

The Dixie Mission 1944: The First US Intelligence Encounter with the Chinese Communists

Bob Bergin

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The Dustbin of History

The Dixie Mission was one that failed in conventional terms, for it didn't lead anywhere. For the moment at least it lies in the dustbin of history.¹

The first deep encounter of American officials with the Chinese Communists came in 1944, during World War II, when a US Army observer group was sent to meet with the communist leadership at its headquarters stronghold at Yen-an in North China. It was essentially an intelligence mission:

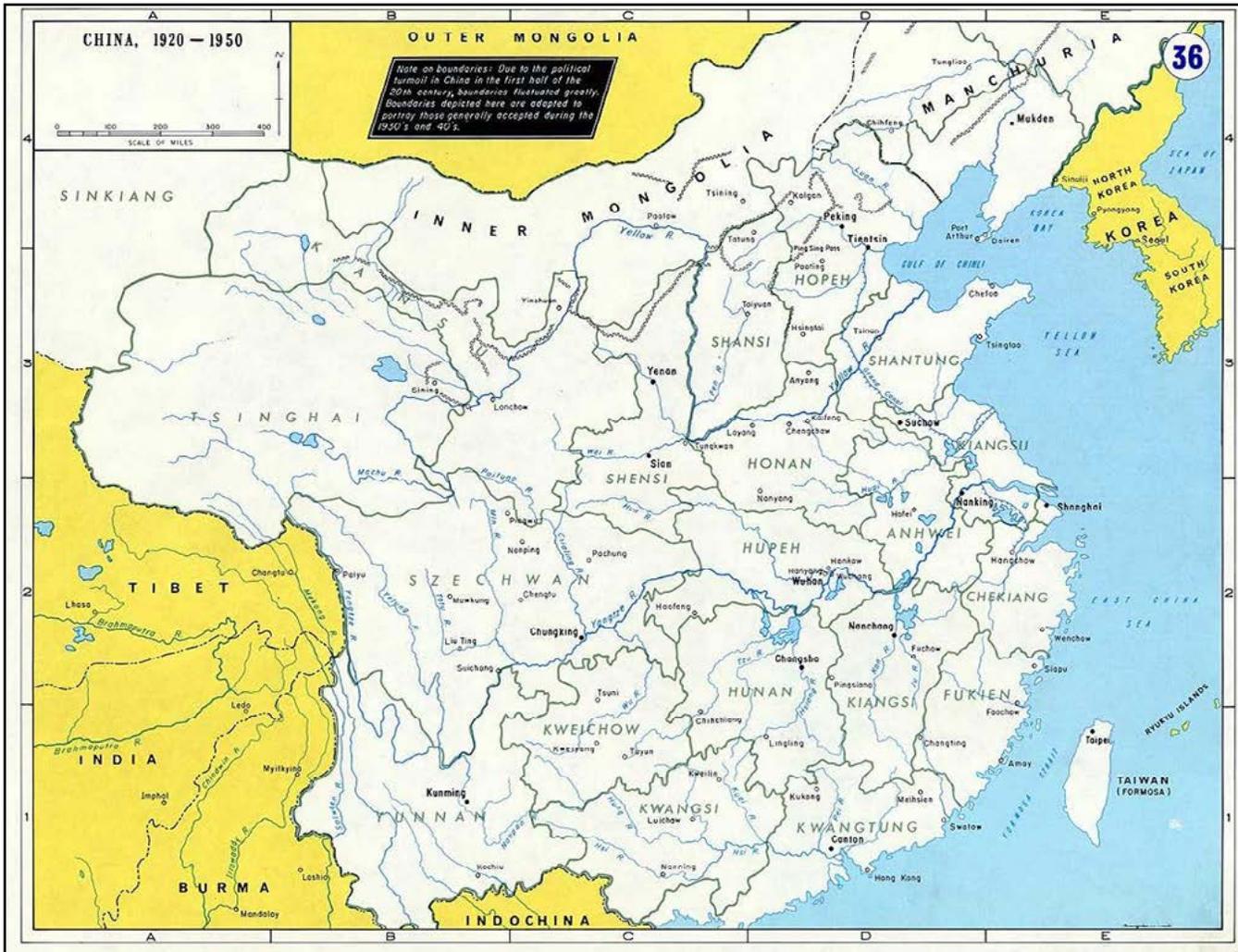
The DIXIE Mission, which consisted of nine members representing the Air Corps, Medical Corps, Signal Corps and Infantry and was followed a month later by a second contingent, was sent to observe with a purpose: to evaluate the Communist potential for military collaboration against the Japanese. They were also instructed to assess 'the most effective means of assisting the Communists to increase the value of their war effort.' This meant American aid and an American relationship, which was exactly what Chiang Kai-shek feared and the reason he had done his best to obstruct the mission."²

The communists welcomed the contact; they were frank and open and willing to tell the Americans what they wanted to know. Not everything the Americans heard or saw was understood, but they gathered a wealth of information, raw intelligence to be analyzed and pondered by the China experts. A good deal of it concerned the strength and disposition of Japanese Forces in North China and the communist Red Army's effectiveness in dealing with them. But what may have been the most significant, intelligence on the Chinese Communists themselves, appears to have been disregarded, then, and in the years that followed.

Dixie acquired facts and insights into the political and military leadership of the Chinese Communists at a time when little was known about them. The Americans got a good look at how the Chinese conducted "people's war," the model for the wars of national liberation that would soon confront America in Asia and Africa. But the war going on was the war with the Japanese, and concerns about the role of communists in the future of China would have to wait.

The war ended, and a political debate began in Washington over a supposed American betrayal of the implacable enemies of the communists, the Chinese Nationalists. It was renewed in the early 1950s over the

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West Point Historical Atlases, World War II, Asia Pacific Theater at https://westpoint.edu/sites/default/files/inline-images/academics/academic_departments/history/WWII%20Asia/ww2%2520asia%2520map%252036.jpg

question, “Who lost China?” The Dixie Mission’s role was questioned. The intelligence it produced was said to be tainted and shunted aside—even within the US intelligence organizations of the time. The information was ignored when it might have been most useful, as US intelligence and military strategists were trying to come to grips with world communism and Soviet and Chinese attempts to shape the world through revolution—and in Korea, through outright war.

