

William G. Grieve, *The American Military Mission to
China, 1941-1942: Lend-Lease Logistics, Politics
and the Tangles of Wartime Cooperation*

Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers,
2014. 264 pp.

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A book on the American Military Mission to China (1941-1942) (AMMISCA) is long overdue, therefore, even its belated publication is good news for scholarship. The AMMISCA's story deserves telling for two obvious reasons: first, it was America's very first tangible military involvement in China's conflict with Japan, and second, it was the precursor to America's oft-repeated experiment of giving official military aid to foreign countries in the post-World War II era, especially in non-Western regions.

Thus, this case study is not only germane to America's bilateral relations with China, it has the potential of providing valuable insight into the U.S.'s handling of foreign military entanglements over the past sixty to seventy years. In this sense, the subject matter is as relevant today as it was first conceived by the author many decades ago.

As the author makes clear at the book's outset, his primary objective is to

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provide a “close-up account” of the Mission “with an emphasis on the unique sequence of challenges it faced” in China and Burma during 1941-1942 (p. 2). In line with this thinking, the book has made important contribution to scholarship in at least four areas:

First, it provides a detailed account of the Chinese government’s own efforts to enlist the American private sector (Daniel G. Arnstein and the transportation business from New York city, pp. 89-99) to improve efficiency on the Burma Road, and of how this effort foreshadowed the Mission’s early endeavors in tackling the multiple difficulties plaguing the Road’s operation. In fact, this book gives us a more thorough review (30 pages, pp. 127-157) of the Road’s logistical problems (including its companion pipeline and air route) than most other existing works. Chapter Nine is packed with facts weaving a fascinating story about the Mission’s operations along the Burma Road, and offers more incisive analysis on the subject than most.

Second, the book gives a thorough account of the Mission’s involvement in the evolution of the American Volunteer Group (AVG) both before and after the Pearl Harbor attack. While the AVG story has been amply covered in the literature, most accounts focus either on its combat accomplishments or on Chennault’s personal exploits. In contrast, this book informs the readers how the Mission helped to strengthen the AVG before Pearl Harbor and facilitate its participation in Rangoon’s air defense in the early days of the Pacific War, quickly bringing international renown to the name of the Flying Tigers (pp. 100-104, Chapter 10, pp. 158-178). In addition, it treats the readers to an insider’s view of both the attitudes that each of various American political and military leaders (e.g., Currie, Marshall, Arnold, Stilwell, and Clayton L. Bissell) harbored with respect to the AVG as well as the long and arduous negotiations between Marguder,

Chennault, Currie, Chiang Kai-shek, and Stilwell about the AVG's role and function in the China theater.

Third, the book leads readers through the American bureaucratic labyrinth and provides an intimate peek into the operations of the various departments and each of their respective stances on China. Particularly pertinent is the book's revelation of General Marshall's low esteem of Magruder's ability and judgment, which practically doomed Magruder's assignment to China from the outset (p. 184). Just as interesting is the book's comparison of the State Department and the War Department's assessments of Magruder's reports as well as the importance (or unimportance) each Department attached to the China War (pp. 185-186). These facts give the readers a better grasp of the American government's inner workings than most other works published thus far.

Finally, the book's informative and insightful analysis of relations between Americans and the British insofar as they affected the Mission's work in the CBI area is an important contribution to scholarship as it is a subject rarely dealt with in such focus in other academic works.

The author has been able to accomplish these feats because he has pored over an impressive body of English-language data hitherto untapped or underutilized by other scholars. These data include archival materials of U.S. and British government agencies as well as personal papers, diaries, and correspondence of important officials. Lastly, the author has acquired diaries and personal papers of, or established correspondence and conducted interviews with, a number of people possessing intimate knowledge about the AMMISCA's work. In short, the author's exhaustive research on English-language materials has enabled him to present a solid treatment of his subject matter from the American point of view.

Notwithstanding these accomplishments, the book suffers from serious flaws

of two general kinds: one substantive and the other organizational.

