



Conference on U.S.-China History: "Ending 'The Great Aberration'"

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Ladies and gentlemen, it's an honor to be here today to address this conference. I'd like to begin by acknowledging the Office of the Historian's patient and determined scholarship from year to year, decade to decade, preserving and publishing the record of American foreign relations.

You will note that this volume is not just about the record of the Department of State. Increasingly, the Historian's Office has assumed the responsibility of providing a foreign policy record that extends beyond the State Department to include the records of the White House and our intelligence agencies. It really is one of the treasures of our nation's government that just happens to be lodged in the Department of State.

In commenting on the role of the Historian's Office and on the role of a conference like this, I note that this is not official history. A lot of the historians who are at this conference don't like this Administration. Some of the premier historians of Sino-American relations like Warren Cohen or Michael Hunt don't like this Administration, and that's okay. Their scholarship has earned them the kind of honor and attention that it continues to receive today. It is perfectly normal and natural that scholars should criticize the Administration, have different views and provide a wealth of perspectives.

Indeed, when I served on the Historical Advisory Committee, I was appointed to that role by a Democratic Secretary of State, and members of that committee were involved in constant strife with whichever Administration was in office at the time -- usually pushing harder and harder for more declassification, placing more material in the public record, to be sure that those values were given attention.

The Historian's Office role in a conference like this is not to provide official history. It is instead about an official duty to history. I hope this conference can serve as an example to other historians' offices and other governments elsewhere in the world -- including our friends in China and our friends in Japan -- on various ways that one can approach sensitive problems in contemporary history.

I want to acknowledge, too, the quality of scholarship and expertise available to students of US-China relations, in particular, the outstanding quality of the primary sources, a tradition of careful documentation that I think is influenced by Chinese culture and traditions in this particular field. There is something disciplining about the fact that when you believe people really will scrutinize what you say word for word, you're more careful in how you write it down. There is also a rich tradition of interchange of scholarship between public and private work. Stanley Hornbeck journeying from Harvard with the permission of President Lowell back to join the State Department and serve in public service, or people like the late Jim Thomson or Ezra Vogel or Ken Lieberthal or many, many others including the newly appointed Deputy Assistant Secretary of State, Tom Christensen, coming to us from Princeton University.

Finally, as I turn to this subject, I want to note that it is really appropriate that we are holding this conference on this date because it is almost exactly one year since Bob Zoellick spoke last September -- September of 2005 -- about America's relations with China today and the way those relations have really entered a new phase, a phase made possible by the developments and policy makers whose work we are studying at this conference.

Of course, American historical memory in these matters can be questioned. I was looking at some different works on this, and I stumbled across a wonderful quote after then-Defense Secretary Harold Brown visited China in the beginning of January 1980. A Chinese intellectual told the delegation of American China specialists that the potential in Sino-American relations should not be overestimated. The quote from *The New York Times* article is that "You Americans are so charming," the Chinese scholar said. "[for] you have such short memories. We can't forget so fast or so easily what happened between us in the past." This conference is trying at least to contribute to the slight lengthening of our sometimes short national memory.

Let me offer some questions and policy reflections: first, on why normalization occurred when it did; second, what did the United States want from normalization; third, on what I think is a striking continuity in American hopes for China; and fourth, some of the lingering consequences of this history today.

First, why did normalization occur when it did?

It's an interesting question because, of course, the State Department had long wanted to normalize US-China relations and had equally long been ambivalent about what would happen if we did. So there was a constancy of State Department desire to normalize and a constancy, too, of State Department ambivalence towards the actual prospect because of reactions from Japan, from Southeast Asia, from the Soviet Union and so forth that naturally were caveats that would have to be taken into account before actually making such a move.

So then when one looks at the American variables, in addition to that constancy, I think it is interesting to look at the role that Richard Nixon himself played. Nixon was more interested in Asia than many American national leaders were even of his time. It's important to remember that Nixon, for example -- in contrast to the life story of Henry Kissinger before 1969 -- was a man of the West and a man of the Pacific Rim in some distinctive ways.

Nixon grew up in California. His World War II service was in the Pacific, not in the European theater. The Republican Party, in which he had spent his formative years, the Republican Party of the late 1940s and early 1950s was extremely interested in Asia. One of the characteristic stereotypes of say Bob Taft, a leader of the Republican Party of that era, is to think of these people as isolationists because of their opposition to NATO. In fact, it is important to remember that Taft Republicans may have been isolationists with regards to American engagement in Europe, but they were anything but isolationists when it came to American engagement in the future of East Asia, where their policy prescriptions were very activist. Nixon very much internalized that. Indeed, one of his signature issues when he became Vice President to Dwight Eisenhower was Asia, an intense interest in the fate of Indochina, for example, in 1953 and 1954 and in the Taiwan Straits crises later in the Eisenhower Administration.