A Blind Spot for US Intelligence

In the spring of 1944, [General Joseph W.] Stilwell’s headquarters, under the pressure of a new Japanese offensive against central China, began to take an interest in the Communist military . . . Donovan’s officers at Chungking could no longer ignore reports that the Communists controlled a force of one million partisans and intelligence agents in an area of major Japanese troop concen-

*tration which was then a blind spot for American intelligence.*³

As US participation in the China war—and its alliance with Chiang Kai-shek’s Nationalists—grew, the communists faded into the background, behind a Nationalist blockade of “twenty divisions of [Chiang’s] best troops.”⁴ OSS intelligence chief, William Donovan had become aware of the communists’ military potential “even before Pearl Harbor,” but OSS manpower was limited and focused on the Japanese.⁵ In October 1943, Roosevelt ordered Donovan “to

gather political intelligence in communist-controlled areas” of China. Given Chiang’s refusal to permit any American access to the communists, it was evident, as Donovan told the president, that OSS could not do its job unless it operated “independent of the Chinese and our other allies.”⁶ Collection on the Chinese Communists would be exceptionally difficult.

The idea for an observer mission into the communist area was first suggested by John Paton Davies, a US State Department officer serving as General Stilwell’s political advisor. In a June 1943 report to Stilwell, Davies noted the importance of the North China area and that the “last official American observer to have visited the communist region was Captain Carlson in 1938.”⁷ Davies sent a second memo to Stilwell in January 1944, which made its way to influential presidential advisor Harry Hopkins. In February, Roosevelt formally requested Chang Kai-shek “to permit military observers to go ‘immediately’ to Shansi and Shensi, tactfully omitting to specify the region as Communist. . . . Chiang gracefully agreed to ‘facilitate’ the mission which, he added, could visit only those areas under the Central Government’s control.”⁸ Roosevelt tried again with Chiang in April and again met with no success. The president then sent Vice President Henry Wallace to talk with Chiang.

In a series of meetings with Wallace during 21–24 June 1944, Chiang initially refused. The following day, Wallace stressed “the American need for intelligence from North China, particularly in connection with B-29 operations. Whether this line of

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argument was persuasive, or some other consideration moved him, the Generalissimo suddenly consented to the dispatch of observers.”⁹

Stilwell had already started working on the mission in February. “To ensure observers who would not be at the mercy of their hosts, Stilwell looked for candidates who had knowledge of the language and acquaintance with China,” Tuchman wrote. To lead the mission he chose “Colonel Barrett, said to be the only American who could tell jokes convincingly in Chinese to Chinese.” He also had a close friendship with Stilwell.¹⁰

Col. David D. Barrett was an assistant military attaché in Peking, between 1924 and 1928, and from 1931 to 1936, when he was named assistant military attaché to Stilwell. In 1942 he succeeded Stilwell as chief military attaché. In early 1944, he was assigned to the Army G-2 section at Kweilin. Stilwell selected him to head the observer mission on 25 March 1944.¹¹

On 21 July, the day before the mission’s departure for Yen-an, Barrett realized he had no orders on what the mission was expected to accomplish. He contacted Colonel Dickey, G-2 at CBI (China-Burma-India) Headquarters and received a single typed sheet. It was unclassified, unsigned, and “without authentication of any kind.” “Actually they were more in the nature of general instruc-

tions for the guidance of the mission rather than the sort of orders usually issued to a unit of the United States Army.” It listed 19 subjects on which “information is particularly desired.” These included Japanese and puppet order of battle,^a target and bomb damage assessments, and weather and economic intelligence. On the communist forces: their strength, composition, dispositions, equipment, training, and combat efficiency. “No other instructions of any kind, oral or written, secret or non-secret were ever given me.”¹²

What was Known of the Chinese Communists?

*Even before Pearl Harbor, General Donovan had received information that the Chinese Communist soldiers were “the best guerrilla troops in the world, trained under veteran leaders of long experience in such tactics, and fired by a bitter hatred of the Japanese.”*¹³

Little was known of the political or military situation in China when the United States came into the war in Asia. The Chinese Communists were a particular puzzle, closed off to outsiders by their own secrecy and politics and by the remoteness of their Yen-an stronghold, where they survived behind the Nationalist Army cordon. In the 1930s, two persistent journalists found their way to the communists and wrote accounts

a. Chinese troops belonging to Japanese-established governments in areas of China occupied by the Imperial Japanese Army.

The first chronicler of the Red Army in action was American journalist Agnes Smedley. . . . In 1936, she made her way to Yen-an, befriended Red Army commander Chu Teh, and later accompanied the Red Army in Japanese-controlled areas.

of the Chinese Communist movement and its leadership. Later, a US Marine Corps officer provided his professional assessment of the Red Army and its effectiveness.

Edgar Snow's *Red Star Over China* appeared in England at the end of 1937 and in the United States soon afterwards. It received lavish praise as "a stunning and significant journalistic coup."¹⁴ "Among the almost two hundred influential Americans. . . Snow's volume was cited second only to Pearl Buck's blockbuster . . . *The Good earth* as a key source of their picture of the Chinese."¹⁵ Despite criticism for believing too much of what the communists told him, Snow turned his four-month sojourn with the communist leadership into a literary classic. But how useful could it be to a serious student of China? Harvard China scholar (and former OSS and Office of War Information [OWI] officer) John King Fairbank addressed that years later: "[*Red Star Over China*] not only gave the first connected history of Mao and his colleagues and where they had come from, but also gave a prospect of the future. . . . The book has stood the test of time on both these counts—as a historical record and as an indication of a trend."¹⁶

The first chronicler of the Red Army in action was American journalist Agnes Smedley. She came to Shanghai in 1928 as a journalist for *Frankfurter Zeitung*.^a In 1936, she made her way to Yen-an, befriended Red Army commander Chu Teh,^b and later accompanied the Red Army in Japanese-controlled areas. Her *China Fights Back: An American Woman with the Eighth Route Army*, published in 1938, was the earliest account of the Red Army at war. It was also well received, but not nearly as popular as Snow's book.

