

Up from Isolationism: The Conservative Dilemma and the Chinese Solution

In the spring of 1946, as American wartime optimism began to turn into post-war anxiety, an unusual petition appeared in major newspapers and periodicals. The “Manchurian Manifesto” claimed the United States owed a special debt to China because the latter was “the victim both of our long appeasement of Japan and of our unpreparedness”: The agreements reached at the Yalta conference the previous year—made “behind China’s back”—granted USSR troops access to the province of Manchuria during the final weeks of the war. Now the Soviet army was giving Mao’s Communists a vital advantage in the Chinese civil war and the United States should “insist on the strict observance of promises made to China.” Defenders would say that Yalta negotiations took place before the certainty of the atomic bomb, and Franklin Roosevelt had sought to bring the Soviet Union into the war against Japan in the spirit of realpolitik diplomacy.¹ On the other hand, postwar critics charged that the Yalta agreement seriously compromised the moral leadership of the United States and imperiled the Open Door tradition of special friendship between the United States and China.

Drawn up by the American China Policy Association, the manifesto blamed Americans, not Joseph Stalin, for China’s “betrayal” at Yalta. The corresponding argument that the United States was responsible for China’s post-war destiny made it a classic example of American orientalism. Meanwhile, the far-reaching appeal of such paternalism was reflected by the variety of public figures endorsing the manifesto’s claims. Numbering sixty-two in all, they ranged from *Time-Life* magnate Henry Luce and Congressman Walter Judd (R-MN) to the socialist Norman Thomas and American Federation of Labor president William Green to publisher Alfred A. Knopf and Mrs. Wendell Willkie. The names of well-known Chiang Kai-shek supporters, such as

Judd (a former medical missionary in China) and Luce (a son of China missionaries), were unsurprising, but the petition was not intended only for the eyes of the converted. It beseeched all Americans to rectify the wrong against a wartime ally: “Will the American people, at the strongest moment in their history, accept a Russian policy in Asia which we rejected in the case of Germany and Japan even when we were weak?” Anybody, whether a public figure or private citizen, had the power to change the course that had been set at Yalta.²

As the Manchurian Manifesto showed, disapproval of recent US China policy could be heard across the political spectrum. However, by 1950, the most vocal and organized critics came from the GOP right. Their efforts would pay off as “conservative foreign policy” ceased to be considered an oxymoron. Before World War II, few of them showed concern for global diplomacy, let alone a country with which the United States shared virtually no trade and a relatively slender ethnic heritage. The mainstream of American conservative ideology dictated that federal power should limit its concerns to national affairs.³ Conservatives of the old guard recognized a fundamental shift had occurred after Pearl Harbor, but they had difficulty adjusting to the nation’s new interventionism; as a result, a presumption that isolationism was a major tenet of rightwing thought lingered beyond the start of the Cold War.⁴

Sen. Robert A. Taft of Ohio, nicknamed “Mr. Republican,” embodied that old guard. The son of former president William Howard Taft, he was a well-respected public figure even if he did not possess the most sparkling personality. H. L. Mencken once observed, “Taft is a pleasant enough fellow of very agreeable manners and gabbing with him was pleasant enough, but he certainly failed to inflame me with any conviction that he was a man of destiny.”⁵ What Mencken deemed to be a deficiency, many other Americans considered to be comforting and honest. Shortly after being elected to the US Senate in 1938, Taft gained a devoted national following, his supporters heralding him as the highest example of integrity and reason.⁶ “I look at that man and I see everything which my father taught me to hold good,” affirmed one Idaho matron.⁷

To supporters and critics alike, Taft’s reputation rested with his positions on national issues like the New Deal and labor. Foreign policy was not his natural forte, and his negative positions on postwar issues like the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) solidified impressions that he was a strict isolationist. However, even before 1941, Taft did come to recognize that literal adherence to the Monroe Doctrine was hardly an appropriate, or practicable, response to the United States’ growing place in the world.

The juxtaposition between widely held presumptions and a subtler, personal evolution has led to widely varying interpretations of Taft's place within the history of US foreign policy. Eric Goldman's sweeping narrative of the immediate postwar period, *The Crucial Decade* (1956), zeroed in on the senator as the unquestioned leader of the Republican right ("Taftites"), a faction that awkwardly grappled with foreign affairs at the beginning of the Cold War. In his account, Taft was a politician beset by circumstance, a man who had but little choice other than to change, however unwilling.⁸ Conservative historian Russell Kirk and coauthor James McClellan painted a more proactive portrait in their 1967 biography. They credited Taft's desire to protect American institutions from actions taken in the name of "an amorphous international 'democracy'" and framed it within global contexts.⁹ Their narrative ardently defended Taft against charges of irregularity on foreign policy, arguing that his shifting stances were no more inconsistent than those of Franklin Roosevelt, Harry Truman, or Dean Acheson. Change was not a symptom of an isolationism that turned diplomatic dilettante, but, rather, a sign of flexible adaptability.¹⁰

More recently, scholars interested in alternative forms of internationalism have cited Taft as a significant example of how conservatives engaged with foreign policy as the nation stood on the brink of World War II. Christopher Nichols describes how during the 1930s, the senator adhered to a platform of "internationally engaged isolationist principles," including domestic reform, peaceful international engagement, and avoidance of foreign treaties and intervention in wars—a philosophy shared by public figures on both the right and the left. In his extensive study on Taft and foreign policy, Clarence Wunderlin traces how the senator's worldview attempted to balance domestic traditionalism with the demands of global circumstances: Taft had a "great reverence" for international law, a trait he inherited from his father. That respect led him to practice a conservative internationalism that supported certain forms of collective security and arbitration, even as it retained a distinct antistatistism and was wielded as a political weapon.¹¹

Taft has received a good amount of academic attention lately, but for much of the time he was the GOP right's standard-bearer, the finer points of early conservative internationalism were overlooked. Before Pearl Harbor, while Americans weighed the prospect of whether their government would openly abandon its neutrality, conservatives bore the label of outright isolationism since declaration of war was widely considered to be the only path to overseas engagement. Similarly, after 1945, Democrats' dominance of the diplomatic sphere meant liberal containment was the most obvious form of long-term intervention while challenges to its grand strategy were dismissed as neither grand nor strategic.

Outmanned and in the political minority as the Cold War took shape, conservatives could either play tightly defined roles in foreign policy (as Sen. Arthur Vandenberg did) or take exploratory steps on their own. Taft's outspoken criticism of the Nuremberg trials showed that his views complicated widely accepted definitions of isolationism. He argued that the trials were "instruments of government policy, determined months before" rather than instruments of justice; the United States' participation in what seemed a pre-determined verdict via *ex post facto* laws was an affront to bedrock constitutional principles.¹² It was a highly unpopular view that made Taft a target of backlash from the press and colleagues. Nevertheless, the argument that the United States' tolerance for proceedings like Nuremberg was dangerous, especially in parallel with the nation's new leadership status, resonated within key circles. Corroboration from legal experts like Robert G. Neumann and Justice William O. Douglas later provided mitigating vindication, as did a laudatory portrait by John F. Kennedy in *Profiles in Courage* (1955).¹³ While not enough to sway either public perception or a radical overhaul of conservative ideology, Taft's position as well as the support it received represented a small but important measure of early revision.

Profound change toward an original internationalism within the entire Republican right was bolstered when senior leaders like Taft adopted an Asia First position in the wake of the Chinese Communist Revolution. This chapter pursues a rather different portrayal than John Paton Davies's recollection of Taft as "an influential conservative who otherwise displayed slight interest in East Asia."¹⁴ Using the senator as a vantage point, it examines conservatives' turn to China during the earliest years of the Cold War.