I. Substantive Issues

Most of the substantive problems in the book may be traced to a single common cause, i.e., the book's absolute silence on Chinese source materials. The ensuing problems are manifest on four levels:

Level One: narrative of specific facts

It is unfortunate that the book is marred by a splattering of erroneous factual accounts throughout the text. For instance, the statement that "British skepticism regarding China's willingness to support the war effort was strengthened on December 22 when Chiang withdrew his troops from Hong Kong..." (p. 188). contains two mistakes in a single sentence. First, by the outbreak of the Pacific War, China had already fought Japan single-handedly for 53 months during which Great Britain steadily refused to respond to any Chinese-initiated effort to coordinate a common defense of their territories against the mounting Japanese threat. Second, Great Britain never allowed any modern Chinese government to send troops to its colony. When Chiang Kai-shek specifically offered to send troops after the outbreak of the Pacific War to bolster Hong Kong's defense, his offer was summarily and disdainfully rejected.

As another example, General Stilwell did not leave Burma on "the last day of March" (1942) but in early May, and the direction of his "walkout" was not toward China as the author claims (p. 203), but toward India, which was in direct violation to the orders issued by the supreme commander of the China theater.

The misrepresentation of such fairly simple facts really cannot inspire confidence in the author's corollary statement as when he says, "in Burma he [Stilwell] was involved with but not responsible for the defeats suffered by the Chinese armies who were driven back to China." Obviously, the author faithfully

embraces the U.S. Army's official history without ever consulting other sources or wondering if the U.S. version might be inaccurate or incomplete.

Level Two: characterization of people or events

A prime example is the book's questionable characterization of China's leaders on page 46 where it states, "(T.V.) Soong was cut very similar to (H. H.) Kung in his value system and methods of operation." Many pages later, the author again quotes approvingly a passage about the "Soong-Kung clique" (p. 82).

Such statements reveal a total lack of awareness of a large body of Chinese language data or the recent English language scholarship derived from such data. The author's citation of one single secondary source of doubtful scholarly credibility published in 1952 (p. 220) does not lend weight to his assertion. As any student of the Nationalist era should know, there existed profound differences between these two men in terms of their personal temperament, political orientation, operating style, power base, and relationship with Chiang Kai-shek. Given the unconcealed contempt that each man felt toward the other, they would probably turn over in their graves if they knew that they were being lumped together into the same clique.

Likewise, the book's description of its central figure, General Magruder, arouses concern. Throughout the book, the author consistently employs the thesis that Magruder enjoyed "good relations" or an "excellent relationship" with Chiang Kai-shek (pp. 103, 173, 187, 204) and relies on this thesis to make inferences about Magruder's relations with the U.S. War Department and General Marshall. In reality, Chiang Kai-shek severely rebuked Magruder shortly after the war broke out (an extremely uncharacteristic action for Chiang to take, especially with respect to a high-ranking American general) and probably inflicted irreparable damage to Magruder's position in Chungking thereafter. It also explains why the

Chinese government soon afterwards bypassed Magruder by asking the U.S. to dispatch another higher-ranking officer to serve as allied chief of staff in the China theater and pointedly suggested that this new appointee need not be an “old China hand”. It further raises the possibility that Magruder himself may have purposefully fed his War Department bosses rosy news of his “good relations” with the Chinese government precisely in order to hide his precarious position among the Chinese and to increase his political clout back home. This possibility in turn would cast doubt upon the book’s many other inferences about U.S.-China relations and the War Department’s internal personnel frictions.

Finally, there is the problem of selected omission of some important issues. One such example is the book’s reticence on Magruder’s own exit from China, a topic which has always aroused considerable speculation. It is well known that General Stilwell, as Magruder’s direct superior, expressed much annoyance at the manner and procedure of Magruder’s unannounced disappearance from his post. Yet the book chooses to accord this episode a most cursory treatment (pp. 209-210), leaving readers with the impression that the author wished to avoid this issue even though it constituted an important reflection on the professional integrity of the most central figure of his entire book.