A professional view of the Red Army came from a US Marine Captain, Evans Carlson—the apparent source of OSS Chief Donovan's information cited above. Carlson had already completed two tours in China when he returned there in 1937 as a language student and observer with the Chinese Nationalist Army. Inspired by *Red*

Star Over China—and with Edgar Snow's help—he spent eight months with the Eighth Route Army, in his view "the only Chinese military organization that is consistently winning engagements with the Japanese." He wrote: "These troops are the most mobile I have ever seen. . . . This force will continue to resist the Japanese if every other unit in China lays down its arms. . . . And the resistance will be effective."¹⁷

All three writers were criticized as too sympathetic to the communists. As a professional soldier, Carlson in particular attracted criticism from his peers and others. President Roosevelt told Edgar Snow, "but the Marine Corps still insists he's a Red!"¹⁸ And that was in 1944, when Carlson was already a legend. After the Unit-



Agnes Smedley (left) with Western literary figures, George Barnard Shaw and Harold Isaacs. The Chinese members of the group are from left to right: Soong Ching Ling, Cai Yuan-p'ei, Lin Yu-t'ang, and Lu Hsun in undated photo from the 1930s. Source Wikimedia Commons.

a. In Shanghai, Smedley was a close associate of legendary Soviet spy Richard Sorge: "The only person in China upon whom I knew I could depend on was Agnes Smedley," said Sorge. "I solicited her aid in establishing my group in Shanghai . . . used [her]. . . as a direct member of my group." Her involvement with the Chinese Red Army does not appear related to Sorge's efforts as a Soviet agent. Source: Gordon W. Prange with Donald M. Goldstein and Katherine V. Dillon, *Target Tokyo: The Story of the Sorge Spy Ring* (Early Bird Books, 1984 [ebook]), Chapter 3. Recent information from Soviet Archives and other sources seem to confirm allegations that Smedley was an agent of the Comintern and later of the Soviet Union. Source: Ruth Price, *The Lives of Agnes Smedley* (Oxford Press, 2005), 6.

b. Names of Chinese Communist officials will be rendered in the Wade-Giles romanization system most widely used during the period of this story. So too with locations, unless popular usage differs, as it does with Peiking, Nanking and Chungking.

ed States entered WWII, Carlson became the creator and leader of the US Marine Corps Raiders, which operated according to philosophy and tactics he had learned from the Red Army.^a

In 1944 there was no current “intelligence” on the Chinese Communists, but the journalistic accounts and Captain Carlson’s reports were reasonably accurate, although of questionable credibility to some readers. The pictures they painted were rosy, but they did provide good insight into the communist leaders and the strength and direction of their movement. The Red Army and the guerrilla tactics that became people’s war are well described. Together, the three accounts may be as good as what intelligence officers of the time could have produced, even better, perhaps; All three writers had extensive China experience and progressive political views that should have helped them comprehend the ways of the Chinese Communists.^b Their combined work—once their biases are recognized—was a good overview and could have served as the basis for specific intelligence requirements the Dixie Mission might have addressed to fill gaps in the picture of the Chinese communists in 1944. There is no indication that was considered.



On 5 October a delegation of US military officers and friends of Colonel Barrett arrived bearing a Legion of Merit for him. They were welcomed by Chairman Mao and Communist army commander Chu Teh. Photo in Wikimedia Commons, official military photo from Barrett’s memoir, *Dixie Mission*, (photo 21).

The United States Army Observer Group

[T]he most exciting event ever since the war against Japan started.¹⁹

Because the Generalissimo had objected to the designation of the unit as a “mission,” it was named the Observer Group. . . . Also, because for some months my colleagues and I had sportingly called the Communist area Dixie—a rebel territory—the observers were also referred to, among Americans, as the Dixie Mission.²⁰

The First contingent of nine observers of the Dixie Mission arrived at Yen-an, in Shensi Province, North China on 22 July 1944; the second contingent, also of nine, arrived on 7 August. Two of the 18 represented the Department of State; four officers and one sergeant were from the OSS. One officer was from AGAS, one from the US Navy, five from the US Army Air Corps (two of whom were from AGFRTS),^c and an assortment of US Army officers, mostly infantry, but including a doctor, Major Melvin A. Casberg, from the Army Medical Corps (who would be both Dixie physician and intelligence collector.)

a. And Carlson brought the Chinese words “Gung Ho” (together) into the vocabulary of Marines. Source: Thomas, *Season of High Adventure*, 172.

b. Some have argued that they did not fully comprehend the movement: “Despite Snow’s (and Mao’s) careful emphasis on the Reds’ Marxist-Leninist credentials and goals, the book left a lasting impression that these revolutionaries were only so-called Communists.” Even among US China experts, the Chinese Communists were long looked on as agrarian reformers. Captain Carlson thought “he had witnessed among the Reds a unique example of Christian ethics and brotherhood in practice.” Source: Thomas, 178. Socialist Agnes Smedley strongly supported the communists and wrote enthusiastically, but her work adds to the sense of what people’s war could be.

c. AGAS was the “Air Ground Aid Service,” to assist the escape of American POWs; AGFRTS was the “Air and Ground Forces Resources and Technical Staff,” an OSS/14th Air Force unit hidden from Dai Li inside the Fourteenth Air Force structure.

Lectures began the morning after our arrival . . . we were scheduled for talks with senior cadres, most of whom had been teachers at Whampoa Military Academy in the 1920s . . . [who] shared with us what they considered their most effective military tactics

^a In line with Stilwell's wish for experienced people, most of the observers were old China hands, or had other extensive experience in Asia.^b

The C-47 carrying the first contingent arrived at Yen'an at about noon on 22 July 1944. The airstrip was small and had not been used for several years. As the aircraft rolled down the runway, the left landing gear suddenly collapsed into an ancient grave no one knew was there. The spinning propeller separated from the engine and sheared through the fuselage right behind the pilot. No one was injured. Standing by the door when the team exited was Chou En-lai, ready to introduce the other important communist officials waiting with the crowd. There was also an honor guard, and many curious peasants. The Americans were taken to their quarters, the famous Yen'an caves, "really not caves at all, but short tunnels. . . cut into the steep hillside and lined with beautifully fitted blocks of hewn stone."²¹ Then came an "excellent" lunch and an introduction to life in Yen'an.

Working Days at Yen'an

*Lectures began the morning after our arrival . . . we were scheduled for talks with senior cadres, most of whom had been teachers at Whampoa Military Academy in the 1920s . . . [who] shared with us what they considered their most effective military tactics . . . Of all our teachers . . . Mao was the most interesting.*²²

In turn, the Americans taught the communists new guerrilla warfare techniques. Capt. John Colling, the most senior OSS member of the mission, was a demolitions expert, and he had brought along 400 pounds of state-of-the-art demolition supplies, including Composition C, a new putty-like explosive, and Primacord, a highly effective detonating cord. Colling did four demonstrations, each drew over 1,000 interested observers.^c The communists were impressed, and eager to obtain such equipment. To Colling's regret that was not possible; arming the communists was beyond the Dixie charter.