Because he ran for both the White House and the Senate after 1945, Taft's personal transition occurred in uniquely plain view. The press scrutinized his positions, and certainly he reflected important shifts within conservative thought. As *U.S. News & World Report* explained, "Some Republicans stand to his left. Quite a few are to his right. But, on most issues, the Ohio Senator is so close to the middle that when Republicans try to find a compromise they move into the position he has held all the time."¹⁵ Neither on the cutting edge nor obstinately immovable, he was a barometer, while his status and leadership in the GOP Congress (which also included high-ranking former isolationists like Sen. Styles Bridges of New Hampshire, Sen. Kenneth Wherry of Nebraska, Rep. Joseph Martin Jr. of Massachusetts, and Sen. Homer Capeheart of Indiana) helped legitimize conservatism's approach to foreign relations during the late 1940s.

Although that group of Republican conservatives may have been relative novices in the field of foreign policy, they did not consider their own

brand of internationalism simply as a political tool. Their overarching goal was to project a specific vision of US superpower to the world, one that emphasized preservation of American unilateralism in international affairs, a strong military defense state, and a commitment to winning the conflict with global communism as quickly as possible. The story of how events in East Asia merged with postwar conservatism's foreign and domestic concerns was one of the most significant subtexts of postwar national politics. Conservative internationalism did not emerge easily, but its development was imperative as the pace of the Cold War accelerated.

A Quickening

The escalation of civil war in China meant a rapid deterioration of American interests in mainland Asia after 1945. Despite the country's Allied status and the Guomindang's openness toward the West, forging a course of action ranked among the most difficult of challenges facing US policymakers. The outcome of the Marshall Mission (1946), resumption of armed conflict between the Communists and the Nationalists (1946–47), and charges of pervasive corruption within Chiang's regime obfuscated any clear or speedy solution. At the same time, those events provided early opportunities for Republican conservatives to voice misgivings about the direction of America's Cold War policy.

George Marshall's mission to China was a case in point. Its purpose was to broker a working agreement between the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the Guomindang. Critics of the administration interpreted the secretary of state's objective as misguided at best; at worst, it tolerated communist expansion. In any case, the mission was virtually impossible to achieve given the circumstances, and Marshall failed to bring about a resolution.¹⁶ Frustrated, he returned to the United States from Nanjing in January 1947, highlighting American ineffectualness in China. After the forcefulness of the Truman Doctrine and Marshall Plan later in the year, conservative hardliners could increasingly argue that Democrats prioritized Europe and the Mediterranean while neglecting mainland Asia. China was not even the first priority in East Asia, considering the weight thrown behind Japanese occupation. Criticism implicated the federal state as well: The goal of brokering peace between the Guomindang and the CCP led to allegations that a "Red cell" of China experts within the State Department had sabotaged US policy by advocating a coalition government in the first place.¹⁷

However, concerns regarding Chiang's efficacy lingered as rumors of his regime's oppressive tactics traveled across the Pacific, making mass aid to the

Guomintang a complicated option. One letter to Taft from Chinese nationals included an enclosure addressed to Chiang: “You must know that the country is paralyzed from your twenty years of political tutelage. You have trained many political slaves, whose political philosophy is dictatorship.”¹⁸ Contrary to the positive public image Chiang supporters promoted in the United States, even ex-isolationists were aware that the Guomintang regime was deeply flawed with questionable popularity among the Chinese. Some conservatives made statements about Chiang that echoed doubts long harbored by liberal internationalists.¹⁹ One of Taft’s close advisors even agreed with Owen Lattimore, describing the Guomintang as “feudalistic” and unable to understand American-style capitalism. As late as 1946, the senator himself characterized China as a “dictatorship.”²⁰

Once the Cold War crystallized, whether or not to support Chiang was a question answered in Manichean terms: Mao was a Communist, and Chiang was not. Therefore, Chiang should receive support from the United States. It was a message that met with general approval in the lead-up to the 1948 election. The lack of a definitive policy from the incumbent administration meant Truman faced harsh criticism on China from Republican opponents. Both GOP candidates—the conservative Taft and the moderate Gov. Thomas Dewey of New York—targeted Asia as a weak point.²¹

The Republican emphasis on China did not go unnoticed. In February, journalist Lowell Mellett classified criticism of China policy as a united, partisan attack. While he saw no real difference between Dewey’s and Taft’s motivations, he did note a significant change in the latter’s position on overseas intervention: “Mr. Taft hasn’t named his figure, but he doesn’t seem as economy-minded toward China as he is toward Europe.” His was an aggressive position intended “to show that the administration isn’t tough enough in its attitude toward Communism.”²²

Taft was indeed busy revamping his stance on foreign relations. At an appearance in Detroit early in the year, he characterized bipartisan foreign policy as a failure that “resulted from the character of the New Deal administration.”²³ He went on to give a (somewhat reserved) endorsement of Chiang: “[H]e is today, regardless of his faults, the only hope to prevent the spread of Communism in China.”²⁴ The Republican tradition of the Open Door and his own belief that the United States should be concerned with Asia first provided stronger motivation: “I believe very strongly that the Far East is ultimately even more important to our future peace and safety than is Europe. We should at least be as much concerned about the advance of Communism to the shores of the Pacific . . . as we are to its possible advance to the shores of the Atlantic.”²⁵

At that point, China was just a means to a diversified platform, not a moral or emotional issue for Taft. One indicator was his lack of faith in the Chinese people themselves. He classified the country as “ready to accept dictatorship” and “likely to acquiesce.” He trusted the United States’ capability to prevent catastrophe, not China’s resistance to Communism. Far from entrenched in ideology, his criticism of Asia policy was mercenary, designed to keep up with Dewey and more established internationalists.

Of course 1948 was not to be for either conservatives or the GOP as a whole. Taft lost the nomination to Dewey, who in turn lost to Truman in stunning fashion.²⁶ Shortly after November, GOP moderates took the opportunity to air their grievances about conservative control of the party. Sen. Irving M. Ives (R-NY) stated that, even if Taft was not a reactionary, he had become a symbol of reaction, to the detriment of the entire party.²⁷

Despite the turmoil, conservative internationalism had taken important first steps during Taft’s campaign. Just one year later, events in China would afford the GOP right ample opportunity to label liberal containment as a weak foundation for American diplomacy. Furthermore, the presumption of internal subversion of US China policy aligned with conservatives’ arguments that a large bureaucratic federal state facilitated the weakening of democratic interests both at home and abroad. The conclusion of the Chinese Revolution represented a point of no return in more ways than one.

Year of the Ox

1949 opened with the capture of Beijing on January 23 and unfolded with Communist troops gaining control of other major cities. By June, Mao was established enough to declare his willingness to open diplomatic relations with any country that showed respect for the new Communist state. In early August, the US State Department preempted Chiang’s imminent defeat and released a 1,054-page white paper specifying all the ways in which the Truman administration could not be held responsible for the fall of the Guomindang government.