So Nixon comes into office as President as a person conditioned to a constancy of interest in Asia and with a lot of knowledge and interest in America's traditions there. In his very first foreign trips, when literally he's been in office only weeks, he's already talking about the idea of opening to China. In his meetings with President de Gaulle, for example, he noted, and this in the Foreign Relations documents, that there existed "considerable sentiment" in

the State Department "not only in favor of a Soviet-US détente but also for a lineup of the Soviets, Europe and the US against the Chinese." This is a false allegation against the State Department, setting up a straw man to which Nixon could then comment. Nixon's comment as described in the F.R.U.S. was that such a détente against the Chinese "might be a good short-range policy, but in the longer term it was in the U.S. interest to recognize that China and the Soviet Union were 'great powers' and that we should build 'parallel relationships with them.'"

Nixon then conceded that this was "largely theoretical as it was difficult to have relations with the Chinese," which begins to suggest that the critical variable in the opening was less in Washington and more perhaps in Beijing. It is not, of course, the place of an American government official to speculate in depth from this podium about the motives and attitudes of the Chinese leadership. But it is important to recognize, as many historians have, that this was a period in the late 1960s and especially the beginning of the 1970s when Chinese revolutionary activism and domestic turmoil was appearing to subside. China's role in the Vietnam War was changing as the Soviet role in supporting the North Vietnamese became primary and the Chinese role became secondary. It was also a period in which China must have felt an increasing sense of isolation from the Communist world and in the world more generally. There were relatively few fast friends for China back then. Among them were countries like Pakistan and Romania, which then both provided back channels to try to facilitate a normalization of relations with the United States. And then there was the Soviet factor, the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, border clashes, and a lot of ominous talk in public and in private.

So, why normalization occurred when it did? Yes, there's an American factor, Nixon being important. It is also very important to look at the Chinese variable as perhaps being the critical variable. But as that variable changed, the opportunities for normalization opened and we turn to my second subject.

What did the United States seek from normalization? Or to put it even more plainly, what did we want from them? The answer to this question is interesting, and I think thought-provoking.

Let's start with what Kissinger wanted. There is a lot of evidence and fragments of evidence about Kissinger's views on this subject. I think it's fair to say that for Kissinger, the opening to China was very much part of the foreign policy perspective he had that was focused on the Soviet Union and the broader geopolitical balance of power. For instance, in October 1971 Kissinger returned from having met with Zhou Enlai, recounted in the new F.R.U.S. volume. Kissinger told Nixon the China trip would be "the keystone of your foreign policy, Mr. President. You get a good reception in China, which I know you will, you come out with a decent communique, you're in business with the Russians. Then the Russian trip will be a great success," a trip they're already thinking about for the spring of 1972. Or for instance, in an exceptionally revealing meeting that lasted for hours between Nixon and Kissinger on the eve of their departure for China, a meeting that fortunately was caught on tape and painstakingly transcribed by the State editors of the F.R.U.S. volume, Kissinger remarks that, "For the next 15 years we have to lean towards the Chinese against the Russians. We have to play this balance of power game totally unemotionally. Right now, we need the Chinese to correct the Russians and to discipline the Russians."

And then going on in the very same conversation Nixon makes some remarks about the Chinese reception for a visiting African leader. Kissinger comes back to his main subject: "Our concern with China right now, in my view, Mr. President, is to use it as a counterweight to Russia, not for its local policy." President Nixon says he agrees. Kissinger adds, "As a counterweight, to keep it in play in the subcontinent for the time being. But above all as a counterweight to Russia. And, the fact that [China] doesn't have a global policy is an asset to us, that it doesn't have global strength yet. And to prevent Russia from gobbling it up. If Russia dominates China, that would be a fact of such tremendous significance." That gives you a little bit of a sense, some fragments of Kissinger's perspective of his orientation. But now consider Nixon's orientation, which was different and in some ways more fundamental and inchoate. For instance, Marshall Green recalled ways that Nixon had expressed himself to him on this subject, especially in 1969 when Green spent a lot of time with Nixon. He recalled that Nixon said, "We simply cannot go on indefinitely in a hostile relationship with one-quarter of mankind especially as the PRC grows in military power." Or try the recollection of John Holdridge, who was working at State then went to work at the NSC staff along with Winston Lord and others who are here. Holdridge recalled Nixon's rationale, which he said he often heard Nixon express, was "'It's far better to talk to the Chinese than to fight them' given China's huge population . . . key geographic location and important . . . influence."