Colling brought extraordinary experience to the team, having been

selected for Dixie after completing 15 months operating against the Japanese in Burma. He had helped organize the Kachin Scouts and led them in intelligence and guerrilla operations. Raised in Tianjin, China, where his US Army captain father had retired, he was a proficient Chinese speaker. He saw his job in Yen'an as investigating "the potential of using Chinese Communist Armies."²³ His memoir, *The Spirit of Yen'an*, which was published in 1991, would provide some of the most detailed, and colorful, accounts of Chinese Communist forces and their behavior in and around Yen'an during the life of the mission.

Colling was eager to get out of Yen'an and join the Red Army in the field. It would be a month before that happened, however. In the interim, he was introduced to intelligence possibilities at Yen'an: Red Army Chief of Staff, General Yeh Chian-ying, wanted an "Air Intelligence" organization for the Red Army. With AGAS assistance, a plan was drawn up in the first week. Colling himself had a special top secret project he hoped to move forward at Yen'an. Named the "Apple Project," its objective was to acquire actual Japanese perspectives on the effectiveness of US B-29 bombing of Japanese cities."²⁴ An improbable task, but at Yen'an it would become possible.

a. Casberg spent four months behind Japanese lines, "hiking with the Chinese Communists by night and hiding during the day." Source: Caroline J. Carter, *Mission to Yen'an* (The University Press of Kentucky, 1997), 33.

b. After the original Dixie Mission ended in about January 1945, the United States maintained a small presence at Yen'an until 1947. From 22 July 1944 to 11 April 1946, the mission was called the US Army Observer Group; From 13 April until the last man departed Yen'an in 1947, it was called the Yen'an Liaison Group. These residual elements were also called the "Dixie mission." This article covers only the approximate first six months, when the majority of the original 18-member observer group was still engaged in Yen'an. By early 1945, communist leaders had begun to leave the region for other areas in a race to take control of territory as the Japanese left the country.

c. "The biggest bang," in Colling's demonstrations "came from a .22 caliber assassination pistol." It had a hair trigger, and Colling's assistant managed to accidentally fire off a round that "whistled past Chou En-lai's ear. There was a stunned silence - broken only when the imperturbable Chou, smiled and casually quipped, 'Close.'" Source: Colling, *The Spirit of Yen'an*, 72.

Two other US priorities were also implemented with communist assistance. The first was obtaining weather reports, essential to the 14th Air Force's bombing missions and to the US Navy's warships closing on the Asian mainland. "Large numbers of small radios . . . were sent to distant parts of the communist-controlled areas, and an astonishingly large number of useful reports, sent by means of these small radios, were received in Yen-an."²⁵

The other priority was the rescue of downed American aircrews. "One of the most strategically beneficial contributions the Dixie Mission [made] . . . was the development of a rescue system . . . for American airmen downed in Communist territories behind Japanese lines." B-29s returning from missions over Tokyo, low on fuel and sometimes with battle damage, had to cross Japanese-occupied areas of North China. Red Army intelligence and its direct help with the rescues made it possible for AGAS to save "approximately 300 American lives."²⁷ AGAS Lieutenant Whittlesey, who helped implement the system, was Dixie's only casualty, shot by the Japanese when he and his Chinese counterpart entered a village they believed had been abandoned by the Japanese.²⁷

When the day's work was done, there were friendly dinners and occasional banquets. The communists presented theatrical performances, and the Americans hosted showings of American films. Smedley wrote of Gen. Chu Teh that he "was seen at almost every showing, howling

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at Abbott and Costello."²⁸ When the weather was good, everyone went to the dances in the pear garden, and "capered . . . to the noise of a battered phonograph playing scratchy records of ancient vintage." Mao always attended and accepted invitations from pigtailed girls who asked, "Chairman, please dance with me."^{29, a}

An "Intelligence Cornucopia"³⁰

*O brave new world, that has such people in 't!*³¹

Time magazine's man in China, journalist Theodore H. White, arrived with the second Dixie contingent.³² He was well-received by the communists.³³ Later, he wrote an enthusiastic overview of communist intelligence capabilities based on interviews with 11 of the 13 Politburo members at Yen-an: "Their frankness, in wartime, on their dispositions, plans, movements, was to me astounding."³⁴ White was looking for a story; he was not bound by a list of questions seeking specific answers. The lack of stricture let him see what he might not have been expecting:

The generals in the politburo admitted they knew nothing of the use of modern artillery; that they knew nothing of aviation, that their own staff work was primitive; that their communications net was rudimentary. . . . But their intelligence service was spectacular: they

*knew precisely the order of battle of Japanese divisions; enemy lines of communications; the spectrum of occupation zones.*³⁵

White's evaluation of Chinese intelligence capabilities was reasonably accurate. It became apparent that the Red Army had good accountings of the Japanese Army's strength and disposition in areas where the communists operated. Understanding how the Chinese Communist system functioned, however, required a bit of learning that would provide some surprises.

Soon after he arrived in Yen-an, Colonel Barrett was presented an insight into Red Army acquisition and use of intelligence information at the most fundamental level. On 26 August, at Barrett's request, the 718th regiment put on a tactical



Colonel Barrett, wearing his newly awarded Legion of Merit, was given a bouquet of flowers by Chu Teh's wife. Shown here is Mao admiring the bouquet. Source: Wikimedia Commons, official military photo from Barrett's memoir, *Dixie Mission*, (photo 25).

a. The dances were Smedley's legacy, a tradition she started at Yen-an in 1937. After the work day, "During such idle, friendly moments I would often line everyone up and teach them the Virginia Reel . . . General Chu . . . would swing his partner *do-si-do* and kick up the dust with a gust as great as that of the youngest guard in the line." Source: Smedley, *The Great Road*, 3.

“Classroom work consisted mostly of sitting around in small rooms and reading the [Liberation Daily].” Back at Yen-an, Barrett expressed his disappointment to the Chinese chief of staff. Once again, Barrett had missed the significance of what he had seen.

exercise, a sham battle. The Chinese scenario included the appearance of a Japanese regiment. Barrett asked how the Red Army would have learned of the Japanese presence; where had the information come from? “The people told us.” Had there been patrolling or reconnaissance “to determine the possible intentions of the enemy?” That was not necessary; “everything needed was learned from the people.”^{36, a} Barrett was not impressed, but he failed to see something very significant.

