

# STILWELL AND THE VIETNAM EXPERIENCE

William Pfaff

Barbara Tuchman's good book on General Stilwell and America's wartime China policy provides an illuminating introduction to that elaborate record of America's Vietnam involvement which the Pentagon, thanks to the *New York Times*, provided for us recently. The really interesting thing is not the way in which these two accounts of American adventure in Asia are alike but the way in which they are different.

***Stilwell and the American Experience in China 1911-1945***, by Barbara W. Tuchman. Macmillan. 621 pp. \$10.00.

Mrs. Tuchman's book is not primarily an account of American policy, its title and avowed theme notwithstanding. It is a conventional biography of Joseph Warren Stilwell's public years, making use of family papers not previously available. The general comment on American Asian policy which Mrs. Tuchman provides is conventional enough: that the American commitment to China in the 1940's rested upon a highly sentimental view of that country, fostered chiefly by missionaries and Christian church groups in America who were pleased to see the Chinese masses as longing for Protestant Christianity and American democracy. China, it was held, could be led to both through a highminded American guardianship. Chiang Kai-shek was regarded with enthusiasm by the American churchmen, in part because he was the only "modern" leader visible in China, in part because of his marriage into the wealthy and Christian Soong family and his conversion, upon the prospective mother-in-law's insistence, to Methodism. He disposed of two earlier wives; "O Promise Me" was sung at the wedding, which was attended by bridesmaids in beaded peach charmeuse and pages in velvet. Thus was China's modernization, democratization and Christianization symbolized.

The American enthusiasm for China, with these eleemosynary origins, found governmental expression under the pressure of Japan's aggression and China's military crisis. The American people wanted to help the Chinese, and after Pearl Harbor they did so with rather more enthusiasm than for America's

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European allies—who were presumed better able to take care of themselves, but were also sophisticated, ungrateful and patronizing. The Chinese were looked upon by Americans as a simpler and more sympathetic race: a colossal miscalculation which Joseph Stilwell, at least, did not share.

Yet Stilwell, a man who spent most of his professional life in China and was passionately involved with that country, had his own essentially manipulative and patronizing view of the Chinese. The corruption of Chiang's government and the elaborate intricacies and treacheries of Chinese high politics he despised but well understood; his affection and respect were for the endlessly patient and courageous peasant soldier. Stilwell wrote in 1938 that "The Chinese soldier is excellent material, wasted and betrayed by stupid leadership," adding: "suppose the Chinese soldier were well-fed, well-armed and equipped, well cared for and well led . . . ?" It was, of course, this task that he made his personal mission when war came and he was named American commander in China. But he was a commander without American troops, and in his official relationship to Chiang there was a fatal contradiction. Chiang wanted Americans to supply and support his regime while he allowed barbarian to fight barbarian, Americans to conquer Japan, his own government then to pick up the pieces in China. The American government, however, wanted China in the role of fourth of the Big Four "democracies," defeating Japan's mainland armies as its particular contribution to the great victory. After the war, then, China would succeed to Japan's role as Asia's great power, remaining America's grateful friend. But Stilwell, the soldier, simply wanted to train and lead a good Chinese army, where the men would be treated decently and would fight for a good cause.

The Communists in Yenan, whose strategy was also to let their enemies destroy one another, were, in the end, the ones who picked up the pieces. One reason was that they were uncompromised by American advice, supplies, and dependence. This they narrowly escaped: When disillusionment with Chiang and his Kuomintang finally struck in America in 1944, America's enthusiasm had been quickly transferred to the Communists. They were the Chinese who would fight, "real" democrats despite their

ideology—which no American would take seriously. The journalists and American diplomats who went to Yen-an in 1944—the first foreigners to spend time with the Communists—were entranced. Disgusted with Chiang's government, they were overwhelmed by the austerity, simplicity and honesty of the Communists. "Yen-an, A Chinese Wonderland City" was the *New York Times* headline over one dispatch; and as Mrs. Tuchman remarks, in words that carry a resonance of contemporary comparisons between Saigon and Hanoi, "the journalists reported what they saw and heard and the saddest thing about it, in the long cruel light of history, was that it was all true."