The escalation of events in East Asia was a potential goldmine for Republicans. As John Davies described it, the “violent transformation of China” was incredibly distressing to an American people that had come to equate the Red Chinese with the Red Russians.²⁸ Any posture of bipartisanship regarding China disintegrated in the face of such upheaval. The exclusion of Vandenberg from Asian affairs allowed all Republicans to claim that a GOP executive would never have failed as badly in China. Even he, the face of bipartisanship in foreign affairs, began to wonder if continued GOP cooperation would

mean “more Chinas and more Hisses and more Russian bombs hanging over us.”²⁹ “It would be absurd to expect the opposition to share the responsibility for the Administration’s dismal record in China,” wrote former Henry P. Fletcher, undersecretary of state, in the conservative journal *Human Events*.³⁰ Joseph Martin called the white paper “a confession of inexcusable failure” and stated Republicans had no choice but to pursue the China issue alone.³¹

Still, the realistic future of American China policy remained unresolved because accurate information was hard to come by. GOP leaders who sought a practicable response, like Vandenberg and Rep. H. Alexander Smith (R-NJ), were limited by a lack of firsthand knowledge. A member of the Foreign Policy and Armed Services Committee, Smith embarked on a fact-finding tour of East Asia in autumn 1949 and in November released a report that illustrated the GOP’s rather awkward position. There was the expected washing of hands: “[W]e have never been consulted about policy in the Far East . . . those of us who have felt alarm over this unfortunate situation have been given the feeling that we were unwelcome meddlers in matters of policy that had already been settled.”³² He also included a startling, though somewhat restrained, critique of Chiang: “The weakness of the Nationalists has not primarily been corruption . . . but as a leadership that has not really understood Western democracy.”³³ With references to the continent’s gigantic landmass and manpower, Smith painted a frightening portrait of an Asian menace that posed a far greater danger than any European threat: “[W]hile we are preoccupied with Europe the real threat of World War III may be approaching us from the Asiatic side.”³⁴ In his synopsis for Republican colleagues, Smith suggested they adopt a position of wait and see while demanding the president refuse to recognize the CCP government. In a suggestion that foreshadowed events soon to come, he also called for a “united command in the Far Pacific” to be led by Gen. Douglas MacArthur.³⁵

Judging from Smith’s report, the GOP had difficulty determining a way forward. Its author was one of the party’s most knowledgeable members on Asia, but as he admitted a few years later, “In 1949, I was very much concerned about the Far Eastern situation and [Vandenberg] was also. We felt that our Far Eastern policy was completely futile and yet we were not entirely clear at the time what direction we should move.”³⁶ If the relatively informed Smith was stymied, then someone like Taft was at sea. Caught in the middle between caution and growing hysteria, any policy ideas he had on the subject of China were rapidly eroding. He confessed to Smith, “There is no subject which puzzles me so much. I know we should not be in the mess that we are in, but it is difficult to see how we can get out of it. I suppose now that Nationalist China is pretty well done for.”³⁷ Taft achieved a degree of clarity by avoid-

ing the subject of Chiang and instead focusing more generally on Taiwan. He even briefly flirted with the idea of official recognition of Communist China if PRC forces did not attempt to occupy the island. Still, despite identifying Taiwanese independence as a goal, the senator remained hazy about its future, whether it should resume its status as a Japanese territory or remain in the hands of Chiang's Nationalists. "I suppose only time can prove what the nature of the Communist government is, and there seems little to do now except wait."³⁸

That uncertainty and hesitance to rally behind Chiang demonstrated the degree to which the Guomindang had yet to win over what should have been a receptive audience. For even those Republicans eager to exploit the situation in East Asia, the China Question remained a policy conundrum—if not a rhetorical one—until the mainland was officially added to the list of territories under Communist control and Chiang fled to Taiwan in December 1949. Media outlets noted that, from the ordinary citizen's perspective, catastrophe in China appeared to be an overnight development rather than the culmination of a long-standing civil war.³⁹ It had been a grueling six months, marked by the detonation of the first Soviet atomic bomb and Alger Hiss's trial and eventual conviction for perjury in January 1950. The establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) only deepened existing impressions that America was losing the Cold War.⁴⁰

A map featured in *U.S. News & World Report* shortly after Chiang's flight illustrated that notion. "Nationalist Formosa," population 7.5 million, was tiny in comparison to Communist China with its nearly half a billion inhabitants and vast geographic territory. Readers were immediately struck by the imbalance between "What Is Left" and "What Is Lost." More so than the other two events, China engendered fear of an all-pervasive menace. An Open Door myth that cast the United States as China's protector transformed into suspicions of internal subversion once that portal had been slammed shut. The fall of this one particular ally magnified threats to both American democracy and national security.

Such impressions easily compounded perceptions of the free world rapidly disintegrating, which in turn led to a belated appreciation of Free China as a bulwark against the spread of communism and an assumption that the American Pacific Rim was in danger. China's long-standing place within the national imagination guaranteed that the issue would not readily dissipate. The implications of "Who lost China?" haunted the Truman administration, despite the State Department's best efforts to dissipate impressions of negligence. Secretary of State Acheson's irritation with the query remained evident ten years after the fact: "We never 'had' China. . . . Chiang Kai-shek lost



FIGURE 1.1. Illustrated map of Chiang's China, in "U.S. Draws a New Line in Asia," *U.S. News & World Report*, 13 January 1950, 24.

what authority he had—and it was not every much—over the vast areas and population of China.” The suggestion that the Truman administration was at fault was patently “untrue.”⁴¹ The US government had done all it could to help Chiang, including providing military advisors and approximately three billion dollars in grants, credits, and surplus property from the end of war with Japan until early 1949.⁴²

The fall-out over China’s communization had yet to be fully determined, but the political benefits of questioning the White House’s decision making were already enormous. It did not take long for Republicans, both conservative and moderate, to capitalize on the situation in earnest. According to an intraparty memo, Republican leaders had recognized the value of China as Democrats’ Achilles heel during the earliest days of World War II. The text noted the disparity between Roosevelt’s Atlantic policy and the “lukewarmness” of his strategy in the Pacific: “This policy [the Open Door] is distinctly a Republican contribution and one of which we can be very proud. In speaking out strongly on the matter, we are true not only to national interests, but to our very finest Party traditions.”⁴³ A decade later, the right opportunity presented itself, and as the accusations and denials flew, Republicans transformed China into an unequivocally partisan issue.

For conservatives in particular, 1949 cemented the formula of their nascent foreign relations strategy. China was to be the steppingstone to a broader platform. Taft’s own rapid transformation exemplified the currents

shaping American conservatism. The post-1949 Taft stood in stark, remarkable contrast to his public profile before the conclusion of the Chinese civil war. His first major speech on Asia showed how quickly his foreign policy had changed. While he vacillated on exactly what type of official commitment should be made, Taft did approve of using US naval ships already in the area as deterrents against communist occupation, and his emphasis on continued and extensive commitment relegated Taiwan to client state status.⁴⁴

During this transition period the senator revealed some surprising dimensions to his understanding of the relationship between the USSR and the new Beijing government. Unlike many of his colleagues, Taft saw the Chinese Communists as independent from the Kremlin. He also predicted American intervention in East Asia did not run the risk of martial conflict with the Soviet Union: "There is not the slightest evidence that Russia will go to war with us because we interfere with a (PRC) crossing to Formosa."⁴⁵ Taft went even further shortly thereafter, stating that US aid to a Guomindang invasion of mainland China would not provoke Soviet action, nor would aid to Greece, Turkey, and Iran.⁴⁶

While such assertions may have been overconfident, they were meant to show that Taft and other conservatives were formulating their own theories of Cold War relations. Conservatism and isolationism were no longer to be considered as one and the same. The *Dayton Journal-Herald* informed Ohio readers that they "should scotch once and for all, charges that he is an isolationist."⁴⁷ "Apparently those who make the charge (of isolationism) feel that anyone who varies from the pattern established by our state department is to be cast into outer darkness and labeled as an isolationist," said Taft.⁴⁸ Translation: Conservatives were not isolationist; they were blameless, unlike proponents of liberal containment. What the right offered was an alternative to the bipartisan foreign policy that had imperiled American interests abroad by losing China.