Shortly afterwards, Barrett visited the “Japanese Resistance Military-political University” at Suiteh, northeast of Yen-an, where a small village had been turned into dormitories and classrooms. At this military university, Barrett discovered, there was “no military instruction. . . . It was actually sort of a rest and recreation center where party workers, officers, and enlisted men were sent for recuperation and indoctrination. . . . Classroom work consisted mostly of sitting around in small rooms and reading the [Liberation Daily].” Back at Yen-an, Barrett expressed his disappointment to the Chinese chief of staff.³⁷ Once again, Barrett had missed the significance of what he had seen.

In his foreword to Barrett’s book, Fairbank explained what Barrett had missed—the birth of people’s war, a new era that Barrett, like most others then, could not see or grasp. “One fascination of this memoir,” Fairbank wrote, “is to see how one can be a true China hand and yet remain in some ways quite culture bound:”

Barrett is reporting on the Chinese Communist forces . . . but he sees them in the American military categories which exclude politics. He finds their military training school really doing next to nothing militarily; the trainees seem to spend their time merely reading the [Liberation Daily]. Out of this reading, of course, came the revolutionary army so ideologically indoctrinated that it could retain popular support and operate decentralized but under discipline. On manoeuvres Barrett finds the Communists rely on the populace to get accurate intelligence on the enemy and so fail to do that energetic scouting and patrolling that has been part and parcel of the American army tradition since the French and Indian War.”³⁸

People’s war was central to almost all things at Yen-an, as it

would remain at the center of the Chinese Communist movement for decades, while the “wars of national liberation” it inspired would be the preoccupation of US intelligence and military strategists over the many long years of the Cold War.

Observing People’s War

The mobilization of the common people throughout the country will create a vast sea in which to drown the enemy.”³⁹

A number of Dixie Mission observers would visit “Japanese Resistance Bases,” the areas inside Japanese-occupied territory that were under Red Army control, and report back their impressions that “the Communists were being supported by the entire civil population.” To which Chairman Mao remarked, “if they did not have the support of the people, they would never survive in areas virtually surrounded by the Japanese.”⁴⁰

On a first encounter with people’s war, professional US military officers—their careers devoted to the study and practice of conventional warfare—the concept must have been perplexing. It required the full involvement of the civilian population as an effective adjunct to the main fighting force. The Dixie observers who went into the field with the Red Army saw that the Chinese people were indeed engaged against the Japanese invader. Under the Red Army’s

a. John Stuart Service, the diplomatic observer for Stilwell and the US embassy in Chungking, echoed the observation, commenting in his collection of despatches on Major Casberg’s report: “The Eighth Route Army depends to a great extent on the People’s Militia for intelligence . . . While I was behind the Japanese lines in the Eighth sub district the military men in our party could give me daily information on the exact movements of the enemy around us. . . . When we attacked a blockhouse we knew not only the exact number and size of the firearms, the exact number of the soldiers, both Japanese and puppet, but also in many cases even the names of the soldiers.” Source: John S. Service, *Lost Chance in China: The World War II Despatches of John S. Service*, 238.

On 27 December, Barrett went back to Yen-an; it would be his final visit. Wedemeyer was out of town, and Maj. Gen. Robert B. McClure, Wedemeyer's chief of staff, gave Barrett "a most important mission"

six hundred fifty thousand and Peoples' Militia of two and a half million when strategic use required by Wedemeyer."⁷⁷

After Bird and Barrett returned to Chungking, they learned "Ambassador Hurley had not been fully briefed about the purpose of the visit which Colonel Bird and [Colonel Barrett] had made to Yen-an, or if he had been cut into the picture, he had failed to take much cognizance of it. . . . he was incensed, and took the stand we had tried to work behind his back against the interest of the National Government."⁷⁸

On 27 December, Barrett went back to Yen-an; it would be his final visit. Wedemeyer was out of town, and Maj. Gen. Robert B. McClure, Wedemeyer's chief of staff, gave Barrett "a most important mission": He was to inform the communist leaders that "after the defeat of Germany . . . a US paratroop division [28,000 strong] . . . might be sent to China to take part in the final attack on the Japanese islands." He was to ask: "if [the communists] could take care of the supply of the division . . . [until] regular U.S. Army supply procedures could begin to function." Barrett was "to impress upon the Communists that my talk with them was purely of an exploratory nature." Barrett was assured that his mission was cleared with Ambassador Hurley. Barrett met with the communist leadership, including Mao, on 27 December.

They seemed "reasonably pleased" at prospects of a large US presence on their territory and assured Barrett that they could provide such support as might be needed.⁷⁹ Soon after his return from Yen-an, Barrett received good news: General Wedemeyer had nominated him for promotion to brigadier general.

But then, "Early in January the roof fell in on me. Nationalist Government intelligence agents in Yen-an had reported back to Chungking that I had offered . . . the Communists an American paratroop division. . . ." The Nationalist were "naturally much upset" and asked Hurley for an explanation. "It developed my visit to Yen-an had not been cleared with the ambassador . . . or . . . he had forgotten the whole thing." Barrett would write that Hurley "blew higher than a kite" and had his promotion rescinded.⁸⁰

Spies at Work

Tai Li got wind of the plan, and Miles was ready to brief Hurley about this clandestine contact.^{81, a}

Lt. Gen. Tai Li was Chiang Kai-shek's spymaster, the head of the KMT intelligence and security. Tai Li was also head of SACO, the Sino-American Cooperative Organization, a joint project with US Navy Commodore Milton "Mary" Miles as his deputy. SACO's strained relation-

ship with OSS and most US military units in China, is beyond the scope of this paper, but much of that was due to Tai Li's secret police methods and SACO efforts being more focused on Chiang's political enemies than the invading Japanese. Early in January 1945, Commodore Miles invited Ambassador Hurley to "Happy Valley," SACO headquarters, "where the ambassador was greeted with pomp and circumstance."⁸² As Miles described it in his memoir:

*We greeted him with flags, ruffles and flourishes, and The Star-Spangled Banner. . . . And we even slipped in a full review. The troops passed—ten minutes of infantry ending with the drill team. . . . The dogs made their attack. The pigeons flew when released. Our few motor vehicles passed smartly. Then ten minutes of cavalry. (We had only sixty horses for our training school but we borrowed a neighboring troop of five hundred of General Tai Li's mounted men.)*⁸³

Historian Frederick Wakeman tells the rest of the story:

. . . while being entertained at dinner. . . . Miles persuaded the Oklahoma oilman that a massive conspiracy was being undertaken by U.S. State Department officers to send American troops and weapons to the Communists. Miles also offered the ambassador the use of SACO's Navy radio communications link with Washington in order to bypass the American embassy

a. The "clandestine contact" was Barrett's proposal—and the OSS proposal Bird had delivered earlier—to Yen-an. While Wakeman cites the 15 December Yen-an visit for both, by Barrett's own account, Hurley's anger was triggered by his 27 December 1941 visit.