But for all the superficiality of American popular and governmental attitudes towards China, America did in fact want only the best for China. We wanted the Chinese to fight, but for China's sake. We wanted to block the French from returning to Indochina, and we scrupulously avoided any collaboration with the reimposition of British colonial rule in Southeastern and Southern Asia. "I have told Chiang to be ready to take [Indochina] over at the end of the war. The French have forfeited their right to it by neglect." That was Franklin Roosevelt in a conversation in 1944. We wanted to win the war, and then a new Asia would step into the new age of the Four Freedoms and the Family of Man.

Stilwell, a bad-tempered, undiplomatic, undevious man, undoubtedly limited, did in fact represent perhaps the best of America in Asia. He was intelligent, uncorruptible, an austere and puritan man, genuinely fond of China and the Chinese. He said what he thought; he cursed his opponents, drove his fellow-Americans and himself to exhaustion. He earned the hatred of the one American ground combat force in Burma, Merrill's Marauders, because he forced them to fight until they disintegrated in disease and casualties, the men falling asleep under fire. He did it because while the Chinese were in battle, the Americans, in honor, could not be withdrawn. He gave no medals to Americans because, in the tradition of Pershing and Marshall, he believed that American soldiers do not bedeck themselves with ribbons and decorations: they do their duty without being "patted on the back or [having] their hands held." He earned another kind of hatred from Claire Chennault and his 14th Air Force because he believed, correctly, that Chennault was a plotter and careerist ingratiating himself with Chiang by promoting a spurious strategy of victory through American airpower. (Give him 105 fighters and 42 bombers, and "full authority as American military commander in China," and he would "accomplish the downfall of Japan . . . probably within six months . . .

and create such goodwill that China will be a great and friendly trade market for generations." That was Chennault's own recommendation to Wendell Willkie and F.D.R. in October, 1942.)

In the thirty years which have passed since Stilwell and the war in China, many of the illusions about Asia which then affected America have persisted, but something fundamental has changed too. We then fancifully believed that an Americanized China could spontaneously emerge after the victory over Japan. When China "betrayed" us, we turned to a program of actively sponsoring democracy, economic and political development elsewhere in Asia—through aid and political action. Then, in our frustration in the 1960's, we began to force Asians to be democrats—bombing Laos and Vietnam into conforming to our political prescriptions, which nominally remained those of democracy and liberalism.

Or such is the gloss which can be placed upon this development of American policy. There is another interpretation which the Pentagon papers provide. Power which originally had been exercised in a context of sentimental idealism became power exercised for its own sake. The Pentagon's account of how America involved itself in Vietnam makes it horribly plain that our dominating motive was simply—if unclearly—to exercise our power. Proclaiming ourselves the most powerful nation in the world, we could not tolerate a refusal of Asian realities to conform to our will. *What* that will of ours should accomplish, what we wanted of Asia, hardly mattered; it was actually a confused mixture of the old missionary idealism, the newer anti-communism, our fear of communism in China, our sense that we, in succession to the old colonial powers, had the cure for Asia's ills. It was a hazy and intellectually disreputable set of assumptions; but the assumptions were really unimportant to a policy which had its own dynamism and sufficient reason: the exercise of power. We went into Vietnam because it was there; we stayed, and stay today, because we are there. We go on doing what we have done since 1964—or 1956, or 1950—because Vietnam and the Vietnamese resist us. We are determined to make them submit. This is the difference between the America of the war years and the America of today. Then, we had only begun to be conscious of our power, we employed it to the simple and dominating purpose of victory in a world war. The old inner restraints of the nation, that consciousness of honor which Stilwell expressed, still constrained our public men. America today is corrupted not by simplistic anti-communism, or neo-imperialism, or the capitalist quest for markets, or by racism. It is corrupted by power.