

The Pacific War ended in August 1945. Japan's invasion of China was over, but China was still torn between the Nationalists, led by Chiang Kai-shek, and the Communists, led by Mao Tse-tung. The two sides had been fighting a civil war for eighteen years, with interruptions mainly due to Japanese aggression. The Nationalists, or Kuomintang, were by far the more established and powerful of the two groups and had been trying to unify China for years. Their adversaries had included not only the Communists but powerful warlords as well. In the fall of 1945, the Nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek was widely recognized by both the Chinese people and other countries as the head of the "Government" of China.

As Chief of Staff of the Army, General George C. Marshall had built up the American military machine and led it to victory in World War II. When the war ended, Marshall retired. His retirement, however, was short-lived, as President Truman called upon him to go on an important mission to China. Marshall's instructions were to bring the Nationalists and the Communists—as well as the minor parties—together in a coalition government and thereby avert a continuation of the civil war. Chiang Kai-shek, commonly referred to as "the Generalissimo" and with whom the United States had a longstanding relationship, was to be engaged with as China's leader; but Marshall, an American of great stature, was also expected to be frank in his discussions with the Generalissimo.

In 1937, after passing his PhD exams in the social sciences at the University of Chicago, John Melby, approaching his mid-twenties and needing money, applied with and was hired by the United States Foreign Service. His first postings and assignments involved Latin America, during which time he also wrote a dissertation in order to complete his doctorate. In June 1943, in the midst of World War II, he was sent to Moscow. Serving under Averell Harriman, the American ambassador, Melby remained in the Soviet Union until April 1945, when he was to be re-assigned. In the spring of 1945, as the European portion of the war wound down, the cracks in the Soviet-American alliance began to widen. As a result, the leaders back in Washington decided, following Harriman's urging, that Foreign Service officers with Soviet experience should be spread around the world to places where Soviet intrigue was most likely. Melby's subsequent overseas posting, which would last from November 1945 until December 1948, was China. The following excerpts are from Melby's own notes and personal letters while in China; Melby himself pieced them together later for a book that offers firsthand insights on why the Chinese Communists came to power.

John Melby on the Chinese Revolution

(The Mandate of Heaven, by John F. Melby, University of Toronto Press, 1968, pages 29-30, 34, 44, 51-2, 82, 90, 96, 115, 117, 132, 154, 173, 176, 177, 194-5, 206-7, 243, 262, 265-7, 269-70, 295-6.)

November 9, 1945 – Each day the news from the north becomes more somber. There have already been small incidents involving American troops, and I would guess that unless they get out, only a miracle can sooner or later prevent one that will touch off God only knows what ugliness. Actually the incidents are all being handled by our military, which tells the Embassy absolutely nothing beyond what we read in the papers. And even there we see little, only enough to know that things are bad and hostilities are cropping out in every direction. We don't know the coverage in the States or the reaction. Practically everyone

now says there is little or no hope for bringing unity to China, that unity means suicide for whichever side compromises the most. The issues and the bitterness are too deep for peace. As far as we are concerned, we have by now jockeyed ourselves into a position where there is no longer any good answer. No matter what we do, we are in the wrong.

In a somewhat lighter vein, nothing in this country has the remotest chance of popular appeal that does not call for agrarian reform. In Canton there is even an organization known as the South Seas Basketball Association for Agrarian Reform! Actually, this is not as frivolous as it sounds. It represents a deeply felt need in this country that the [Nationalist] Government will ignore at its mortal peril. It has ignored it so far, despite lip service.

November 17, 1945 – Last night the Embassy political officers had dinner with representatives of the Democratic League, the so-called Third Force in China that stands between the Kuomintang [Nationalists] and the Communists. It was organized in 1941 to coordinate all the tag-end democratic and liberal groups who had no voice in the Kuomintang and thought they should. They were almost all educated abroad, call themselves the intellectuals of China, make a precarious sort of living writing ambiguous editorials for Kuomintang papers, and discuss the situation in their spare time. They believe the civil war will be continued...and advocate discussion groups as the way out of all troubles, possibly because they do not have an army and are most unlikely to get one. Despite the tremulous and ineffectual air about them, I have to admire their guts. They never stop their criticism of the Government, even though they know they are under continual secret police surveillance. Every so often one of them disappears, and his death is seldom quick or gentle; they also know it could happen to them all at any time. Probably the only thing that saves most of them is Kuomintang awareness that too big a purge would look bad in the American press.

