

America Needs More Anson Burlingames



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Anson Burlingame has a unique place in history. First, he was American envoy to China. Then he became an envoy to the U.S. representing China.

Periodic tension between Washington and Beijing suggests that we need more leaders like Anson Burlingame. He was a politician and Congressman from Massachusetts, whom President Abraham Lincoln appointed as his envoy to China in 1861. Burlingame was an excellent orator with a strong sense of right from wrong which showed in his highly visible antislavery stance.

Upon his arrival in China, he undertook side trips to various cities to get a better understanding of the country and although not a trained diplomat, he quickly became a leader of the diplomatic community in Beijing. He was outspoken in defense of the sovereignty of China and criticized foreign interference in China's internal affairs. He became a trusted advisor to the Manchu imperial court and was befriended by Prince Kung, the power behind the throne.

He was interested in helping China modernize. To that end, he introduced an American geologist and also mining technology to help China develop her coal deposits. He was also in regular contact with another American then living in China, Frederick Townsend Ward. A soldier of fortune, Ward organized troops from Shanghai to fight the Tai Ping rebels. Ward's battlefield successes led to his eventual appointment as a Chinese general by the imperial court. It was likely that Burlingame played an intermediary role. See <http://georgekoo.blogspot.com/1995/01/firstamerican-to-become-chinese.html> for more.

When Burlingame was ready to return to the U.S., Prince Kung asked him to accept the appointment as High Minister Plenipotentiary and Envoy Extraordinary representing the imperial court, in other words, to become an ambassador on behalf of China. He accepted and led a delegation from China to Washington D.C. where the historic Burlingame Treaty was signed on July 28, 1868. The gist of the treaty was to commit the U.S. to noninterference of China's affairs and accord China the same peer stature and obligations as the western powers.

Burlingame then led the Chinese delegation to Europe where he was warmly received. He began treaty negotiations with Britain, France, Prussia, Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Russia. Tragically, he contracted pneumonia in St. Petersburg and died on February 23, 1870, after being ill for four days. He was not yet 50. Apparently, none of his other negotiations culminated in formal treaties except the one with the U.S. Ever since then, China has received a more even-handed and sometimes sympathetic treatment from the U.S. than from other western powers. Undoubtedly, this is a legacy of Burlingame's unique role in history.

From knowing nothing about China to becoming a diplomat working on behalf China may seem remarkable, but China has this effect on many Americans that spend time in the country. While living in China, they come to appreciate Chinese culture, values and the daily lives of the people. Some come to love their experience and memories in China.

Henry Kissinger as Nixon's secret envoy to China took a number of clandestine trips to Beijing to pave the way for Nixon's historic meeting with Mao. In between meetings with Mao and Zhou Enlai, he was said to have spent many solitary hours visiting the Forbidden City, the former imperial palace. Since then, he has been a moderating influence on the U.S. side of the bilateral relations.

George H. Bush served as the minister in charge of the liaison office in Beijing before the normalization of diplomatic relations. After becoming President, his administration was marked by a lack of confrontation with Beijing.

Leonard Woodcock, appointed by Jimmy Carter, became the first ambassador to Beijing where mutual diplomatic recognition and normalization took place in January 1979. Subsequently, even in failing health, Woodcock was a vigorous advocate of China joining the WTO. Despite being the former leader of United Auto Workers, his position on China has been far

more enlightened than his colleagues in organized labor.

As a matter of fact, virtually all of the ambassadors to China since Woodcock have become reasoned voices in favor of positive engagements and collaboration with China. There may be two possible exceptions. Winston Lord, who left Beijing just before the Tiananmen disturbance, saw that his vision to be the pivotal influence in turning China into a western style democracy was not to be. Now his acerbic comments about China seem to reflect his disenchantment.

James Lilley, Lord's successor in Beijing, has also been less than empathetic with Beijing. In his case, his outlook may have been hardened by prior years of service in the CIA and a stint as Washington's representative in Taiwan before rotating to Beijing. Probably, it did not help matters that he was the sitting ambassador having to deal with the fallout of the Tiananmen incident.

(While Donald Rumsfeld was still Secretary of Defense, Lilley spoke at a Pacific Council event in San Francisco. He overheard my conversation with a fellow attendee and was outraged when I described the neoconservatives in the Bush Administration as a bunch of "neoconpoops." He was certainly clear where he stood on the Middle East conflict.)

Even a brief visit to China can open eyes if not the mind. Senator Chuck Schumer comes to mind. He had been a leading proponent of levying a 27.5% duty on goods made in China to penalize China for alleged currency manipulation. After a quick visit to Beijing, he actually toned down his rhetoric for a while, although the China effect wore off and he has rejoined the demonizing China camp.

Today, China can engage the world on her own and no longer needs a Burlingame to exercise diplomacy on their behalf. However, hostility rooted in ignorance and not understanding China still persists in Washington.

In the interest of the public good, we should offer an annual “Burlingame” prize to the person who has contributed the most to promote mutual understanding between America and China.

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