

# Josiah Quincy: China and Russia (1900)

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*When the Boxer Rebellion erupted against the presence of foreign nations on Chinese soil, England, France, Germany, Russia, and the United States dispatched a rescue expedition (including 2,500 American troops) to protect their citizens living in China. Fearing that some of the competing Western powers might take advantage of the volatile situation to seize Chinese territory, Hay decided to expand America's commitment to China to include the preservation of Chinese territorial and administrative integrity as well as commercial equality. He failed to realize the long-range significance of such a commitment. In 1900 Josiah Quincy, formerly first assistant United States secretary of state, criticized Hay and McKinley for committing the United States to policies it could not enforce.*

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From Josiah Quincy, "China and Russia," *North American Review* 171 (October 1900): 529-542.

... The action of our own Government for the last year in connection with Chinese affairs, beginning with the circular note of Secretary Hay relative to the "open door" policy, in September, 1899, has certainly, in the main, been wise and conservative, and it may well be conceded that if the record closes equally well, a creditable chapter will have been added to the annals of American diplomacy. But the critical period of the real difficulties is just upon us, and this may last even for years before any final settlement is effected-if, indeed, the Chinese puzzle is to be solved at all in our day, which is by no means certain. It may not, therefore, be out of place to point out, in a spirit of considerate criticism, two mistakes, perhaps not unnatural ones, and fortunately not of the gravest importance or incapable of correction, which the present Administration seems to have made.

In the first place, the program outlined in Secretary Hay's note of July 3rd, while excellent ideally, was too ambitious and comprehensive in its scope, and too political in its character, differing radically in the latter respect from the policy embodied in his negotiations for the maintenance of the "open door" for commerce. His promise to hold the responsible authors of wrongs to American citizens to "the uttermost accountability" can easily be seen, in the light of recent developments, to have been somewhat too sweeping, and a more intimate knowledge of existing conditions in China would, doubtless, have prevented it from being made. It is never wise to threaten punishment which cannot be inflicted; and even on July 3rd it should have been sufficiently evident that the difficulties in the way of even ascertaining, to say nothing of punishing, the "responsible authors" of outrages would be so great as to make threats worse than idle; and a great nation cannot but suffer some loss of dignity if unable to make good its solemn words ....

In further declaring it to be the policy of the United States to seek a solution of the existing troubles which should "prevent a recurrence of such disasters, bring about permanent safety and peace in China;" Secretary Hay plainly implied the intention of our Government to join in political action for the radical reconstruction of Chinese administration. Fortunately, his language is general and does not hold us to any specific program, and when it suits our convenience we can dismiss it as a mere expression of pious good will toward the Chinese people; but taking the then existing conditions in connection with the context, it is sufficiently clear that the intention was to commit the United States to political action for the reform of Chinese government-an object quite outside the scope of previous American policy in the Far East, impossible of attainment by our own independent action and, if pursued in common with other Powers, fraught with the gravest possibilities of those international entanglements with European nations, which it is our historical policy to keep out of.

The Chinese government is, indeed, in the most crying need of reconstruction, whether from within or from without. But if this reform is to come from within, we have no more right to interfere with the internal politics of China than she has to take sides in our Presidential election; if from without, we had much better leave this huge, if not impossible, task to such nations as Russia or Japan, which could alone attempt it with any hope of success. It is not the mission of the United States to set right everything that is amiss all over the world, even if we have interests involved, or to take part in remodeling the government of some four hundred millions of people who deeply resent foreign interference with their affairs.

The idea of joining a syndicate of nations for the establishment of a political trust to regulate the affairs of the world may be a dazzling one, but when it seriously appeals to the United States, the whole character of our government and of our institutions will have to be changed; for world empire and democracy are inconsistent with each other and cannot coexist. Fortunately, the territory and power of the whole eastern hemisphere have already been so far divided up or preempted

among the older nations that the share which a new political partner would now receive would not be a very tempting one, in comparison with their great empires and dependencies-and perhaps we have our share in the political hegemony of the whole American hemisphere under the Monroe doctrine, to say nothing of our newly acquired islands.

The second mistake of the Administration was its assent to the appointment of a Commander-in-Chief of the forces of the allied Powers. A willingness to place American troops under any foreign officer implied a closer alliance with other Powers in China than was consistent with the independent attitude of the United States in Asiatic affairs in the past, and involved unknown risks of entangling us in political complications.

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We should never lose sight of the cardinal fact in the Chinese situation, so far as we are concerned -- namely, that we have no present or prospective territorial or political interests, "spheres of influence:" or "leases" of ports, in China, and that we do not want any -- in which respects we are in a radically different position from all the other Powers represented in the concert. If we have joined with other nations in forcing our missionaries and our trade on China, we have not, at least, participated in the exaction of those cessions of territory and comprehensive privileges which seem to have been the direct cause of the present outbreak. We may, therefore, well leave the main task of quelling the storm to those Powers which have raised it, merely safeguarding our own special interests, so far as that is possible.

In another respect, also, the position of the United States in China is fundamentally different from that of the other allied Powers. Everyone of these has such important interests at stake or such political alliances in Europe, that it must unfortunately consider becoming involved in war over the issues to be settled in Asia as at least a possibility and each is at present practically on a war footing, though this can only be said of Great Britain owing to the conflict in South Africa.

Doubtless, the tremendous disasters which would be involved in any war carried on between two great Powers under modern conditions disasters which would fall only less heavily upon the victors than upon the vanquished-are fully realized by responsible statesmen and rulers, and this knowledge makes their action most careful and conservative. Yet to the European Powers and Japan the dread possibility of armed conflict is always present in the background. Fortunately for the United States, in spite of our large army in the Philippines and our troops now in China, no sane American thinks that we will fight with any other member of the concert, whatever may be our policy or our interests, either to prevent the dismemberment of China or to secure any share in the partition for ourselves, or to reform the Chinese government, or even to maintain the "open door" for our trade. This certainly affords another cogent consideration in favor of keeping out of the threatening complications which may lead to war between the Powers; for, if we do not mean to fight, neither do we want to suffer any loss of dignity or prestige....

## REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What was the basis of Quincy's critique of Hay's Open Door Notes and policies?
2. How did Quincy define American interests in China?
3. Do you find Quincy or Hay more convincing? Why?