Factionalism between GOP elites appeared to abate somewhat as moderates and conservatives both surpassed their efforts in 1948 and made China a keystone issue early in 1950, an election year. Press analysis varied. The *Washington Evening Star* described all Republicans' turn to China as "an adventure in politics" and cited partisanship as the sole motivation.⁴⁹ The *New York Times* was more perceptive. It recognized that conservatives' desire for control had not dissipated despite the semblance of unity on China: On one side were conservatives who proposed increased US military presence in the Taiwan region, though whether that was actual troop occupation or a concentration of naval or air power was still subject to debate. On the other stood moderates who wanted to take advantage of political opportunity but hesitated to

advocate drastic measures.⁵⁰ This was not just a battle between two political parties; it was also a fight for the Republican institution.

Conservatives still harbored just as many, if not more, complaints against the moderates of their own party as they did Democrats. Older leaders partnered with younger conservatives like Smith and Sen. William Knowland, and together they entered the foreign policy debate to save their vision for Republicanism. Once Asia was framed an ideological issue, with defense of Free China as the vehicle for a return to bedrock American principles, the transition proved less fraught and unnatural than before.

Even if support for Free China was immediately associated with Chiang, not all who spoke out on the issue personally supported his leadership. Marked by a distinct utilitarianism, the right's adoption of China attempted to skirt the fine line between endorsement of a more aggressive foreign policy and wholehearted investment in Chiang. In a classified memorandum, MacArthur summed up the delicate position in which conservatives found themselves. The general declared the island's fate "largely rests with the United States," yet in the next paragraph admitted he was "unable to recommend the exact political, economic, and military measures which should be taken."⁵¹ Arming Chiang and setting him on his way was not an option, even for a prominent supporter of the Guomindang like MacArthur. The barest risk of a third world war was not worth it. Rather than as a panacea for China, the most productive way to use Chiang was as an instrument to criticize liberal consensus in the United States.

Yalta: Questions of Executive Power

Accordingly, conservative officials highlighted what they considered to be a tradition of special democratic friendship between the United States and China, presenting a narrative of how Democrats betrayed that relationship via unchecked executive power. By connecting China and Cold War strategy to familiar political issues like federal growth, the Republican right was able to make Cold War policy more legible to its members and their core constituents.

Conservatives had protested the expansion of executive authority within both domestic and international affairs since the 1930s. Taft's own urging of strict American neutrality before Pearl Harbor highlighted conservatives' long-standing fear of the link between wartime and increased executive power.⁵² With military conflict consuming Europe, he warned against a president who could seize hold of the economy and use military intervention as a conduit to unlimited growth of New Deal programs if the United States en-

tered World War II. “There are some who say that politics should stop at the water’s edge and that the nations must present a united front,” he stated. “I do not at all agree. . . . There is no principle of subjection to the Executive in foreign policy. Only Hitler or Stalin would assert it.”⁵³ Taft saw the combination of unchecked power and demagoguery as a potential path to dictatorship. A vigilant Congress was the sole entity that could maintain fiscal responsibility and protect citizens from an overly active government; the legislative branch therefore had a duty to serve as a counterweight to White House unilateralism. Republican opponents to war might be branded “isolationists,” but Taft used a different term: “They are the peace party,” he asserted.⁵⁴

With the transition from antifascism to anticommunism, the Yalta agreement of 1945 was an ideal way to link the national and the global using a familiar narrative of liberalism’s failures. Conservatives had long held doubts about the confidential compacts.⁵⁵ “I am not happy about the country’s foreign policy. Through the agreements made at Tehran and Yalta by President Roosevelt, and at Potsdam by President Truman, we practically abandoned all of the ideals for which the war was fought,” Taft asserted in 1947.⁵⁶ After 1949, backlash against decisions made at the conference itself raised larger questions about who controlled US foreign policy and how such a concentration of power could potentially damage national interests both at home and abroad. The blame rested, conservatives argued, with an executive branch that was allowed to wield too much power over a large federal apparatus as well as the nation’s participation in multilateral organizations.⁵⁷

It was the provision that granted Soviet troops access to Manchuria during the final weeks of World War II and the subsequent fate of China that raised the outcry against Yalta to full volume. Faced with the reality of a China under communism and the demise of what they believed was a special US-China relationship that dated back half a century, American supporters of the Guomindang—some of whom had the money to make sure that their opinions were heard—mobilized to lay blame for the “loss.”⁵⁸ Denunciation of East Asian policy grew more frenetic with each passing week. In 1950 alone, Knowland delivered 115 hard-charging speeches on the Far East, a feat that earned him the nickname “the senator from Formosa.”⁵⁹ Even former isolationists like Taft began to openly advocate intervention to combat communism in the Pacific.

Agreements like Yalta had also exacted costs closer to home. In practical terms, Taft charged that American taxpayers would have to pay for federal agencies expanded to administer foreign aid. The moral price was even higher: “I am not happy about the country’s foreign policy. Through the agreements made at Tehran and Yalta by President Roosevelt, and at Potsdam

by President Truman, we practically abandoned all of the ideals for which the war was fought.”⁶⁰ Taft’s allegation was clear that, through secret wartime negotiations, an American president had abandoned the nation’s public promises to uphold freedom around the world.

Decrying the erosion of traditional morals and values was easy; translating critique into policy was another task altogether. Former president Herbert Hoover was among the first to offer a reconsideration of Taiwan’s status vis-à-vis Yalta and other wartime agreements. Immediately after Chiang’s flight from the mainland, he wrote to remind Knowland that the Cairo Declaration of 1943, which stipulated Japanese imperial territories would be returned to the Republic of China in the event of Allied victory, and the 1945 Potsdam proclamation, which specified the terms for Japanese surrender, were “executive agreements.” That status meant they were never ratified as treaties by the Senate and were therefore legally questionable. Hoover suggested, “You might think over an argument that could be made; namely, that Formosa and the Pescadores are still in MacArthur’s jurisdiction.”⁶¹

If Cairo and Potsdam were null and void, and if Taiwan and other offshore islands were still technically Japanese, not Chinese, possessions, then they would fall under the general’s authority as head of the Supreme Command of Allied Powers (SCAP) in Japan. Exactly what that meant for the security of Taiwan was left undefined—perhaps the occupation government in Japan would be expected to intervene if Mao moved across the strait. Whatever the possibilities, MacArthur’s status as a popular conservative figure offered reassurance that Taiwan would be defended. Hoover’s plan demonstrated a remarkable willingness to intercede to protect the island from communist aggression, even if it meant nullifying its status as an independent, sovereign government.

Although the details of his suggestion were rather drastic, Hoover raised the larger issue about growth of executive power at the hands of an expanded US foreign policy, particularly when it came to postwar settlement in East Asia. Other Republican conservatives had also been thinking along similar lines. For example, in response to the State Department’s 1949 white paper on China, Sen. Bridges described Yalta as “a trade of territory which did not belong to either the United States or Great Britain.”⁶² In other words, Roosevelt and Winston Churchill had flouted the principles of self-determination outlined in the 1941 Atlantic Charter in the name of striking a quick bargain with Stalin; an American president had broken a public promise during secret negotiations. Increasingly, conservative leaders treated their suspicions as fact, and they presented them as such when evaluating both China policy and the entire relationship between US foreign relations and executive power.

As Hoover's early example suggested, the shift from reactionary rhetoric to policy proposals would soon follow.