December 8, 1945 – One of the great mysteries to me is why one group of people retains faith, whereas another from much the same origins and experience loses it. Over the years the Communists have absorbed an incredible amount of punishment, have been guilty of their own share of atrocities, and yet still have retained a kind of integrity, faith in their destiny, and will to prevail. By contrast, the Kuomintang has also gone through astonishing tribulations, has committed its excesses, has survived a major war with unbelievable prestige, and is now throwing everything away at a frightening rate because the revolutionary faith is gone and has been replaced by the smell of corruption and decay. It is too simple to attribute the difference to ideology. In the context of a generation ago both were equally revolutionary. There has to be another explanation, but I don't know what it is.

December 19, 1945 – Everybody scurries around here doing not much of anything, but with the impression of great accomplishment, and all scared to death over the impending arrival of the great man himself [General Marshall]. Since Washington has told us nothing, no one knows what he is going to do, what his instructions are, or how long he will be here... Many here now regret it, but don't know what can be done, except to go through with it. Most are agreed that it cannot help but impair the great reputation.

December 20, 1945 – These [leaders of the Nationalists]...were at one time the flaming revolutionaries of Asia who cut their way right and left, passionately devoted to Dr. Sun Yat-sen and what he stood for. Their Northern Expedition that consolidated Kuomintang control was one of the sagas of our times. Now they are sleek, polished, well fed, worldly, cynical, reactionary, interested only in maintaining their own positions and prerogatives. The same is true of their women, some of whom once marched barefoot out of Canton to the north. Now their hands are soft, and so are their heads and their morals. To see what has happened to them is the saddest and most depressing part of Chungking [the Chinese capital since 1938]. This does not apply to the Generalissimo. Whatever may be wrong with him, he is not soft.

February 2, 1946 – The PCC [Political Consultative Conference was composed of representatives of the Government/Nationalists, the Communists, and minor parties that were mostly grouped within the Democratic League] is over and no doubt all the press in America is now rejoicing that democracy has at last come to China. The Generalissimo's final speech was an impressive performance. He had all the words and all the sentiments and all in the right order. Even the agreements are impressive on paper. For what it is worth, it does have at least the advantages of putting all parties on record as favoring these things and of legalizing the opposition parties. Marshall is quite aware that so far it is only words, words, words. And when I suggested that one of its main secret objectives was to get him out of China, he agreed.

February 14, 1946 – The rioting and disorders are beginning to get on Marshall's nerves, and he is sharp about it, as he begins to suspect that he has something by the tail that is bigger than any one person. Nothing he does or says to anyone stops the violence, and this exasperates him. He also begins to wonder if the Generalissimo may have something bigger than he can handle; if he can go into the council of [Nationalist] generals in Nanking tomorrow and break them to his will, it will indeed be quite a feat. Sometimes Marshall reacts as though he were slowly coming to the reluctant and rather sickening conclusion there is only one answer left and that is to pull the props and turn the country over to civil war. As he put it once, "I don't see any other way of arousing a consciousness of political realities, of eliminating the reactionary groups, and of convincing these fine talking liberals around here that they will get just what is coming to them unless they are prepared to take to the barricades in defense of what they say they believe. There is the risk of what the Communists might do, but right now it does not seem they could or would do much militarily, and in any event as things are going now the Kuomintang will lose in the end. So perhaps it is not such a risk after all."

February 28, 1946 – I think many people overlook one factor in all the talk about the sincerity of the Generalissimo and his desire for reform. Assume for argument's sake that this is true; we don't give enough weight to the fact that for years the Kuomintang has been oriented and built away from reform and that all posts with any power have been given to the reactionaries. You don't change their attitude by fiat and really to reform means the greatest political purge in the history of the Party. That isn't easy; probably it isn't even possible.

May 2, 1946 – The newspaper correspondents are all living in the Nanking Hotel. I was there last night with them. Marshall had given a press conference and they were discouraged because they found him so depressed and worried. When that tight mouth of his says, “The situation is serious, critical, and dangerous,” it means just that. But he keeps repeating that this thing must succeed... I am almost certain now the Generalissimo is convinced he can settle China by force alone and intends to do just that.

May 5, 1946 - ...today we celebrate the “triumphal” return of the capital to Nanking. [The war with Japan had forced the move to Chungking for eight years.]

May 7 1946 – The Generalissimo and Marshall were distinctly cool to each other. They have been having some very harsh exchanges recently and there is a rapidly growing distrust of each other’s motives and judgment. The negotiations [on-going between the Nationalists and the Communists over political and military questions] have reached a complete stalemate. Sometimes I expect the collapse will come through fragmentation of the Kuomintang. If nothing else, the economic condition could bring it down. In Nanking I become increasingly aware of the economic aspects of the whole problem. Chungking, with its location and almost unassailable agricultural abundance, was such an economic world apart from the rest of China that it seemed of little relevance to politics. Here I can see how economics will dictate politics, unless something drastic is done. For example, just in the last three or four months the currency note issue has reached astronomical proportions. No semantic juggling in committee meetings can change what this does to people.

