



# TOO LATE FOR EMPIRE

FROM PAGE 13

States has had no peer in wealth and weaponry, has it for more than a half-century been persistently, incurably complaining of weakness, paralysis, even impotence?

McCarthy, of course, presented the "loss" of China as Exhibit A in his display of the deeds of his gallery of traitors. For example, in the Wheeling speech, he specifically mentioned John Service, of the State Department's China desk, and charged that he "sent official reports back to the State Department urging that we torpedo our ally Chiang Kai-Shek and stating, in effect, that communism was the best hope of China." By such false accusations — including the spurious allegation about Communists in the State Department — did McCarthy transpose the "lost" war in China to the domestic sphere, where the phantom saboteurs of American global hegemony were supposedly at work. Soon, the Communist tactic of the purge was adopted by the American government, with the result that many of those most knowledgeable about Asia, such as Service, were driven out of government.

As has often been pointed out, whether the United States "lost China" depends on whether you think the United States ever had it. The question has lasting importance because the alleged loss of one country or another — China, Vietnam, Laos, Chile, Iran, Nicaragua, Iraq — became a leitmotif of American politics, especially at election time. In each of these cases, the United States "possessed" the countries in question (and thus was in a position to "lose" them) only insofar as it somehow laid claim to control the destinies of peoples on a global basis, or, as Fullbright said, an imperial basis. But if there is one clear lesson that the history of recent empires has taught,

it is that modern peoples have both the will and the capacity to reject imperial rule and assert control over their destinies. Less interested in the contest between East and West than in running their own countries, they yearned for self-determination, and they achieved it. The British and French imperialists were forced to learn this lesson over the course of a century. The Soviet Union took a little longer, and itself collapsed in the process. The United States, determined in the period in question to act in an imperial fashion, has been the dunce in the class, and indeed under the current administration has put forward imperial claims that dwarf those of imperial Britain at its height. It is only because in country after country, the United States has attempted the impossible abroad that it has been led to blame people at home for the failure.

Fortunately, American involvement in China in the 1940s was restricted to aid and advice and virtually no fighting between Americans and Mao's forces occurred. Now that the price of the military intervention in Vietnam — a much smaller country — is known, we can only shudder to imagine what intervention in China would have cost. Perhaps one of the few positive things that can be said about the Vietnam disaster is that if the United States was determined to fight a counterinsurgency war, it was better to do it in Vietnam than in China. But even without intervention, the price of China's defection from the American camp was high. The causes of McCarthyism were manifold, but in a very real sense, what the country got instead of war with Mao was the "war" at home that was McCarthyism.

The true causes of the Nationalist government's fall — its own incompetence and corruption, leading to wholesale loss of legitimacy in the eyes of its own people — were expunged from consciousness, and the lurid fantasy of State Department traitors and conspirators was concocted in their place. Then the delusion that Chiang would return from what then was called the island of Formosa (the Portuguese name for Taiwan) to retake the mainland was fostered by the China lobby. Delusion ran wild. Myths were created to take the place of unfaceable truths. The internal conspiracy to destroy the United States, said McCarthy, was supposedly headed by, of all people, Truman's Secretary of State, General George Marshall. "It was Marshall, with Acheson and Vincent eagerly assisting," he said, "who created the China

policy which, destroying China, robbed us of a great and friendly ally, a buffer against the Soviet imperialism with which we are now at war." And he added for good measure, "We have declined precipitously in relation to the Soviet Union in the last six years. How much swifter may be our fall into disaster with Marshall at the helm?"