*in Chongqing [sic], which was presumably infiltrated by fellow travelers determined to defeat Chiang Kai-shek.*⁸⁴

On 15 January 1945, Hurley sent his report to President Roosevelt. “He had learned from SACO and Dai Li that there was a plan to use US paratroopers to lead communist guerrillas. . . . this amounted to recognition of the communists and approval of their objectives to destroy the nationalist regime.” Hurley went on to denounce the American “China hands” who he blamed for this. “His cable to Roosevelt was the opening blow of his long campaign to dishonor both the Foreign Service China experts who labored under him and the military officers in Wedemeyer’s command, not only to dishonor them, but to purge them from the service.”⁸⁵

Hurley’s rage and where it would take him is encapsulated in the comment below by historian Richard Bernstein describing Hurley’s belated reaction to Stilwell’s firing—which Hurley endorsed—and to the negative American press coverage of Chiang it unleashed: *New York Times* journalist Brooks Atkinson, for example, commented: “Relieving General Stilwell and appointing a successor has the effect of making us acquiesce in an unenlightened cold-hearted autocratic political regime.”⁸⁶

Hurley said nothing public right away. But within a year or so, he was making comments that can only be described as deranged, accusing Stilwell, the State Department officers who agreed with the General about Chiang, and the American press

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as engaged in a conspiracy to overthrow Chiang and see him replaced by a Communist government. He summed up his position this way: ‘The record of General Stilwell in China is irrevocably coupled in history with the conspiracy to overthrow the Nationalist Government of China, and to set up in its place a Communist regime—and all of this movement was part of, and cannot be separated from, the Communist cell or apparatus that existed at that time in the Government in Washington.’”⁸⁷

In early 1945, “Hurley’s direct access to the President was the trump card.” He used it “to press what amounted to a purge of the professional China experts in the field, the men who had been in the country for years, who spoke the language, who knew the place and its dramatis personae.”⁸⁸ “The Generalissimo later congratulated Hurley on having “purged the United States headquarters of the conspirators.”⁸⁹

World War II ended with Japan’s surrender on 15 August 1945. The following month, President Truman terminated the OSS, America’s premier foreign intelligence organization. “There appeared to be no need for foreign intelligence. . . . US military planners felt comfortable, almost complacent with the technological advantage the United States

had achieved.”⁹⁰ The US Central Intelligence Agency was established in 1947.

Messengers Were Not Well Received

*I have wondered just what became of my reports.*⁹¹

Colonel Barrett wrote “many reports, all on military subjects. . . . I devoted particular attention to estimates of the strength of the Communist forces . . . and their tactics, equipment, training, discipline, and morale.”⁹² There was apparently no feedback, from Chungking or Washington, on intelligence reporting from Yen-an. In December 1944, as the Dixie Mission was winding down, several Dixie members traveled to Washington. They were taken aback by their reception.

Because of a letter he was asked to hand deliver to Chief of Naval Operations Admiral King, Lt. Hitch found himself addressing the Joint Chiefs or Staff on the China situation. He described “the Chinese Communist scene as he saw it.” From what he had observed, he concluded that no matter how much [US military support] we give to the Nationalist Government], “the people calling themselves Communists will someday take over China.” Hitch’s comments “were not well received; he was told he would not be going back

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to China.”^{93, a} He soon learned that he was assigned to the Philippines desk in the Office of Naval Intelligence.

The war had already ended when Major Casberg, Dixie’s doctor, returned to Washington on Christmas Eve 1945 and went directly to what was left of OSS headquarters—it had officially been disbanded three months before—to discuss his long experience with the communists. He offered his assessment: A civil war between the communists and nationalists was unavoidable, and the communists would win; after the communists took over, China would not maintain close ties with the Soviet Union; in the long term, Chou En-lai and those who “wore his mantle” would have the greatest influence in China. The people listening to him laughed, “probably thinking him merely a medical man, not qualified to predict military outcomes.”⁹⁴

John Colling also traveled to Washington in December 1944. He was instructed to report directly to General Donovan. According to Colling, “it turned out, Donovan was the only high official in Washington who wanted to know anything about the Dixie Mission.” In his 1991 memoir Colling wrote that only years later did he learn the “political ramifications” of his involvement with Dixie. “When the CIA began recruiting me in 1952 for the Korean War, I was quickly dismissed on the second day

of [interviewing] after they realized my involvement with the Dixie Mission.”⁹⁵ As to value of his reporting:

In the spring of 1945 I had returned [to OSS] my carefully kept files on Chinese field tactics. They were ignored through both the Korean and Vietnamese conflicts. These files were returned to me with my original seals intact in 1972, after ‘Ping Pong Diplomacy’ thawed US-China relations.”⁹⁶

Colling believed that “Washington learned little of what we did, partially because the purpose behind the mission was extinguished by the ending of the war.” The other part is the paradox that Colling believed Dixie had become.

The Dixie Mission was meant to be a military mission in pursuit of strategically important information. What became clear soon after was that the politics that brought us to Yanan eventually silenced our reports of what we had learned.”⁹⁷

The Dixie Experience and Its Lessons for Intelligence

The Dixie Mission is an early example of the task force approach applied to an intelligence problem. Participation in the team was wide, the Army, Navy, and Air Force were

represented, as was the OSS and other specialized elements that could evaluate Chinese Communist capabilities. The environment the team worked in was unusual, but the mission succeeded. It gathered a wealth of fresh information and developed solutions to immediate problems like weather reporting and the rescue of downed US airmen. It even produced intelligence information from inside Japan.

Much of Dixie’s success came from Stilwell’s direction to use “China hands” or others with extensive Asian experience. The Chinese Communist experience was new for everyone, but having the language, or at least past experience with an Asian culture, eased the team’s entry into its interactions with communist counterparts. The principle of using experienced area specialists in the most difficult situations has always been valid.

Extensive intelligence information was collected on the Japanese military and on the communists. That much of this information was later disregarded was due to external factors. The war would end quickly and unexpectedly and totally devalue intelligence on the Japanese.