Republican conservatives were certainly the loudest, but they were not the only members of the GOP who believed the United States owed non-Communist China a debt because of wartime negotiations. In 1950 John Foster Dulles argued American interest in Taiwan was "deep and legitimate." The nation owed a "special responsibility because of close connection between disposition of Formosa and conclusion of Japanese Peace Treaty." Dulles did not wish to cast doubt on the validity of Potsdam and Cairo, though he argued the existing Chinese mainland government was not in power when those agreements were negotiated and Taiwan should not be subjected to Communist rule as a Chinese territory. Acheson agreed. He even indicated an interest in providing aid for the Chinese on Taiwan to overthrow the CCP on one condition: They were under new leadership that was not Chiang Kai-shek's.⁶³

Indeed, Chiang proved the dividing line. On one side stood Democrats and moderate Republicans whose incredulity about the Guomindang yielded a vague, piecemeal China policy. On the other, conservative Republican officials, relatively inexperienced (and often ill informed), came to view Chiang's anticommunism as the only credential that mattered. Any reservations they previously held dissipated in the face of communism's rapid expansion in Asia.

War Abroad, War at Home

Given prevalent doubts about the Guomindang's government's abilities, reactionary responses to developments in China might have been short-lived if the Cold War in Asia had run a quieter course after 1949. Michael Schaller describes how the rebuilding of Japan and securing a "great crescent" of capitalism and military defense along the Pacific Rim were the cornerstones of containment in Asia.⁶⁴ Such a strategy never made China the centerpiece of US Asia policy after World War II. However, political tension over its fate reached a new crescendo after North Korean troops crossed the 38th parallel on June 25, 1950. Eager to counter claims that he was soft on communism in Asia, Truman acted almost immediately, committing significant amounts of American resources in support of United Nations (UN) Security Council Resolutions 82 and 83.

The intervention was expected to quickly succeed, and for the moment, Truman enjoyed an unusual level of bipartisan support.⁶⁵ However, Republican conservatives refused to commit to the show of harmony. Just three days after the conflict began, they went on the offensive. "[T]his entirely unfortu-

nate crisis has been produced first, by the outrageous, aggressive attitude of Soviet Russia, and second, by the bungling and inconsistent foreign policy of the administration,” Taft stated in a Senate address. “The Chinese policy of the administration gave basic encouragement to the North Korean aggression.”⁶⁶ The message he intended was obvious: Democratic foreign policy had been ineffective on all fronts, resulting in another hot war in the Pacific.

Truman’s choice of MacArthur to lead UN forces in Korea certainly helped to quell such accusations. The general’s record of service as a military commander and tenure as head of SCAP during the occupation of Japan made him one of the most celebrated military figures of the era. Moreover, he was enormously popular with conservative Republicans who often floated his name as a candidate for office.⁶⁷ Truman accomplished the dual task of outflanking right-wing critics who said he was soft on Asian communism while negating the possibility of the general becoming a nearby asset for the GOP during midterm elections.⁶⁸ The general’s appointment could also temper notice of the fact that the Truman administration (with MacArthur’s concurrence) took pains to forbid Chiang from contributing manpower in Korea for fear of the PRC joining the war. Ostensibly, the Seventh Fleet was deployed to protect Taiwan from aggression, but it was also there to ensure that Nationalist forces “cease all air and sea operations against the mainland.”⁶⁹

Bipartisanship proved short-lived as military stalemate replaced the prospect of quick, sure victory. Indeed, there was fundamental disagreement between the Truman administration and its conservative critics as to what actually constituted victory: containment of communism to the 38th parallel versus its eradication on the Korean peninsula and beyond. UN forces’ October campaign into North Korea and toward the Yalu River brought those competing views to full light. As Truman ordered MacArthur to pull back for fear of Chinese mobilization, Asia Firsters decried the wasted opportunity to drive allied forces northward into China. The more virulent among them asserted the president was keeping MacArthur and, by extension, Chiang on a leash. The use of Nationalist troops came to be considered a potential cost-saving measure and, ultimately, a way to spare American lives.⁷⁰

That theory held even after the momentum had reversed. When PRC troops entered the conflict on November 26 and UN forces suffered two withdrawals south of the 38th parallel, conservatives framed those developments as preventable. They argued Truman had circumvented Congress by going to the UN, and once war was underway, he had refused to take necessary steps toward total victory by decisively engaging the PRC when MacArthur had momentum on his side. If only Truman had chosen to act aggressively rather than remain committed to mere containment.⁷¹ Angered by the stalemate,

conservatives raised the familiar argument about executive overreach. Lest anybody forget, Truman had “usurped his powers as Commander in Chief” and had “no legal authority” to bypass Congress by going to the UN. There were also economic repercussions to monitor, including “arbitrary government control,” inflation, and a drastic increase in the national debt.⁷²

Conservatives redoubled their support of MacArthur, who still sought expanded engagement with Communist forces via a blockade of the China coast, air and naval attacks of the Chinese mainland, and the acceptance of Chiang’s earlier offer of Guomintang troops.⁷³ “[W]e can release Chiang Kai-shek from the restraints we have imposed upon him, and it may be that he can create enough diversion to occupy the Chinese Communists. . . . We need commit no American soldiers and should not.”⁷⁴ The United States ostensibly had only to liberate Chiang and donate a relatively small amount of aid to secure its own interests.

Given that PRC engagement in Korea began almost simultaneously, the November 1950 elections bore the imprimatur of the Cold War in Asia. As products of the first national campaigns since the fall of China in 1949 and onset of the Korean conflict, they highlighted the degree to which the right’s agenda and prospects for political relevance had been overhauled.⁷⁵ Taft’s reelection campaign in Ohio was a telling example of how conservatives buttressed their foreign policy credentials. His campaign workers strove to connect with a growing ethnic electorate that included Poles, Italians, Rumanians, Hungarians, Greeks, Jews, and Czechs—groups that usually voted Democrat—by playing up international affairs. When relevant, Taft supporters reminded those voters that the senator had opposed the agreements at Tehran, Yalta, and Potsdam, urging naturalized citizens to vote for an official who had not betrayed their homelands.⁷⁶ The ballot tallies confirmed the success of his new platform as Taft won by a massive margin of over 430,000 votes, the second-largest Senate election plurality in Ohio history.⁷⁷

That mandate all but guaranteed Taft’s third run for the White House during the next national election cycle, and he began to build his candidacy almost immediately with a lengthy Senate address on January 5, 1951. This was the speech that launched the so-called Great Debate over foreign policy and how it should be executed.⁷⁸ “The principle purpose of the foreign policy of the United States is to maintain the liberty of our people. . . . [W]e must avoid war like poison,” Taft stated.⁷⁹ He protested the extensive use of American land forces overseas. Directly echoing a plan for “victory on the cheap” advocated earlier by Lt. Gen. Claire Lee Chennault (the famous fighter pilot who helped train the Chinese air force), the senator recommended development of naval and air power as a cost-effective substitute for on-the-ground presence

overseas.⁸⁰ Not only did he consider extensive American military deployment extraneous to the achievement of peace, it was a long-term expense that would trigger “inflation and decrease in the value of the dollar.”⁸¹

Even as conservatism experienced significant validation at the ballot box, the Korean conflict remained unresolved and the rift between Truman and MacArthur deepened. In April 1951, the general wrote to House Speaker Joseph Martin in a fit of frustration. “[I]f we lose this war to Communism in Asia,” he averred, “the fall of Europe is inevitable; win it, and Europe most probably would avoid war and yet preserve freedom.”⁸² MacArthur interpreted the president’s adherence to containment as defeatist. After Martin, who had been demanding a second front and use of Guomindang troops in Korea, read the letter aloud in the Senate, Truman announced the general’s recall on grounds of insubordination on April 11.