Level Three: analysis of complex events

The so-called “Three Demands” episode of June 1942 is a topic traditionally addressed in most comparable scholarly works but serves as a good example of this book’s inadequate analysis of complex events. A passage on p. 155 states that, “in an exchange of communications between Washington and Chungking, Chiang reiterated, among other threats, *his inclination to seek a separate peace with Japan.*” Such a statement not only fails to present the Chinese side of the story, it also fails to show awareness of the existence of other English language materials

that contradict this interpretation. Moreover, by putting words (as highlighted above) into Chiang's mouth, it goes even beyond what U.S. Army official historians have dared to state. At the very least, the author could have provided the readers with a more credible citation of his own sources.

A more serious example can be found on p. 206 which says, "Chiang Kai-shek knew that after the war there would be difficulties in bringing the numerous rogue warlords under his control, and a considerably greater problem subduing the Communists. *Hence, he stockpiled troops and supplies, for example the X, Y, and Z forces later outfitted and trained at Ramgarh, India.*" Again, in one single sentence he lumps together three huge Chinese forces of very different kinds. First, only one of these forces (the X Force) was trained in Ramgarh while the other two were trained inside China. Second, the time frame of the quoted passage covers a 3-year period (1942-1945) during which both X and Y Forces were fully engaged in combat against Japanese forces in Burma. The Z Force did not even come into existence until much later. The author really needs to define carefully the meaning of the word "stockpiled" in this context.

Level Four: representation of issues relating to allied interactions

Problems with the book become even more obvious when it finally delves into the politics and tangles of wartime cooperation. The last chapter, entitled "international strategic planning", is ostensibly a broad survey of the trilateral relations between the U.S., the UK, and China. Yet it gives only a U.S.-centered account of this important allied military meeting in Chungking in late December 1941.

Further, the account gives no clue that the process of strategic planning in the Asian theater was actually initiated and tenaciously promoted by the Chinese government. It does not inform readers about China's reasons for advocating the

planning process, its concrete expectations or its proposals for implementation. Instead, it gives the impression that the U.S. played the dominant role while China was but a passive second fiddle. Not surprisingly, it totally fails to address the issue of how the Chinese leaders' perception and reaction to the allied military leaders' conduct at the meeting nearly wrecked the Sino-British segment of this brand new alliance. As for the U.S., its most senior participant at the meeting was a general who was in Asia at the time by chance and who knew little about the background of the meeting.

Another example is the book's treatment of the so-called "Tulsa Incident". To its credit, the book marshals an impressive body of English-language materials to reconstruct an elaborate account of the incident in Burma, including American military involvement in the incident, British actions in Rangoon, and the eventual disposition of the Lend-Lease materials under contention (pp. 108-126). Particularly valuable is the book's meticulous treatment of the mentality and actions of American personnel in Rangoon as well as the attitudes of the War Department leaders.

But the Tulsa Incident's historical importance lies not so much with the fact that British authorities in Burma impulsively seized a shipload of American Lend-Lease materials in the Port of Rangoon, but, rather, because such seizure gravely damaged China's confidence in its two new Western allies. Without bringing Chinese reactions to the incident into sharp focus and underscoring the incident's immediate and long-term damage to the alliance, it almost becomes unjustified to allocate so much precious print to the incident at all.

Unfortunately, this chapter not only tells us very little about this complicated relationship, but proceeds to make unwarranted deductions on the basis of its narrative. Thus, for instance, it asserts that Magruder reported to Washington

that Chiang Kai-shek had become “visibly pleased” (p. 107) by his explanation of America’s policy toward the incident. This is simply not true.

In addition to the above-mentioned problems, the book also makes some careless mistakes. For example, Chiang Kai-shek was never the “president” of China during the Pacific War (pp. 4, 7). Instead, he was the generalissimo. Speaking of China’s effort at the end of 1941 to join supreme allied war council, the author states on p. 193, “but it was over a year before China gained a seat on a prominent Allied planning council: the Combined Chiefs of Staff.” Again, the basic facts are wrong. The author describes Stilwell at the end of April 1942 (p. 197) as “leading the withdrawal from Burma”. Even the U.S. Army’s official history has never made such a bold claim. The fact remains that Stilwell left Burma with only a small coterie and left all the Chinese units under his command to fend for themselves. As one more example, Henry Morgenthau was definitely not “Secretary of State” (p. 33).