Then look at what did America want from China from the normalization process? If the question is: What did we want from them? The answer is: not very much. A lot of the agenda was a defensive agenda, how to avoid giving away too much on Taiwan. It was not an agenda like the agenda with the Soviet Union where we really expected dramatic results on, say, Vietnam. After the February 1972 summit, the Vietnamese launched the Easter offense that began on March 30th, 1972, and neither Nixon or Kissinger appeared to feel betrayed by that. They didn't think they had a deal with the Chinese. Indeed, if anything, the Chinese were kind of urging the Americans to be tougher on the North Vietnamese because of their growing estrangement from the North Vietnamese.

But you go through issue after issue, it's hard to find anything that's concrete and instrumental that the Americans are really seeking from the opening. There's the balance of power argument showing that America and China could work together and the chilling effect that would have on the Russians that Kissinger emphasizes. But then it's hard to resist the sense that there's this more fundamental and inchoate concern which Nixon articulates that's less instrumental and more about such an opening as an end in itself. In other words, Nixon thought he would be earning his place in history simply by ending what Warren Cohen has called "the great aberration," the period of rupture in US-China relations that had lasted for about 20 years.

That point is important because it brings us to the third one. If you think about "the great aberration," you can consider that, for Nixon, in a way he was returning to a sense of good relations with China. That, for him, was part of the natural, normal American context. He was returning to normalization not creating it new.

Then you really capture the sense of the continuity of American hopes for China, which I think is worth dwelling on in some detail.

It is asserted by some Chinese nationalists, not necessarily by the Chinese Government, that the recent tradition of American relations with China is a desire to keep China down, to limit China's power, to limit China's influence. In contrast, I think it's fairer to assert that as long as it has been involved in Asia's politics, for more than 100 years, America's leaders have sought a strong, united and independent China.

Year in and year out, from one generation to the next, America pursued this goal with a constancy of purpose unique among all the major powers in the region. Of course, America did so to serve America's interests. But America conceived its interests in a way that was in rare harmony with the long-term interests of the Chinese people. And America thus played, again and again, an indispensable historical role in the evolution of a strong and independent China.

Let me offer just a few illustrations. In 1899, immediately after America realized that it is an Asiatic power, Hay and William Rockhill authored the Open Door Note. The Open Door Note, as I'm sure many of you here know, is commonly remembered for the goal of being sure that the door was not closed to American commerce, as some of the imperial powers were moving to carve up China in the waning years of the Manchu Dynasty. But it's also worth remembering when one reads the Open Door Note that it had two goals, not only the goal of not excluding the United States and keeping the door open in that sense, but also asserting that China should be allowed to continue to have control of its finances, the issue of control of China's customs revenue. Because if China lost complete control of its finances, its effective independence would come to an end, and the United States had already decided that it was very much in America's interests for China to preserve its independence.

That kind of persistent view of the need for a stable, stronger and more independent China is carried forward in the administration of Theodore Roosevelt, in the way America distinctively approached the settlement of the Boxer rebellion claims and Roosevelt's own essay on the awakening of China. It continues on through the Taft Administration and then on into the Wilson Administration. After the Chinese Revolution of 1911-1912, the Wilson Administration moved to recognize the new Republic of China and did so unilaterally before the other great powers were willing to go along. Wilson once expressed, as Josephus Daniels noted in his minutes of a cabinet meeting, that his desire to help China was so strong, "that I prefer to err in the line of helping that country than otherwise."

All this was coupled with a growing concern about Japan. All of it was limited by a keen sense of how little American power there was to project in East Asia and how little one could do to safeguard China or promote China. But America would do what it could.

In 1922, in the Harding Administration, Charles Evans Hughes, the Secretary of State and Elihu Root decided to create a Washington system for East Asia organized by the Washington conferences. By the way, again, the stereotype of American isolation after the failure of the League of Nations, is not true when it comes to American policy in Asia. That Washington system they crafted had at its core a Nine Power Treaty designed to secure Chinese independence in a period of disorder, guaranteeing its independence and guaranteeing its territorial integrity. America was the lead sponsor of those provisions to ensure that the Nine Powers respected them.

This was not enough for the Chinese nationalists, not enough for them because America couldn't overthrow the regime of unequal treaties that the other powers insisted on. Yet even on that score, by 1926, again ahead of the other powers, the United States was ready to discard extraterritoriality and wanted to grant China tariff autonomy over active protests from within Washington and protests from both London and Tokyo. America's Secretary Kellogg and Nelson Johnson expressed their dedication to preserve a strong and independent China once China could sort out its internal disorder and its internal weaknesses.