Asia Firsters took the dismissal as a symptom of long-standing US failure on mainland Asia. During the Senate’s inquiry, William Knowland tied MacArthur’s removal from duty to post-Yalta China and inappropriate executive privilege: “When actions are taken that lead to hundreds of millions of Chinese going into the Soviet orbit with the destruction of their lives and their liberty, is this private business? Is it comparable to the relationship of a doctor and his patient, attorney and his client, priest and the parishioner? I think not.”⁸³ The loss of China and the ensuing Korean conflict were traceable to a secretive White House. That vital decisions could be made without regulation indicated that the president wielded too much power over the direction of US diplomacy and the new national security state. MacArthur’s appearance during a joint session of Congress made the ongoing debate over balance of power all the more heated. From the House podium, at the behest of conservative Republicans, the general launched his public retaliation against Truman: “War’s very object is victory, not prolonged indecision. In war, there is no substitute for victory,” aimed directly at executive leadership that claimed the status quo of containment as its foreign policy goal.⁸⁴ Richard Rovere and Arthur Schlesinger Jr. noted the enormous impact of the MacArthur controversy. Millions of listeners heard the radio broadcast while newspapers ran reprints of the address the next morning—Broadway even released recordings of the song “Old Soldiers Never Die.” The situation in East Asia “galvanized deep and spreading national bafflement and discontent.”⁸⁵

In the wake of such public response lay further opportunity for Republicans to ratchet up their attack on the Truman administration. An April episode of the radio program “Meet Your Congress” demonstrated how the MacArthur controversy had intensified partisan divides on Asia policy. The panel that week consisted of two Democrats (Herbert Lehman [NY] and Hu-

bert Humphrey [MN]) and two conservative Republican senators (Taft and Homer Capeheart). Never entirely civil, the discussion devolved into a verbal brawl. Taft channeled MacArthur, asking, "What is the purpose of war except to win a war?" Capeheart accused Lehman and Humphrey of harboring procommunist sympathies.⁸⁶ Their remarks reflected how conservatives had latched on to Korea as tangible evidence of Truman's refusal to win against global communism.⁸⁷

Just weeks later, MacArthur himself gave extended testimony before joint meetings of the Senate Armed Services and Foreign Relations Committees. During one appearance, he asserted the United States should act on its own in China if the UN would not give its approval. Anything less was "appeasement" that could lead to another world war: "[I]f they can't see exactly the road that they are following in Asia, why then we had better protect ourselves and go it alone." Unilateral action buttressed by cutting edge military technology was preferable to war applied in a "piecemeal way."⁸⁸ If there was a distinction between appeasement of communism and appeasement of the UN, MacArthur left it undefined. What was clear was how his hopes for the reprioritization and realization of US foreign policy complemented that of Asia Firsters.

Nevertheless, the scope of what to do for Chiang remained a crucial point of difference between MacArthur and conservative leaders. While both recommended aid to Taiwan for quick victory in Korea, the latter never seriously considered using the Korean War as a gateway for restoration of the Guomintang on mainland China.⁸⁹ For example, on "Meet Your Congress," Taft stated, "In recent months, it has, of course, been very doubtful whether aid to Nationalist Government could be effective, and no one desires to waste American efforts."⁹⁰ His more tempered view demonstrated a healthy degree of pragmatism about Chiang and an emphasis on the feasible. After recent engagement with PRC troops in Korea, investment in the Guomintang was a dubious prospect not worth the risk of World War III.

The more useable elements of MacArthur's proposals bolstered a sustainable conservative foreign-policy ethos by emphasizing the preservation of national unilateralism, as well as the use of available military and technological means to claim decisive victory in any war, hot or cold. As Rovere and Schlesinger recognized, response to the United States' latest war in East Asia and the MacArthur controversy was "a direct reaction to the Chinese catastrophe itself."⁹¹ The tandem of China and Korea, combined with internal fears of communist subversion, meant conservative internationalism reaped significant dividends from perceptions of a domino effect in the Pacific. With the renewal of military conflict in East Asia, Asia Firsters could continue at-

tempts to question executive power and the endgame of liberal containment. The prolonged timeline of armistice negotiations (June 1951 to July 1953) meant they could persistently claim the liberal brand of anticommunism was unwilling or unable to end armed conflict quickly and favorably.

Moreover, the war overseas engendered extensive political warfare at home. By the time a peace settlement was signed, Korea had provided an effective backdrop for the notoriety of Sen. Joseph McCarthy, as well as a host of issues reemphasized by the phenomenon that bore his name.

McCarthy

McCarthy's rapid rise seemingly went hand in hand with Asia First internationalism. Because the two phenomena overlapped so much, assuming that their influences on conservatism were one and the same was easy. Both originated out of criticism of US Asia policy. Both articulated an antistatism that denounced liberalism and a large federal state as the culprits behind recent setbacks in the Cold War. Above all, both capitalized on a heightened climate of fear that the United States was somehow losing the fight against communism from the inside out. The Hiss and Rosenberg trials, the crusade led by Sen. Patrick McCarran (D-NV) to restrict immigration and monitor suspicious individuals and groups, and the stalemate in Korea helped to buttress that perception.⁹²

In short order, "Tail-gunner Joe" seized on established themes of internal leaks and treason in East Asian affairs and expanded their applicability to a wide variety of federal agencies, including the armed forces. "In examining the record, it will be necessary to discuss the actions of certain individuals because history does not just happen. It is made by men—men with names and faces, and the only way that the course of history can be changed is by getting rid of the specific individuals who we find are bad for America," McCarthy avowed.⁹³ Such rhetoric struck a deep chord. One enthusiastic supporter from Oakland, California, wrote, "All real Americans who love America above any foreign group of ideologists [*sic*] are with you. They are sick and tired and have a belly full [*sic*] of our foreign ideology boys."⁹⁴ Truman told Acheson that he believed McCarthy to be "a pathological liar"—then immediately acknowledged he could hardly repeat such an opinion in public. Even the president could do little in the face of an ingrained system of institutional deference and the long-standing history of anticommunism that helped sustain McCarthy's individual quest for the limelight.⁹⁵

Despite the fact that Republican conservatism stood to profit from this new wave of anticommunism, fault lines did exist between McCarthy and

more established leaders. As one of Taft's advisors noted, "I cannot feel that any sense of loyalty to any of us or to any one at all has any part in the picture."⁹⁶ Taft himself was divided about McCarthyism. His public statements on communist subversion suggested unalloyed support for the new climate in Washington, and biographer William S. White described Taft's attitude on McCarthy as "fundamentally pro."⁹⁷ Yet in private moments the senator expressed apprehension about the way in which his colleague operated, fretting that a witch hunt could sully the party's reputation.⁹⁸ Herbert Hoover reinforced that instinct, describing McCarthy as a pressing concern. "He has had a great life by the dismissal of (John) Service," Hoover wrote. The measures the unpredictable McCarthy would take with his newfound fame and power were deeply concerning.⁹⁹

In sum, McCarthy was a volatile asset. His status as an elite GOP official and his efforts in the name of anticommunism complemented long-term plans for conservative internationalism. At the same time, he could not entirely be trusted to do the right thing for the party. The senator's personal popularity forced senior officials to make a choice. Resolution of the issue came when the White House attempted to intervene in Senate operations, namely, the Tydings Committee investigations into McCarthy's allegations. Any executive mitigation was subject to interpretation as a violation of constitutional balance of power. It also triggered Republican partisanship. Taft lashed out at Truman in a Senate address, labeling the president's appeal for reform a "bitter and prejudiced attack on Republicans in the Senate." He presented a united GOP front in the face of Democratic aggression and took the opportunity to again assert Republican innocence in the foreign policy that lost China: "There never was any consultation regarding the policy in China or the Far East. . . . 'Bi-partisan foreign policy' is being used by Mr. Truman as a slogan to condemn any Republican who disagrees with Mr. Truman's unilateral foreign policy secretly initiated and put into effect without any real consultation with Congress." Returning to the issue of presidential fault, Taft called for "an investigation unhampered by executive obstinacy and name calling."¹⁰⁰ It was one of his strongest outbursts since battles with Roosevelt and the New Deal in the late 1930s.

