

# RESPONSIBLE STATECRAFT

## American Civil War and the Lesson for China and Taiwan

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July 19, 2021

Taiwan has become a flashpoint between Washington and Beijing, so much so that The Economist now judges the island state to be “the most dangerous place on earth.”

Formally the Republic of China, Taiwan is claimed by the People’s Republic of China. Beijing is threatening — without apparent plans to do so in the near-term — to use force to impose its authority over territory that has unofficially acted as a separate nation since 1949.

As the people of Taiwan created a country both free and prosperous, they grew increasingly apart from the mainland. For many, the PRC’s brutal crackdown in Hong Kong is destroying any lingering appeal of the purported “one country, two systems” model.

The communist absorption of Hong Kong also increased sympathy in America for Taiwan. There appears to be increasing support in Washington for ending the policy of strategic ambiguity and forthrightly promising to defend Taiwan from Chinese attack.

Many triumphalist Americans believe that Beijing would not dare challenge such a U.S. guarantee. For instance, Leon Panetta, a former secretary of defense and CIA director, insisted that “We’re not going to allow China to invade Taiwan, and to undermine their independence.” He added: “if China understands that we’re serious about that, China’s not going to do that. They may be a lot of things, they’re not dumb.”

In short, Panetta sees a promise to protect Taiwan as a freebie: the United States need only say the word and China won’t test America. Xi Jinping and his Politburo full of blowhards will slink back into Zhongnanhai, never to be heard from again.

Dream on.

The willingness of peoples and countries to use force almost irrespective of cost to stop secession is widespread if not quite universal. Among the bitter, brutal wars that resulted when majorities refused to allow minorities to depart were Nigeria, Ethiopia, Pakistan, Great Britain, Sudan, France, Congo, Cyprus, Indonesia, Yemen, and Yugoslavia. In many more cases, such as India and Spain, resistance has been violent, including terrorism, but short of war.

Americans need only look to their own history. As 1860 closed, the United States, then a plural to many citizens, were splitting apart. And partisans on both sides assured their countrymen that there was nothing to fear. Southerners were certain that Yankee shopkeepers and wage slaves wouldn’t fight. Northerners figured one sharp clash would disperse the “fire-eaters.”

There were a few Cassandras, such as William Tecumseh Sherman, commandant at a southern military academy, and Robert E. Lee, on leave handling his father-in-law's estate, who both became celebrated Civil War generals, but their fears were rudely dismissed. Indeed, resigned Sen. James Chestnut, Jr. of South Carolina — his wife, Mary, would write one of the conflict's most famous diaries — averred that “a lady's thimble” would “hold all the blood that will be shed” as a result of secession.

Passionate nationalism, leavened by the tragic conviction that the other side was bluffing, rushed America into its worst war. The seven deep southern states seceded even though President Abraham Lincoln said he only intended to contain slavery (and thereby, southerners were convinced, ensure its extinction) by halting its expansion into the territories. Lincoln then called out the troops to force the recalcitrant seven to remain in the Union.

Although Lincoln personally opposed slavery, that is not why he chose war. As Lincoln famously wrote to New York Tribune editor Horace Greeley: “My paramount object in this struggle *is* to save the Union, and is *not* either to save or to destroy slavery... I have here stated my purpose according to my view of *official* duty; and I intend no modification of my oft-expressed *personal* wish that all men everywhere could be free.” At which point four more states, unwilling to coerce their fellow southerners, joined the Confederacy. They found no resonance in Lincoln's famous appeal to the “mystic chords of memory.”

The carnage that ensued caused regret even among ardent unionists. The early battles would count as mere skirmishes later in the conflict, but still shocked those who had shared Chestnut's illusions. Blood soon flowed in torrents. By war's end some 750,000 had died, about eight million as a percentage of today's population.

After the 1864 Overland Campaign across northern Virginia, which caused some 85,000 casualties, the equivalent of a million people today, Massachusetts Sen. Henry Wilson lamented: “If that scene could have been presented to me before the war, anxious as I was for the preservation of the Union, I should have said: ‘The cost is too great; erring sisters, go in peace.’”

However, once the war began both sides constantly doubled down. Weapons were produced, arsenals were amassed, men were conscripted, goods were requisitioned, and territory was ravaged. Smaller civil wars erupted within Missouri, Kentucky, Appalachia, and other divided territories.

Washington was particularly truculent when foreign intervention threatened. Secretary of State William Seward made clear that intervention by London, the most important foreign power, would mean war. As the armies gathered in America Seward warned: “If any European Power provokes a war, we shall not shrink from it. A contest between Great Britain and the United States would wrap the world in fire.”

This was not mere bombast: having decided on war to stop the southern states from leaving, the Union would not yield based on foreign threats. Conflict beckoned after the unauthorized seizure of two southern commissioners bound for Europe on the RMS Trent, a mail packet. With northern popular opinion favoring this shocking — to Britain, anyway — violation of its sovereignty, London reached a compromise with Washington, the men's release without an apology, and stayed out of the war.

Once engaged against the People's Republic of China over Taiwan, the United States would face challenges beyond the exigencies of nationalism. One is geography. The main island of Taiwan is around 100 miles from the PRC, about the same distance of Cuba from America. That makes military intervention difficult, especially if America's Asian allies declined to aid the U.S., which would risk turning them into military targets. Equally problematic, any conflict would necessarily involve attacks on the mainland, forcing Beijing to escalate. Imagine how Americans would react if Chinese bombs fell on U.S. bases in a conflict over Cuba.

History also inflames the controversy. The Chinese speak of the century of humiliation. Mao Zedong's insistence that China had "stood up" resonated with the Chinese people.

Taiwan's separation from the mainland is part of that history. Japan seized the island in war; the U.S.-backed Nationalists under Chiang Kai-shek retreated to Taiwan in war; and Washington threatened to protect the ROC in war. Ongoing threats to intervene militarily look like a throwback to an earlier era.

Xi and his colleagues are unlikely to be forever deterred. And if war erupts, Beijing is unlikely to stop until it wins. If the PRC nevertheless loses, that would be just the first round. While the leadership in a failed war might be swept away, its replacement likely would unite to prepare for the next round. Defeat did not cause the Germans after World War I to abandon their quest for revenge. The Chinese would be no more likely to drop their pursuit of reunification.

The people of Taiwan deserve to make their own decision over their own future. And the government of China shouldn't interfere. Sadly, that is not reality. Before President Joe Biden or his successors commit themselves to defending Taiwan, they should recognize that doing so wouldn't be cheap. Beijing wouldn't back down. Once the PRC began military action, it wouldn't quit voluntarily. And even if it was forced to yield, like the Terminator it would be back. Just how high a price would Washington be willing to pay?

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