Intelligence collected on the Chinese Communists should have had a longer life, but it became tainted by political conflict that grew out of America’s involvements in China and post-war concern about the global spread of communism and was shunted aside. The lack of anyone in Washington wise enough to glimpse the true significance of the Chinese

a. The letter Hitch delivered to the CNO was a “secret” appeal for US assistance from Mao—one of several attempts by the Communists to circumvent Ambassador Hurley and other reactionary elements among the Americans in China.”

Communists and the intelligence produced by the Dixie Mission was the killing blow. That insight might have come from OSS Chief Donovan, by war's end the only "high official interested in the Dixie Mission," but OSS was disbanded in September 1945 and Donovan was gone.

Did the loss of this intelligence have an effect on US strategic efforts in the post-war period and the Cold War? In retrospect, one can imagine the effects in US decisions made during the Korean War to support imagined Nationalist remnants fighting the new communist government—Dixie Mission members are likely to have argued that communist control was so great no Nationalist counterinsurgency could possibly cause enough damage to disrupt People's Republic of China war efforts in Korea or gain control over territory in Northeast China.

On a more global scale, if we imagine that the information had been put to use, for example, in the training of US intelligence officers, particularly those assigned to countries experiencing Wars of National Liberation. During the Cold War, most US intelligence officers were reasonably grounded in Soviet communism, but even officers sent

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to countries contending with Maoist insurgencies had little grounding in Chinese communism. The presumption was that it was the Soviet hand that guided world communism, and Chinese communism was simply subordinate to that. Soviet communism received the emphasis.

Another significant lesson lost in time was how the Red Army treated Japanese POWs and the dividends that paid. John Fairbank saw the meaning of that immediately. Whether American adoption of the Red Army's "lenient" treatment of POWs might have served American interests in later wars is difficult to say. Regrettably, the Red Army way was not considered, or even the subject of serious study.

An example can be taken from Thailand. During the Vietnam era, the Thai government found itself suddenly confronted by a Maoist Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) insurgency. Within 10 years it affected half the country. "Thirty-six of Thailand's 73 provinces were under strong commu-

nist influence."⁹⁸ In looking for ways to defeat the CPT, the Thai turned to captured party members as teachers on communism and Maoist thought. In time, former senior CPT members became advisers to the police, and military effort focused on the insurgency. The key to the CPT insurgency's collapse was amnesty, and reintegration of the insurgents into Thai society. The insurgency ended in 1982; the peace established then has never been broken. The approach that led to the end of the Maoist insurgency in Thailand came from senior Maoist-raided CPT members.

The major lesson from Dixie for the managers of intelligence services and for the non-intelligence outsiders appointed to oversee them is that an intelligence service must be kept well clear of politics and actively protected from any such involvement. There is no place for partisanship in an intelligence service. To do otherwise risks undermining the objectivity of a service's reporting and devalues the service and all its work.



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Endnotes

1. David D. Barrett, *Dixie Mission: The United States Army Observer Group in Yen-an, 1944* (University of California Press, 1970), from the Foreword by John K. Fairbank, Harvard University, 7.
2. Barbara W. Tuchman, *Stilwell and the American Experience in China, 1911–45* (Macmillan, 1970), 477.
3. R. Harris Smith, *OSS: The Secret History of America's First Central Intelligence Agency* (University of California Press, 1972), 260.
4. *Ibid*, 259.
5. *Ibid*.
6. Frederick Wakeman, Jr., *Spymaster: Dai Li and the Chinese Secret Service* (University of California Press, 2003), 315.
7. Tuchman, *Stilwell*, 463.
8. *Ibid*.
9. John Paton Davies, Jr., *Dragon by the Tail: American, British, Japanese, and Russian Encounters with China and One Another* (W.W. Norton & Company, 1972), 308.
10. Tuchman, *Stilwell*, 463.
11. William P. Head, *Yenan! Colonel Wilbur Peterkin and the American Military Mission to the Chinese Communists, 1944–1945* (Documentary Publications, 1987), 37.
12. Barrett, *Dixie Mission*, 27–28.
13. Smith, *OSS*, 259–60.
14. S. Bernard Thomas, *Season of High Adventure: Edgar Snow in China* (University of California Press, 1996) 172.
15. *Ibid*, 171.
16. Edgar Snow, *Red Star Over China* (Grove Press, 1968), from “Introduction by Dr. John K. Fairbank,” 13.
17. Captain Evans F. Carlson, USMC, Letter to Captain Stapler, from “Hq. 8th Route Army, somewhere in Shansi, 20 December 1937,” prepared as an Intelligence Report by South China Patrol, Canton, China, 3 January 1938. Available at: <http://digitallibrary.usc.edu/cdm/fullbrowser/collection/p15799coll12/id/1155/rv/compoundobject/cpd/1160>
18. Thomas, *Season of High Adventure*, 268. “FDR had known Carlson since he commanded his presidential bodyguard at Quantico, where they became friends. White House backing had become essential to overcome the old-line Marine opposition to the whole Raider training system, which Carlson had set up . . . Jimmy Roosevelt had been Carlson’s executive officer, and he later become commander of the second Raider Battalion. “Jimmy,” his father once said to me, “is crazy about Carlson.” Source: Edgar Snow, “Random notes on Red China, 1936–1945,” Harvard East Asian Research Center, included as Appendix II In Colling, *Spirit of Yen-an*, 163–70.
19. Richard Bernstein, *China 1945: Mao’s Revolution and America’s Fateful Choice* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2014), 91. Bernstein noted that Mao himself helped to set the affable tone, writing in an editorial that the mission was “The most exciting event since the war against Japan started.”
20. Davies, *Dragon by the Tail*, 318.
21. Barrett, p. 29.
22. John Colling, *The Spirit of Yen-an: A Wartime Chapter of Sino-American Friendship* (API Press Ltd, Hong Kong, 1991), 67–70.
23. Colling, *The Spirit of Yen-an*, 14.
24. Colling, *The Spirit of Yen-an*, 80.
25. Barrett, *Dixie Mission*, 35.
26. Colling, *The Spirit of Yen-an*, 76.
27. *Ibid*, 77
28. Agnes Smedley, *The Great Road: The Life and Times of Chu Teh* (Monthly Review Press, 1956), 4.
29. Barrett, *Dixie Mission*, 50–51.
30. Smith, *OSS*, 263.
31. Shakespeare. *The Tempest*, Act 5 Scene 1.
32. Barrett, *Dixie Mission*, from the Foreword by John K. Fairbank: “[The Dixie Mission] also coincided with the admission to Yen-an of a group of American journalists who got across the Kuomintang blockade to report on that other China....” Theodore White had made his own way, accompanying the second Dixie contingent with the help of friends at the US Embassy.”
33. Theodore H. White, *In Search of History: A Personal Adventure* (Warner Books, 1981), 249: “And all—except Chou En-lai and Mao Tse-tung—were convinced, apparently, that I was a semi-official and friendly reportorial arm of the American government.”
34. *Ibid*, 250.
35. *Ibid*, 249.
36. Barrett, *Dixie Mission*, 38–41.
37. *Ibid*, 41–42.
38. Barrett, *Dixie Mission*, 9, from the Foreword by John K. Fairbank.
39. Mao’s statement continued:” ... [.] create the conditions that will make up for our inferiority in arms and other things, and create the prerequisites for overcoming every difficulty in the war.” Mao Tse-tung, *On Protracted War, Selected Works*, Vol. II, Foreign Language Press, 1965), 154.