McCarthy's longest lasting contribution to conservatism was perhaps the way in which his crusade highlighted the fundamental issue of congressional authority. Support for him symbolized minority opposition to the administration while challenging his intent could be construed as complicity in a "rubber stamp" Congress. In his leadership position, Taft attempted to bridge caution and partisan support by claiming McCarthy had done much to arouse a public previously ignorant of the communist threat. Although it was "un-

fortunate” the Wisconsin senator failed to thoroughly check his facts, Taft on balance believed McCarthy had provided the country “a real service.”¹⁰¹ With the next round of national elections fast approaching, the junior senator stood to make a significant contribution to Republican victories if he continued to heighten impressions of the GOP as the party that was proactively tough on internal subversion.

A Foreign Policy for Americans

It fell to Taft to demonstrate that the heart of conservatism had incorporated internationalism in a well-rounded, sustainable way. Blunt rejection of a strict interpretation of the Monroe Doctrine was a major step. “I do not agree with those who think we can completely abandon the rest of the world and rely solely upon the defense of the continent,” he stated in the Senate at the beginning of 1951.¹⁰² The logical follow-up was to articulate the conservative answer to liberal internationalism. Released in November 1951, *A Foreign Policy for Americans* marked Taft’s official coming out as a “conservative Cold Warrior.”¹⁰³

The introduction quickly set an aggressive tone that challenged both containment and Truman himself: “I have written this book to emphasize the fact that the freedom of the people of the United States is in serious danger from the foreign policy of the present Administration. I have frequently written of the danger to liberty from the constant increase in the activity, spending, and the power of the Federal Government, but today the threat from foreign policy is even greater.”¹⁰⁴ *A Foreign Policy* was an overtly partisan piece of writing; after all, it was the springboard from which Taft planned to launch his third campaign for the White House. His leadership status within the party also meant the book was widely significant from a political perspective. The slim volume articulated a diplomatic ethos that represented a turning point for the GOP right’s agenda, one that signaled that all of conservatism—even the staunchest old guard—had undergone a fundamental shift.

As could be expected, Taft tackled issues and institutions that had long been thorns in the right’s side. In many ways his book read like a compendium of familiar conservative complaints about the growth of executive power, the UN, and how US policy helped the “Russian Menace” to expand.

Yet the book was no mere knee-jerk rejection of Democratic policy. Using a combination of political philosophy, history, and geographic case studies, Taft called for selective intervention, tactical anticommunism via arms and economic aid, and defensive military deployment, as well as underground infiltration of communist states. Ironically, his assessment plainly bore the

influence of George Kennan, but it was that very similarity that showed how the very backbone of the GOP right had embraced a multifaceted approach to global anticommunism. Unlike previous eras, diplomatic isolationism and armed intervention were no longer the only options for those who identified with conservatism. An approach that provided an alternative to liberal containment—however modest in variation—was a subtle but sure mark of change.

The text also dealt with philosophical matters that transcended the immediacy of the next election cycle. Of chief concern was how the nation could balance an unprecedented role in the global community with its responsibility to its own citizens. According to Taft, US foreign policy should take the well-being of the American people as its primary goal. If the United States protected them from external threats (i.e., communists, entangling diplomatic alliances) as well as internal ones (e.g., subversion, a dictatorial presidency), the entire world would be better off. “We cannot afford to destroy at home the very liberty which we must sell to the rest of the world as the basis for progress and happiness.”¹⁰⁵ Taft and other conservatives had used the same line of reasoning during World War II, when foreign intervention threatened to make permanent the programs of the New Deal and grant the president sweeping powers.¹⁰⁶ The Cold War demanded the same, if not a higher, degree of vigilance against forces that imperiled American exceptionalism from within and without.

The book’s last chapters were its most effective. They compared two case studies of US postwar intervention, one in Western Europe and one in East Asia, and together illustrated regional contours within conservative internationalism. The contrast between Taft’s proposals for the two areas was indeed striking. For Europe, the senator relied on familiar complaints regarding economic and military aid, collective security commitments, and peacetime troop contributions.¹⁰⁷ His overarching concern was that Western European states use their own material and human resources to protect themselves from Soviet aggression. The United States should sell arms, not give them away. It should donate manpower only under specific circumstances. Its policies should not “speak of Western Europe as if it were a single country,” but rather differentiate between nations worth going to war for (England and Germany) and those that were not (France and Italy).¹⁰⁸ At bottom, the nation’s security commitments in Europe, via the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and a weak UN, were overtaxing in all senses of the word. In a foreshadowing of the Nixon Doctrine, Taft inferred that the United States could not be expected to address crises everywhere and thereby expend its own resources; allies needed to contribute much more fully. When it did choose

to act, the United States should be able to do so without compromising its unilateralism.¹⁰⁹

Taft could not but help raise the examples of China and Korea even as he ostensibly addressed Atlantic affairs. If Europe received the “lion’s share” of assistance, it came at the expense of allies in East Asia who did not get the arms and equipment they needed to combat the communist threat before and after 1949.¹¹⁰ In previous conversations, the senator had denied prioritizing the Pacific over the Atlantic: “What I object to is that while we didn’t mind risking a war in Europe, we weren’t willing to risk any war in Asia. . . . I want the same treatment in the East as in the West; in the West as in the East.”¹¹¹ *A Foreign Policy* repeated that this was a matter of basic fairness. Why would US policy refuse to grant Asian partners the same attention and support they did European ones, some of whom were less deserving? Providing the same “treatment” for Chinese Nationalist and South Korean allies meant arming and training them so they could combat communist aggression themselves, with a sensible amount of American support that did not include deploying American soldiers.¹¹²

Taft frequently cited what happened in China during the late 1940s as the best example to date of communist methods and diplomatic errors made by liberals. Roosevelt had conceded too much in the face of Stalin’s aggressive demands and secretly “bargained away” Manchuria at Yalta. Truman was accused of having completely “abandoned” the Guomindang after 1947.¹¹³ The disparity between US action in Europe (decisive and effective) and policy on Asia (weak and compromising) was US foreign policy’s Achilles heel, Taft argued. “I only insist that we apply to Asia the same basic policy which we apply to Europe. . . . [M]y quarrel is with those who wish to go all-out in Europe, even beyond our capacity, and who at the same time refuse to apply our general program and strategy to the Far East.”¹¹⁴

With such statements about arming the Guomindang, any initial misgivings about Chiang and his government had been set aside. The Nationalists, along with the British, were the standard by which foreign allies should be judged, heralded as the type of stalwart anticommunist allies that should be cultivated and helped. Qualifying nations like Nationalist China were willing to fight for themselves and had experience with democracy; in other words, they possessed attributes similar to those of the United States. Consciously or not, Taft translated “Asia First” into a Cold War, internationalized version of “America First.”

During the early 1950s, the mere suggestion of arming Chiang and supporting his invasion of mainland China was bound to provoke controversy. Britain and France vehemently opposed such a plan, and while the nature

of the Sino-Soviet alliance remained unclear, there was the danger of major consequences if such a campaign failed. In an uncharacteristic show of bravado, Taft scoffed at the suggestion. He downplayed theories that intervention beyond containment in Asia could lead to another worldwide conflict. An invasion of mainland China, led by Chiang and sponsored by the United States, would be “no possible threat” to Russia’s sense of security. Such a maneuver could hardly compare to the menace of NATO forces encircling the Soviet Union and its satellites, about which Moscow had yet to do anything. Even if there was a chance the Soviets would react, it was a risk worth taking.¹¹⁵

The theory relied on two presumptions. The first was that Stalin would not hazard a third world war for Mao; second, Chinese communism could not withstand an Allied assault without the Kremlin’s patronage. Like many American officials at the time, Taft held the misimpression that Chinese Communism marched in lockstep with, and was dependent on, the Soviet state. He therefore framed Mao’s victory as a Russian triumph and Chiang’s loss the result of American errors. Neither development was Chinese, per se.