Those American interests, while they remained the same, were not so actively pursued until finally, as Japanese aggression on the Chinese mainland grew during the 1930s, in the period from 1938 to 1941, the United States of America took supreme risks to protect the strength and independence of China. Finally at the end of 1938 the activist Secretary of the Treasury Henry Morgenthau found at last an ally in the Department of State -- hitherto preferring non-recognition and non-intervention.

Morgenthau was at State asking for another embargo on some Japanese trade. Hull as usual disagreed with Morgenthau. Hull then sent for Stanley Hornbeck. And then Hornbeck arrives, and Morgenthau noted in his diaries, "I almost fell out of my chair when Hornbeck agreed that this ought to be done." According to Morgenthau, Hornbeck said, "As a matter of fact, we're working on several other ways to put the screws in the Japanese, and this is just what we ought to do." These actions, ushered in a period of financial and economic aid to China, then fighting for its life, and financial and economic sanctions against Japan of growing strength and gravity. By 1940 and 1941 the risks that were being undertaken by these sanctions flew in the face of America's grand strategy which was, after all, Germany first.

With a Germany first strategy, the U.S. did not want to provoke a war in the Pacific before it had come to grips with the main problem in Europe. Yet, that is exactly the kind of risk that was being courted by the policy and, in fact, the risk that materialized finally in the attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941. This extraordinary dichotomy of risk and principle is worth noting because some of the ideas involved have resonance to the present day.

Stanley Hornbeck, nearing the end of his life in the early 1960s, was asked about what America should do to meet its present challenges. Here I'm indebted to the late Jim Thompson for noting this. Hornbeck said, "Well, I am sure about some things, our national concern for and regarding principles and practices of freedom, independence, justice and security is greater than is that of any other nation. . . . We should be prepared to go further and to make greater efforts in defense of those principles and practices than is to be expected of any other country." At the same time, his life drawing to a close, Hornbeck filed a little note in a box marked "Pearl Harbor" in a way leaving a record for posterity, "Did I," Hornbeck said, "underestimate Japan's strength? The answer is: Yes, both in absolute terms and in comparative terms. And so did practically everyone else in the United States, both in the government and out of the government in varying degrees." The results were that America then found itself in a war, a war it had been drawn into in conflict with its grand strategy. Why? In great part because of America's stubborn dedication to trying to preserve a united and independent China.

Another key moment arose as the war went on. Who will make up the permanent membership of the United Nations Security Council that will have such an extraordinary role in the postwar order? There was only one voice in the councils of the great powers that said such a seat must be held for China. That voice was again that of the United States. Franklin Roosevelt, for example, insisted on it with Anthony Eden in March of 1943. So in 1945 that seat is there, the seat which the Peoples' Republic of China now holds, a seat which it could take in 1971 because that seat had been built for it in 1945. Had that seat not been there, China might today be with other countries asking for the reorganization of the UN Security Council to recognize China's role. But instead, the United States had worked successfully to preserve that role as early as 1943.

And in 1946, America had to make another extraordinary choice. As the war came to an end and American policy was fluid on its attitude towards the Chinese communists, the great choice facing the United States Government was: Do you side completely with Jiang Jiezhhi and the Kuomintang against the communists? Instead a series of American leaders, especially Byrnes, Acheson, Marshall and John Carter Vincent decided to choose mediation and restraint in China's civil war.

There was an extraordinary opportunity for the anti-communists. After all, Stalin had already made his deal with Jiang Jiezhhi in 1945 as to how he would come to a modus vivendi with Kuomintang rule in the new China, and Mao knew it. There were a lot of Americans, Patrick Hurley among them and others, who would have argued that the United States should come down 100 percent on the side of the Kuomintang. The United States chose not to do this in 1945 or 1946, or even in 1947 as the civil war deepened into complete strife. The result was that, with the future of East Asia arguably at stake, perhaps the most important contest in the emerging Cold War where a quarter of the world's population was on the table, the United States fundamentally chose not to intervene with its full military might at the time when victory for the Kuomintang could perhaps have been assured.

We can argue about whether those decisions or the way they carried them out were right. But the reason for their choice of mediation and restraint was because of their hopes for a strong, united and independent China, and that somehow this was the only way to achieve that unity. We can fault the way they went about it. But the purpose is important to understand.

And that purpose even lingered on in the Korean War, when in 1950 and 1951 Mao essentially invited America to join World War III. Despite the recommendations of some, such as his commander in the Far East, President Truman chose to decline that terrible invitation.

