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MILITARY UNREST IN CHINA

BULLETIN No. 3

Issued by

American Committee for Fair Play in China

PURPOSE

TO GIVE TO AMERICA THE UNCOLORED TRUTH ABOUT CHINA, WITH THE CONVICTION THAT A PROPER UNDERSTANDING BETWEEN NATIONS IS THE ONLY REQUISITE TO JUST RELATIONS AND MUTUALLY HELPFUL DEALING, AND THAT OUT OF THIS UNDERSTANDING GOOD WILL COME FOR CHINA AND FOR THE WORLD.

APRIL, 1926

TWO QUESTIONS ANSWERED

It is difficult for inhabitants of a consistently unified country to form an adequate mental picture of the present state of military unrest in China. Among the medley of warring military leaders whose names travel rather meaninglessly abroad to further confuse the newspaper reading public, interested individuals may well ask—"But which one is the central force, which the rebel?"

And there is another frequently asked question, concerning issues: "*Why* are the people of the various sections of China constantly struggling against each other?"

The answers to both these questions are short. To the first "*Neither.*" To the second "*They are not.*"

To which seeming paradox this is the explanation:

(1) There *is no* central authority in China which can be regarded as authentically such; there is merely a temporary regime instituted by the force of one military leader or another according to the fortunes of battle, and having only a very slightly extensive power, either in point of time or area. Each military leader consequently names his opponents "rebels" and himself the saviour and would-be unifier of China—the "National Army," or central force.

(2) There are no *real issues* which concern the people closely in these manifold warrings. Therefore, THE PEOPLE THEMSELVES ARE NOT ENGAGING IN THESE STRUGGLES. When I say "the people" I mean those who are not officials or would-be-officials or ex-officials—and many as there are in the latter classes, still the people themselves number vastly more thousands! And it is true that the people themselves are not greatly concerned. They are *not* a disunited people or a people incapable of unification as many observers are fond of stating. There *are no* causes of quarrel, fundamentally, between the provinces in which Wu Pei-fu is supreme and those in which Feng Yu-hsiang has held sway; or between either of those and the people of Canton, or the areas farther west. The wars are leaders' wars, and are waged for personal power and control, almost invariably with little to choose between the combatants.

The leaders are supported in their warfare by a mercenary or an impressed soldiery, and by funds levied as tax upon the merchants of the areas they control. A mercenary army is an understandable thing in China, where it is drawn from those sections of a dense population which are already facing star-

vation and which welcome even the precarious life of a soldier as a more certain means of subsistence.

The essential point in answer number two is, therefore, that there is no real division between the people of North and South, Coast or Inland provinces. And the problem of the unification of China is, then, the problem (by no means a simple one) of ridding herself of her warring militarist *leaders*.

GEOGRAPHICAL CAUSE FOR DISUNITY

It is not easy for people living in a country so closely-knit as America, a country of even *mental* unification where every morning the people of one State know precisely what the people of their farthest-removed sister-State have been doing in the few hours since the last news edition—it is not easy for people of such an environment and mental habit to comprehend China and the degree of her disunion. But that disunion is almost wholly *physical* in character. Perhaps we may come nearer to an understanding of the situation if we think of our own thirteen colonies and states before the days of train and telegraph, and the disunity that then prevailed from geographical conditions and social diversities.

Consider a country with an area estimated at five million square miles, of which only the four hundred linear miles of coast territory are in any sense well connected or easily accessible one part to another by rail, telegraph or water. Consider the huge interior area which is only sparsely and imperfectly touched by telegraph, where railroads do not exist, where the laborious travel by small river boat, cart or camel-train is made more uncertain and difficult by the natural obstacles of turbulent rivers, rapids, floods, great mountain barriers, poor roads.

Under such conditions it is scarcely reasonable to expect the people of Kansu Province, or of distant Szechuan, which border on the Tibetan wastes and are months distant from Peking, to know of, much less comprehend and conform to, edicts from the temporary authority at Peking! And without the thought-unity that comes from a close news-intercourse it is a very difficult matter for a republican government to function over wide areas.

During the Empire these distant provinces enjoyed a remarkably autonomous regime—under the governorship of an imported Manchu staff, it is true, and paying taxes to Peking, but otherwise practically cut off from central authority, certainly cut off from participation in extra-

provincial affairs or any constraint thereto. The removal of even a corrupt and tottering Imperial power, with no strong or organized force for its immediate replacement, could not, even though the agency be termed Revolution and the form Republic, bring about an instant conformity throughout a territory of vast distances and physical barriers. It did but increase the sense of local autonomy by removing the semblance of central authority and failing to remove the local Big Men, their armies or their ambitions.

PROVINCES BUT PAWNS

Out of such a beginning China's fifteen years of non-monarchical existence have been filled with an intensification of inter-provincial warfare, manoeuvred by varying combinations of military power,—a warfare which has hampered and rendered well-nigh impossible the constructive efforts of nation and government builders. And there again the term "inter-provincial" is misleading, for the provinces are but pawns in the hands of the militarists—impressed suppliers of men and money for the armies, not truculent participants of themselves. While the leaders themselves,—old military governors, or bandit generals, or upstarts from the ranks, whatnot—are each pursuing his own personal dream of uniting all China under his own leadership; and to that end attempting to "pacify" his own particular provincial stronghold and consolidate his immediate neighbors under his command. The difficulty of each lies in the fact that "consolidation" means absorption of other lesser powers into his own; and in an atmosphere of personal ambitions, constrained subordination, individual jealousies, it is nonsense to look for or expect such things as loyalty and trust among these enforced allies. A man is your ally or your subordinate until he sees a chance to take steps alone in his own direction, or an opportunity to gain further toward his own objective in the service of your rival. That is why it seems impossible that a decisive war or even battle can be fought out in this mass of military unrest and intrigue.