June 14, 1946 – The CC clique [the extreme right wing faction of the Nationalists, named for the two Ch’en brothers who controlled it] is the best-known and most notorious faction in the Kuomintang. The basic philosophy of its leaders, the Ch’en brothers, is a kind of Chinese Fascism that has great appeal for the Generalissimo, who has never displayed any understanding of economics beyond Confucian feudalism. The brothers are adamant in their opposition to any agreement with the Communists. Force is the only answer. They can usually count on the support of a group of generals whose sole objective is to protect their looting of military funds. It is a formidable combination and, skilled politician that he is, the Generalissimo dare not ignore their wishes too much. Perhaps he has never really wanted to do so. It is this coalition that is meant whenever anyone in China refers to “reactionary elements in the Kuomintang.”

October 1, 1946 – If August seemed a welter of harsh words producing nothing, September was a dizzy merry-go-round of charge, counter charge, proposal, counter proposal, and committees of three or five or none or steering committees that never met. It will take a very pedantic doctoral dissertation some day to unravel the threads; and the turmoil will have proved to be nothing more than an exercise in the art of how to negotiate when you have no slightest intention of conceding an iota, and doing it at arm’s length, since the Generalissimo has been at his summer residence in Kuling and Chou En-lai has been in Shanghai. Absolutely nothing has been accomplished politically, except that an angry Marshall has warned Chou En-lai that unless the Communists stop their attacks on his integrity [through their propaganda] he will withdraw.

Militarily the picture is very different. The Government [Kuomintang] is now not far short of having occupied almost all the territory it demanded at the time of the June truce. Yesterday, if it did not exactly cut a Gordian knot, it started something by announcing its intention of capturing the strategic Communist-held strongpoint of Kalgan in north China on which it has been advancing anyway for some time. This has provoked a thoroughly disgusted Marshall to inform both the Government and the Communists today that he totally disagrees with what both are doing and that unless they stop the fighting and get down to serious business on the negotiations he is going home and the United States is through with China.

December 1, 1946 – Marshall has had another one of those endless sessions with the Generalissimo... Largely rehash, its main interest was the flat assertion by Marshall that the Communists could not be destroyed militarily. The Generalissimo just as flatly disagreed. He even set a time schedule of eight to ten months and then asked Marshall to stay as an advisor to the Government. This evoked a very firm: “No! If I have been unable to have any influence on you as mediator with the full backing of my Government, how do you expect me to have any as an advisor?”

December 25, 1946 – Peffer leaves shortly in a hopeless mood [Nathaniel Peffer, an Asia expert from Columbia University]. Like most of us here he is dreadfully pessimistic about what the future holds, fed up with a corrupt and ineffectual Government, and completely disillusioned with the integrity of the Communists when they speak of doing anything other than provoking whatever chaos may be needed to secure their own ends.

January 8, 1947 – Marshall’s farewell “a plague on both your houses” statement has the Chinese vacillating between stunned silence and anguished screams. The dismay is compounded by the announcement he is to be Secretary of State, which leaves them with no illusions as to what they can expect from the United States at this time. It was typical of him that he took off almost unnoticed and that his new job was kept completely secret until he was in the air and beyond reach of supplication.

March 8, 1947 - ...we [the United States] are allied with a faction in China [the Nationalists] that is in the process of losing the Mandate of Heaven. The Russians can afford an amused complaisance since their cohorts [the Communists] give every evidence of picking up the Mandate as fast as the Generalissimo drops it. Too much we tend to look on this as a struggle for power; it is indeed that, but we overlook the third major participant, the people of China, who might just have a few ideas of their own as to what they would like to see happen in their country. In the long run it is they who will decide.

May 8, 1947 – Recent visitors to Communist areas have observed a good deal of local autonomy. The general directive comes from on high, but its implementation is left to local discretion. Furthermore, the general directive is largely limited to traditional Chinese peasant desires, namely land reform, relief from exorbitant taxes, and some opportunity for individual expression. To the average untutored peasant the reforms have nothing to do with ideology, which is just so much meaningless verbiage to him. He consequently

proceeds to carry out permissible reforms with great gusto and turns on his landlords and bureaucratic supervisors with all the cruelty and ruthlessness they formerly used on him. ...In the end, of course, only that government that can satisfy minimum peasant aspirations will secure and retain peasant loyalty. Herein lies the greatest failure of the Kuomintang.