Another event, scarcely more than a month before Mao declared the existence of the People's Republic of China, also fueled McCarthy's theme of thrown-away greatness. On August 29, 1949, the Soviet Union tested its first atomic bomb — "Joe-1," named after Joseph Stalin. At once, in an experience strangely parallel to the loss of China from America's sphere of interest, intoxicating dreams of atomic monopoly and the lasting military superiority that was thought to go with it shriveled up. Not superiority but stalemate was suddenly the outlook — not dominance but the status of the "balance of terror." The outlines of the new limitations soon take shape in the long, wearying, poorly understood and publicly disliked Korean War, in which America's atomic arsenal, whose use was considered but rejected, was no help. The theme of thwarted American greatness was sounded again, when General Douglas MacArthur, who had proposed using atomic weapons in Korea, announced, "There can be no substitute for victory," and was fired by Truman for insubordination. Meanwhile, a connection with the enemy was discovered when Soviet spying on the Manhattan Project came to light. Scientists had long known that there could be no "secret" of the bomb — that the relevant science was irretrievably available to all — and that the Soviet Union would be able to build one. The Soviet timetable had indeed been speeded up by the spying, but now it seemed to McCarthy and others that the domestic traitors were the prime agents of the sudden, apparent reversal of American fortune. (Truman sought to compensate for the loss of the atomic monopoly with his prompt decision to build the H-bomb.)

The full implication of the ensuing nuclear standoff sank in slowly. As the Soviet Union gradually built up its arsenal, American strategic thinkers and policy-makers awakened to some unpleasant discoveries about nuclear arms. The bomb, too, had a distinctly genie-like quality of looking formidable at one instant but useless the next. Even in the days of American nuclear monopoly, between 1945 and the first Soviet explosion of 1949, nuclear weapons had proved a disappointing military instrument. Stalin had simply declared that nuclear weapons were for scaring people with "weak nerves," and acted accordingly. And once the monopoly was broken, no use of nuclear weapons could be planned without facing the prospect of retaliation. During the 1950s Dwight Eisenhower tried to squeeze what benefit he could out of the United States' lingering numerical nuclear superiority with his "massive retaliation" policy, but its prescription of threatening nuclear annihilation to gain advantage in far-flung local struggles was never quite believable, perhaps even by its practitioners. By the late 1950s a new generation of strategists was awakening to the full dimensions of a central paradox of the nuclear age: Possession of nuclear arsenals did not empower but paralyzed their owners. Henry Kissinger remarked, "The more powerful the weapons, the greater the reluctance to use them," and fretted about "how our power can give impetus to our policy rather than paralyze it."

Here at the core of the riddle of American power in the nuclear age was the very image of the pitiful, helpless giant, a figure grown weak through the very excess of his strength. But the source of this weakness, which was very real, had nothing to do with any domestic cowards, not to speak of traitors, or any political event; it lay in the revolutionary consequences for all military power of the invention of nuclear arms, even if — with a hint of defensiveness, perhaps — the United States now called itself a "superpower." (The H-bomb was first called "the super.") Here was a barrier to the application of force that no cultivation of "will" could change or overcome. But the policy-makers did not accept the verdict of paralysis without a struggle. Within the precincts of high strategy, the "nuclear priesthood" mounted a sustained, complex intellectual insurrection against this distasteful reality of the nuclear age. Even in the face of the undoubted reality that if the arsenals were used, "mutual assured destruction" would result, they looked for room to maneuver. One line of attack was the "counterforce" strategy of targeting the nuclear forces rather than the society of the foe. The hope was to preserve the possibility of some kind of victory, or at least of relative military advantage, from the general ruin of nuclear war. Another line of attack was advocacy of "limited war," championed by Kissinger and others. The strategists reasoned that although "general war" might be unwinnable, limited war, of the kind just brewing in Vietnam, could be fought and won. Perhaps not all war between nuclear adversaries had been paralyzed. Thus, the impotent omnipotence of the nuclear stalemate became one more paradoxical argument, in addition to those drummed into the public mind by McCarthy and his heirs, in favor of American engagement in counterinsurgency struggles. And this time the United States, unprotected by the prudence of a George Marshall, did go to war.

The results are the ones we know. American military might was no more profitable when used against rebellious local populations in limited wars than it was in general, nuclear wars. This time the lessons were learned, and for awhile they stuck: Peoples, even of small countries, are powerful within their own borders; they have the means to resist foreign occupation successfully; military force will not lead them to change their minds; the issues are therefore essentially political, and in this

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