This was true again in the Taiwan Straits crises. Still later, Chinese intervention into the Vietnam War in the early and mid-1960s led China to threaten the United States that if America sought to solve the Vietnam War by dealing with North Vietnam, the U.S. would face war with China. America decided to accept the limited war that China insisted on rather than choose war with China. Again and again, the United States chose the path of its consistent interests and sought to avoid a full confrontation against China.

Which then brings us back to the issues of the 1970s. For America in the 1970s, you can see a constancy of interest that now seemed enabled by Chinese readiness for better relations. Therefore, I want to turn fourth to the consequences of that normalization and that constancy today.

Looking back at 1969 again, one of the many studies that the White House commissioned was National Security Study Memorandum 14, commissioned in the spring and summer of 1969 to look at U.S. policies towards China. Kissinger famously remarked that these studies were make-work projects to keep the State Department busy. I think this is Kissinger in one of his more puckish moments. In fact, at the time I think this particular study was taken quite seriously. A lot of people worked on it especially at the State Department. There was a prescient question asked in the State Department's paper.

In August 1969, the State Department paper responding to NSSM 14 posed the following question, which I think was probably written by Marshall Green, John Holdridge and their colleagues. (Holdridge was at State before he then went over and received the paper on the NSC staff.) "A question can legitimately be posed as to whether or not it is in U.S. interests for Peking to become more engaged in the international scene. If Peking should choose to pursue a more pragmatic and moderate foreign policy, pressures by the nations of Asia for accommodating Peking and for accepting the PRC into international organizations would build rapidly. Peking's emergence from its self-imposed isolation would thus pose new challenges for U.S. policy in Asia and would probably result in certain short-term losses to ourselves and our allies."

And to that prescient question, it is interesting to note a prescient answer. The answer then offered in August 1969 was that over the long-term, "evolution of Peking's policies toward moderation would offer the prospect of increased stability in East Asia. Since it does not lie within the United States' power to prevent Peking from breaking out of its isolation, the issue posed for the U.S. is whether this evolution will take place in spite of U.S. resistance or whether the U.S. will be seen as willing to accept and live with Peking's entry into the international community and do what it can to take advantage of the change." Those words do indeed ring true today.

There are cautions in that same memorandum, cautions about limited U.S. power. To what extent, one can ask, can America actually influence the way China approaches the international system if it has these new opportunities? Here again, the study's authors in the summer of '69 wrote, "Future Chinese leaders' perspectives may be altered, however, by considerations of domestic political control, by the need for economic development and by China's relations with third countries. U.S. actions to alter what Peking perceives as the U.S. 'threat' could contribute to this. . . . This need not be hostile to U.S. interests in the long-run if it allows for continuing U.S. political and economic relations with these countries [throughout Asia] even though at a reduced level of intimacy than previously."

In other words, America made the choice that was forecasted for it in the summer of 1969. It made the choice to embrace the growth of Chinese power. So, for example, when Deputy Secretary Zoellick gave his speech a year ago, he said that: "For the United States and the world the essential question is -- how will China use its influence? To answer that question, it is time to take our policy beyond opening doors to China's membership into the international system. We need to urge China to become a responsible stakeholder in that system."

It is essential, then, to understand the historical record and see the continuity across more than a century of the American belief that a strong, independent and united China could contribute to the stability of East Asia and the belief that such a role should be welcomed. The address a year ago on behalf of the Administration made it clear that the argument about whether the United States wanted to contain Chinese power had been settled. The paradigm that we put forward cannot be reconciled with the paradigm of containment. It is a paradigm that accepts the growth of Chinese power and urges the Chinese to take on their role "to strengthen the international system that has enabled its success."

Now the choice is above all for China. China has choices it will make about how it approaches its own historical record and its own view of its past. But China also has important choices to make about the future.

When I was trying to think about words to use in speaking to the Chinese Government or its people about its choices, about its future, I was very drawn to some lines that Dean Acheson used more than half a century ago in a very different context.

And so, I will just close by saying: And by no means least of all, it rests with our . . . friends to see that this relationship reaps its true fruits. And I say to them: A great broad highway to a position of equality, of honor, of friendship in the world lies open to you. All the obstacles on that highway have been cleared away so far as governments can clear them away. The obstacles that remain, only you can remove, and you can remove those if you act with other peoples with understanding and with generosity and with kindness. All those qualities are inherent in the nature of your people; and what we urge you to do is to make those qualities, which are so inherent in your people, the policy of your government.

Thank you. .

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