Communists. The Truman administration failed to foresee how their attempt at impartially disclosing the U.S.'s intervention in China's affairs could turn back on them. It not only provided additional material for the China Lobby to criticize, but also gave the Chinese Communists a much-welcome opportunity to rail against American imperialism. Moreover, Acheson's reference to democratic individualism unintentionally sealed the fate of the forces that represented the last hope of countering Chinese communism. On October 1st, 1949 Mao Zedong declared the founding of the People's Republic of China and President Truman's domestic political situation was no better off than before the White Paper's release. Regardless of George Kennan's initial opinion, the White Paper had failed.