Although a fundamental misunderstanding of the CCP’s depth, as well as Beijing’s relationship with the Soviet Union, skewed many conservatives’ perception of what could be accomplished in East Asia, the influence of an Asia First platform extended beyond proposals for the region itself. In fact, it shaped conservative internationalism’s entire defense platform. From calls for reformation of executive power to criticism of the American involvement in the UN, events of the Korean War in particular served as direct inspiration.

For example, the demand for a stronger air force that could deploy necessary atomic weaponry and expand quickly in times of war was central to *A Foreign Policy*’s defense proposals. Not only would the United States hold a technological and geopolitical edge over the Soviet Union, it could do so while relying less on traditional manpower.¹¹⁶ As demonstrated by their fierce opposition to the “time tax” of Universal Military Training, conservatives had long protested the expansion of a standing army.¹¹⁷ After the Truman administration rebuffed MacArthur’s desire to engage Chinese Communist forces above the Yalu River for fear of awakening China’s military masses, the GOP right argued liberal containment lacked the will to win. Taft agreed US forces could not hope to match Soviet and Chinese numbers on the ground, but that was not the point: “The same old-fashioned obsession for ground combat is dominating our policy today” when it was within the United States’ power to dominate the Cold War via air and tactical weaponry.¹¹⁸

The text emphasized themes of thrift and efficiency as crucial to protection of national interests around the world. After all, intervention was expensive. In war, US officials needed to be unafraid to use the force necessary to bring

missions like Korea to decisive, successful conclusion. Conservative internationalism was presented as a way not only to minimize the loss of American lives and money in the event of conflict but also to prevent communist aggression so that it was unnecessary for vital resources to be expended in the first place.

As its most visible leader, Taft was in a position to show just how much the GOP right had changed on foreign policy. His words represented a firm dedication to expansion of the armed forces and the defense state, something that was not integral to the conservative platform just a decade earlier. At the same time, retention of traditional values, such as a balanced budget and an unapologetic vision of American exceptionalism, tempered all the change.¹¹⁹ The building up of the nation's air force meant a cutting back of its spending; it was a policy designed to keep an eye on a balanced budget and appealed to voters concerned about that bottom line. Finally, Taft's foreign policy was a public commitment to technology, which allowed an ex-isolationist to now dub Democratic foreign policy as "old-fashioned." Conservatism now styled itself an innovator in a new political and diplomatic age.

By early 1952, 52,500 copies of *A Foreign Policy* were in circulation.¹²⁰ Shortly after its publication, MacArthur reached out to congratulate Taft on a "masterly" effort: "I have read the book and believe that its issuance will greatly strengthen your position with the American people. It is unequivocal and clears away many of the cobwebs of uncertainty which are spun so carefully by propagandists and the invisible government," he wrote. "Your aggressive and energetic campaign is splendid in every way. You are immeasurably improving your position, and everywhere I go I find this to be the case."¹²¹ MacArthur's encouragement was essential, for he was a potential contender for the White House himself. Such words indicated that the general was unlikely to run himself and, in turn, could be open to formally endorsing Taft. Engaging the former's outsized personality had its downsides, however. As cartoonist Newton Pratt deftly pointed out, MacArthur beating the drum threatened to claim the spotlight and disrupt the campaign at hand, a pattern all too familiar to Truman.

Media response to the book varied between high commendation and harsh criticism with little in between. *The Atlantic*, for example, featured reviews of the book in two consecutive issues. Arthur Schlesinger Jr. dubbed its ideas "The New Isolationism"—a "fundamental attack" on the nation's God-given responsibility to promote democracy around the world. Much more dangerous than its predecessor, this new doctrine sought an active place within the crafting of foreign policy, yet it refused to relinquish the spirit of the Monroe Doctrine. Schlesinger was perhaps even more perplexed by the



FIGURE 1.2. Newton Pratt, “The Voice of Experience,” *Sacramento Bee*, 5 March 1952, Harry S. Truman Library Photographs, Accession No. 60-345.

lapse in judgment by the “ordinarily logical” Taft: “There is something deeper here—some essential perplexity of a powerful mind confounded by events which he cannot quite fit into a consistent scheme of interpretation,” he wrote. “Senator Taft, indeed, is a man in transition, an Old Isolationist trying hard to come to terms with the modern world.” In the end, Schlesinger was not about to let empathy obstruct progress. “Once we have exorcised this latest version of isolationism, we may at last begin to live in the twentieth century,” he concluded.¹²²

Political science professor W. Reed West had a very different assessment. He praised the book as a reflection of its author’s “well-defined foreign policy—a positive program within a global philosophy.” It was true that Taft

was susceptible to criticism because of his past reputation and a personal tendency toward absolute frankness, but he deserved credit. His foreign policy outlay took into account the nation's financial resources and the burden born by taxpayers. While Schlesinger moaned about New Isolationists "tainted with unilateralism, McCarthyism, and capitalism," West saw a foreign policy ethos based on common sense. From his perspective, this new conservative position "appear[ed] not to be isolationism but internationalism translated into practical statesmanship."¹²³

Early in 1952, Taft spoke before a group of Denver Republicans on the subject of international affairs. In a few brief sentences he summed up the transformation conservatism had experienced over the past few years: "How can any Republican avoid the foreign policy issue? It affects every feature of domestic policy."¹²⁴ The entire GOP, not just moderate Republicans who participated in bipartisan diplomacy, had to engage with foreign policy because it had a direct impact on matters at home. From taxes to executive power to internal subversion, the Cold War made its presence known in everyday American life. Therefore, conservatives, many of them former neutralists or isolationists, needed to understand that foreign policy was domestic policy, and vice versa.

China and East Asia were the catalysts for that decompartmentalization. Even if Taft seemed at times to struggle with uneven analysis, his book showcased the partnership between the GOP right and the Guomindang. The bond made perfect sense. Frustration with the Korean War, the Cold War dynamics of the GOP, and the public's lingering receptiveness to the Open Door ideal that Chiang represented meant emphasis on East Asia could yield considerable electoral gains. Chiang himself benefitted from the efforts of a political faction that needed him to present its internationalism as much as he needed them to keep his hopes afloat.

A major part of the American narrative of global benevolence, the open door to a "free China" was a salient way for rightwing Republicans to craft a more popular, widely relatable approach to foreign policy. As the title of Taft's book suggested, he and fellow conservatives aimed for a broader audience than the relatively esoteric one familiar with George Kennan's "Article X." The turn to an Asia First strategy empowered each reader: "We are embarked on a voyage at this moment in which a continued failure of understanding and judgment may wreck the greatest adventure in freedom the human race has ever known."¹²⁵ All Americans, not just elite State Department bureaucrats, were responsible to stay the course of "freedom" and give the rest of the world hope. That undiluted articulation of exceptionalism created a sense of national community, as well as destiny, to be fulfilled by all citizens.

The strategy adopted by elite conservative officials dovetailed perfectly with developments within the private sector. As early as the 1930s, activists in the United States had considered the Guomindang government to be a democratic counterpart in East Asia. After the Communist revolution, grassroots efforts to force the direction of US China policy in favor of increasing aid to Chiang's efforts on Taiwan and beyond tested the traditional boundaries of formal diplomacy. Waged outside of government with the hopes of influencing public policy, the campaign also engendered one of the enduring myths of Cold War politics, that of the so-called China Lobby.