May 13, 1947 – There are rice riots in cities all over the country, universities are on strike, and civil war spreads, inflation mounts, and nothing is right with China today. Not that it should be deduced, as many have deduced, that any final collapse is imminent. This country has a tremendous absorptive power for punishment. It is eighty percent agricultural, and the peasant population lives not much more miserably than it always has. Unless the rice crop this year is a failure the situation can drag on for a long time.

May 15, 1947 – Somehow the Kuomintang still fails to instill any sense of purpose in its troops and there are increasing instances in which Communist appeals are resulting in defections.

October 29, 1947 – Now we have a storm over the outlawing of the Democratic League by the Government on charges it is too close to the Communists. If the League dissolves voluntarily—there is little else for it to do—and its members behave themselves they will be unmolested. Although this move seems a little pointless, the League seldom left much doubt as to where its major sympathies lie. This is the end of any third party or middle-of-the-road activity. Some members will join the Government, some the Communists, and the rest will simply fade away.

May 21, 1948 – Leo Eloesser of the World Health Organization, who knows China in and out, has returned here from a four-month trip... He found the Communists preoccupied to the exclusion of everything else with the prosecution of the civil war and with land reform, the latter getting them the support of the peasants. He found the reform being pushed ruthlessly and the stories of atrocities against the landlords not exaggerated, although in the areas he visited this class had less than ten percent of the land. Wealthy landlords are tried by the entire village for “crimes against the people” and conviction means stoning to death by the populace.

June 11, 1948 – As more and more people around here are increasingly convinced all is lost, a debate grows as to what the future stance of the Communists will be and how events will develop... Much must be largely speculative, since we cannot really be sure what Communist thinking is, beyond unanimous agreement that winning the war is the primary goal. The principal argument is the extent to which traditional institutions will modify Chinese Communist ideology once the war is won. It must be assumed that as long as the war goes on the Communists will make any compromise necessary in order to survive and win. But it would be a mistake to assume further that compromise will be permanent once the pressure has been removed. Not since 1927 have they taken orders from anyone and they are hardly likely to do so when they are the victors. Many feel that ideology and institutions will react on each other, but no one is rash enough to pinpoint where that middle ground will be. The nature of relations between Yanan [the Chinese Communist

headquarters, where Mao was] and Moscow [the Soviet capital, where Stalin was] will be a key indicator here...

I would be even more surprised if Mao did not in this period keep firm control over the instruments of power...

Communism in one form or another has come to China for a long time to come. Western democracy, especially the American brand, is an unfamiliar idiom to the Chinese, far more alien than communism. There is a tradition of autocracy on which the West has made little dent. The American economic system is something the Chinese do not understand, have never had, and do not now want. Any group, whatever its political persuasion, always speaks of socialism as the desirable and possible form. Even the Shanghai bankers and industrialists, who come closer to us than any other group, have very close connections with the Government, draw much of their capital from it, and as often as not are officials themselves. Even those who complain the most about the abuses of this "bureaucratic capital," as it is called, do not favor a free enterprise system. The big Chinese complaint, even in Shanghai, about American economic policy in Japan is that we are not socializing industry and that we are encouraging free enterprise. They are not worried about the size of the new trusts, but that their control is in private hands.

June 20, 1948 – One of the principal weaknesses continues to be the unwillingness of the Generalissimo to relinquish personal control and direction of every phase of national life or to divorce himself from his Confucian feudal outlook. Time and again he has promised changes and then done nothing. Time and again he has promised to bring in abler men and then appoints the most incompetent he can find. Time and again he has promised to break the rule of the CC clique and then continues to rely on it. More and more people are saying there will be no change until he goes, but no one has any suggestions as to who could replace him. He alone can seem to lead, but in private conversations he admits he does not know what to do.

Along with the military deterioration there is corresponding economic decline. The U.S. dollar, which two years ago was worth two thousand Chinese dollars, is now worth nearly two million. ...The cost of living index today is more than fifty thousand times what it was two years ago. No effective measures whatsoever have been taken to check the tide. Even the passage of the American aid bill did not have the slightest effect on the inflation. ...Even those who think the program is too small and too late know that the Government is incapable of making good use of any program.

October 1, 1949 – Mao Tse-tung proclaimed in Peking [while also re-establishing this city as China's capital] the formal establishment of the People's Republic of China. [Peking is the same city as Beijing. The Nationalists had relocated the capital from Peking to Nanking in 1928, and the Communists moved it back to Peking in 1949.]

December 9, 1949 – The Government [the Nationalists] moved to Formosa [Taiwan].

December 27, 1949 - ...the year ended with all mainland China under Communist control.