As mentioned, most of the problems delineated above share one common cause, that being the book’s failure to consult Chinese-language materials. It should be remembered that the Mission was not a unilateral American policy decision superimposed upon China, but the product of mutual accommodation through negotiation. The Mission’s duties were supposed to be performed in China in close collaboration with Chinese leaders. It is therefore difficult to understand how discussion of the Chinese viewpoint could be virtually non-existent for much of the book’s narrative.

As Sino-American differences in motivations and expectations were not reconciled diplomatically, it is not at all surprising that the level of cooperation fell short of both countries’ expectations. Whereas the American military preferred to regard the AMMISCA as doing China a big favor, the Chinese government

definitely did not share the same sentiment. Therefore, Magruder and the AMMISCA's activities should have been narrated throughout the book in tandem with the aspirations and concerns of their Chinese counterparts, and not merely in context of the War Department's administrative framework.

In substantive terms, the book makes a lot of excellent observations about the AMMISCA's technical performance insofar as the Americans worked among themselves. However, it falls short on explaining how the Mission performed its job in China and describing its interactions with the Chinese government. To put it differently, the book offers solid micro-level discussion when English-language materials suffice to serve its purpose (e.g., Lend-Lease Logistics), but reveals deficiencies in macro-level discussion, such as its treatment of "Politics and the Tangles of Wartime Cooperation". In the latter case, the English-language materials should have been supplemented by Chinese-language materials. Additional fact-checking would have been warranted as well. Thus, ironically, it is precisely the book's strength in using English-language materials that magnifies its uneven treatment of its subject matter.

II. Organizational Issues

The book as a whole exhibits an organizational problem as well.

The author informs us early on that the book "is configured to provide a *concise* regional historical background" (p. 2), yet the finished product is anything but concise. With 216 pages of text, it devotes the first 87 pages to this "regional historical background". This allocation of nearly 40% of the text to historical background seems excessive by any standard, especially when the content could well have been quickly summarized in the form of a prologue. It is inexplicable why the author saw fit to devote so many pages to the background of China's distant past, yet to say little to nothing about its contemporary political setting and

Chinese actors that the AMMISCA would have encountered.

Strangely, the author is very eloquent about the need to study the AMMISCA's counterpart, i.e., the Chinese. He says, "as a former intelligence officer I believe much can be learned from the experiences of AMMISCA. In the intelligence field a cardinal rule is that one learns as much as possible about one's adversary. I submit, however, that this study demonstrates *it is absolutely essential* to be as cognizant as possible not only of the motivations, intentions, and capabilities of one's enemies, but of one's allies and superiors as well. Politics permeates every aspect of the human endeavor" (p. 4). Given his apparent understanding of the advantages, it is puzzling why the author would ignore his own advice in treating the subject matter on hand. In the few instances where he does mention the names of Chinese leaders, he chooses to make cursory remarks by embracing well-worn perceptions and interpretations of a bygone era while depriving himself of an opportunity to make original contribution to the subject.

The book's silence on contemporary Chinese actors almost implies that they are but stereotypical characters, ones whose "motivations, intentions and capabilities" might be better explained by shared common historical and cultural background rather than by personal, individualized, and private ones.

An obvious drawback of this space allocation scheme is that readers are not presented with the fruits of the author's own original research until well into the sixth chapter, if indeed their attention can be sustained that long. It may also be safely assumed that anyone sufficiently interested in the highly specialized topic of the AMMISCA probably has read extensively on China, U.S.-China relations, the Pacific War, etc., and would not require such a lengthy introduction. And for the small minority of readers who might benefit from such introductory materials, a *concise* prologue would have sufficed.

Therefore, in this reviewer's humble opinion, readers who are genuinely interested in the AMMISCA will be richly rewarded by this book's original research and incisive analysis by reading from Chapter Six onward, while bearing in mind that they are reading the American half of the story.