40. Barrett, *Dixie Mission*, 44. Mao made the comment to John Service.
41. John S. Service, *Lost Chance in China: The World War II Despatches of John S. Service* (Random House, 1974), 240–41. From Service memo based on talks with journalists Harrison Forman, M. Votaw, and I. Epstein on their journey with the Red Army in Northwest Shansi.
42. Colling, *The Spirit of Yen-an*, 26.
43. Service, *Lost Chance in China*, 236–37.
44. *Ibid.*, 236, 237.
45. *Ibid.*, 238.
46. Barrett, *Dixie Mission*, 34
47. *Ibid.*
48. Barrett, *Dixie Mission*, 35.
49. *Ibid.*, 34.
50. *Ibid.*, 7–8. OWI rep Francis McCracken Fisher was not a member of the Dixie team as such. The date of his appearance at Yen-an could not be determined. Said to have been “one of America’s foremost newspaper correspondents” in China, he most likely accompanied the group of journalists that had arrived almost concurrently with Dixie. In December 1941 he had been sworn in as an Auxiliary Foreign Service officer to represent Donovan’s OSS precursor office, Coordinator of Information, and later OWI. Source: Page on Fisher at “Social Networks And Archival Context” website.
51. Colling, *The Spirit of Yen-an*, 80–81. Spies sent by the Japanese Army had been discovered in the school. Colling wrote that “After good treatment and indoctrination, some agents confessed and worked for the group [JEL]”
52. Head, *Yen-an*, 82.
53. Colling, *The Spirit of Yen-an*, 83.
54. *Ibid.*, 86. In this author’s dealings with early members of the People’s Liberation Army Air Force—i.e., those who had trained in the early 1950’s—he learned that their flight instructors were primarily Japanese Army pilots, former POWs who had decided to remain in China after the war. Bob Bergin, “Growth of Air Defenses: Responding to Covert Overflights, 1949–1974, *Studies in Intelligence* 57, No. 2 (June 2013), 20.
55. Colling, *The Spirit of Yen-an*, 88.
56. Colling, *The Spirit of Yen-an*, 83.
57. Smedley, *The Great Road*, 363.
58. Smedley, *The Great Road*, 364. The date of the order is unknown, but was probably November 1937, the time of the above incident.
59. Colling, *The Spirit of Yen-an*, 85–87. Captain Evans Carlson records an encounter with Japanese POWs in about mid-1938. Two officers and 11 enlisted men were being held in a small village. “The people smilingly informed us that the Japanese “guests” were doing their lessons. We found them in a sunny courtyard . . . a Chinese soldier stood before a blackboard talking to them in Japanese. The subject, I was informed, was the basic theory of co-operative societies. . . . All appeared to be in good health and well fed, and all were cheerful.” Source: Evans Fordyce Carlson, *Twin Stars of China: A Behind-the-Scenes Story of China’s Valiant Struggle for Existence, by a U.S. Marine Who Lived & Moved With the People* (Dodd, Mead & Company, 1940), 229.
60. Colling, *The Spirit of Yen-an*, 95.
61. *Ibid.*, 101–106.
62. *Ibid.*, 93.
63. *Ibid.*, 158.
64. *Ibid.*, 95.
65. *Ibid.*, 96.
66. *Ibid.*, 100
67. *Ibid.*, 106.
68. White, *In Search of History*, 261.
69. Barrett, *Dixie Mission*, 56.
70. *Ibid.*,
71. Carole J. Carter, *Mission to Yen-an: American Liaison with the Chinese Communists, 1944–1947* (The University Press of Kentucky, 1997), 107.
72. Colling, *The Spirit of Yen-an*, 108.
73. Smith, *OSS*, 274.
74. Colling, *The Spirit of Yen-an*, 114.
75. Bernstein, *China 1945*, 155.
76. Smith, *OSS*, 272.
77. Willis Bird Memo, “Yen-an Trip,” 24 January 1945, NARA 226, Entry 148 Box 7, Folder 103.
78. Barrett, *Dixie Mission*, 76, 77.
79. *Ibid.*, 79.
80. *Ibid.*, 78.

81. Wakeman, *Spymaster*, 348.
82. Ibid.
83. Milton E. Miles (Vice Admiral, USN) and Hawthorne Daniel, *A Different Kind of War: The Little-Known Story of the Combined Guerilla Forces Created in China by the U.S. Navy and the Chinese during World War II* (Doubleday, 1967), 468.
84. Wakeman, *Spymaster*, 348.
85. Bernstein, *China 1945*, 182.
86. Ibid., 48.
87. Ibid.
88. Bernstein, *China 1945*, 228.
89. Wakeman, *Spymaster*, 148–49.
90. Dino A Brugioni and Doris G. Taylor, *Eyes in the Sky: Eisenhower, the CIA and Cold War Aerial Espionage* (Naval Institute Press, 2010), 34–35.
91. Barrett, *Dixie Mission*, 36.
92. Ibid.
93. Colling, *The Spirit of Yen-an*, 118.
94. Carter, *Mission to Yen-an*, 207, 298.
95. Colling, *The Spirit of Yen-an*, 124.
96. Ibid., xxi.
97. Ibid., 125.
98. Bob Bergin, “Defeating an Insurgency: The Thai Effort against the Communist Party of Thailand, 1965-ca. 1982,” *Studies in Intelligence* 60, No.2 (June 2016), 31.