It is, in fact, this very indecisiveness which is the curse of the military situation today, and which, incidentally, renders it so puzzling and incomprehensible to the casual onlooker by reason of its continual shifting of face. No general is ever honest-to-goodness "licked." None is ever eliminated—unless he chances to be a rebelling subordinate who is unlucky enough to fall into his erstwhile superior's clutches. Little does it count that day before yesterday Wu and Feng drove Chang outside the Great Wall, for yesterday Feng turned around and let him in

again and together *they* drove *Wu* into hiding; and today Chang and Wu have joined forces to castigate the too-presumptuous Feng. Tomorrow—what?

FOREIGN AID TO MILITARY CONTESTANTS

A further element, intensifying the indecisiveness, has in the past been the ability of warring factions to secure the sinews of war from one or another of the foreign powers—some Chinese patriots say because it was to the interests of the powers to maintain a weak, unstable, impotent China as the field for their enterprises. Some even say it has been a well-known policy for one Power to help finance two belligerents at the same time. It is likewise conceded by many of these same patriots that foreign subsidization alone does not keep the militarists solvent and functioning. The wealth of China herself is year after year scrunched within the mailed paws of the militarists—and the merchants under their domination seem helpless to withhold.

These same foreign Powers are fond of saying officially—“If *China* does this and that,” or “If the Chinese people stop their domestic quarrelling . . .” as if there is at present any functioning unit known as China which can issue and enforce an ultimatum; as if the Chinese *people* had anything to do with this incessant warring! The people themselves do nothing but suffer at the hands of the military under whose regime they exist—lose peace, prosperity, actual property, even lives in the wake of battles which do not otherwise concern them and which never settle anything. They are heartily wearied of the endless game; but so far, because there is little ease of communication between them there has been little possibility of concerted action in self-defense.

In some such concerted action, however, lies what looks like China's only hope of freeing herself from that incubus, the Tuchun or military governor. And the fact that the people themselves are not divided by these struggles—that in fact they loathe all militarists with an impartial loathing—is the one element that renders the situation hopeful.

THE “BIG THREE”

It is true that amongst the present Big Three who, first in one combination and then another, manipulate all the many lesser generals of Central, Western and Northern China in an incessant struggle for control, public opinion differs in its estimate, and some people incline to one and some to another as “the least bad.” On the

whole, Wu Pei-fu has the odds in the popular favor—but chiefly as an individual, not as a leader of armies, as a civil administrator, or as a possible savior of China. He holds this lead by reason of his unimpeachable personal honesty (witness his comparative poverty and simplicity of life), by his unquestioned (if misguided) patriotism, and not least by reason of his strict bearing as a traditional hero, a Confucian ethicist of the classical type.

On the other hand, the less conservative-minded of Young China are inclined to hold Feng Yu-hsiang as more modern, more nationalistic, more plastic, less the rigid conformist of the old fashion—in short, more hopeful as a potential doer of constructive things. Personally he is almost universally disliked, despised even, because of his instability and unaccountability; but he has made a grand bid for popular suffrance in disciplining an army which does not prey upon the countryside it inhabits, and a still stronger bid for favor among participants in the nationalist movement by declaring boldly for a People's Army to fight China's battles against foreign aggression—a safe enough gesture.

It is safe to say that except among power-seekers, Chang Tso-lin is practically anathema. He is probably the most efficient and powerful militarist of them all, and with seeming taste for efficient government as well, as exemplified in Manchuria. But, strong man or not, honest man or not, he had his beginning as a bandit, a common "hung-hu-tze," and *that* the long memory of the Chinese people can neither forget nor forgive.

This division of popular opinion can scarcely be said to go to the lengths of voluntary support, for all three men are considered enemies of the public peace and of constructive development. Yet strangely enough, the force of public like or dislike, while it cannot stem the tide of warfare can do much in swaying its success. So it means much to a leader to gain any degree of popular favor or suffrance, and he will take great pains to announce his plans and principles in populace-courying terms, or even, when convenient, to do constructive small-scale works for the same purpose.

CHINA'S ONE HOPE

But in the long run, despite his efforts and his high-sounding phrases, he gains little real popular favor. His deeds too greatly belie his words. Everywhere as a result the populace joins in futilely cursing the military. They suffer from victors and vanquished alike. And now there is a growing movement for making this popular cursing *less* futile,—a movement to translate it into action and

crystallize it into effectivity. So far the movement seems small and impotent, it is true, when compared with the vast field over which it has to work. But there were even smaller and more insignificant beginnings for that other amazing movement which fifteen years ago overthrew an Empire, in a tradition-loving land where Empire had for thousands of years existed. And both movements found or are finding their beginnings in the fiery-spirited, determined student-class. Today this student-class is more widespread and more embracing than was its prototype of fifteen or twenty years ago.

If that other miracle could have happened (even poorly managed as it may have been) who can say that the seemingly hopeless muddle of present-day militarism in China may not also be resolved, unexpectedly and completely. Come when it may, certainly *that* miracle could never be branded as "premature," as the earlier has sometimes been!

Let China's self-conscious youth get solidly behind the slogan "Down With Militarists!" and I for one have faith in their ultimate achievement. It is China's one hope,—and a by no means hopeless one!

Report submitted by

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NOTE:—Copies of any bulletin will be furnished upon request.

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