

Spring 2016

# Candidate Kennedy and Quemoy

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## Recommended Citation

Spannagel, Quentin, "Candidate Kennedy and Quemoy" (2016). *2016 Awards for Excellence in Student Research and Creative Activity - Documents*. 4.

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## Candidate Kennedy and Quemoy

Running for president in 1960, John F. Kennedy vowed to explore a “New Frontier” — a hybrid of challenges and opportunities that promised progress both domestically and abroad.<sup>1</sup> In essence, Kennedy envisioned a New America not chained down by the traditions of the Republican administration before him. In many regards, Kennedy achieved what he desired: a fresh, open-minded way of approaching international issues. Though Kennedy struggled to develop a new diplomatic approach to China, he did show a willingness to compromise with the Chinese in regards to the islands of Quemoy and Matsu. Kennedy remained a “cold war warrior” throughout his presidency, but he did begin to cautiously portray himself to the communist Chinese as open to negotiation and more forward-thinking than the Eisenhower administration. This is best reflected in Kennedy’s stance on the islands of Quemoy and Matsu during the 1960 presidential debate.

The crisis between the Republic of China (ROC) and the People’s Republic of China (PRC) was one of the great political tinderboxes for American foreign policy in the 1950s and 1960s. In 1949, during the Truman Administration, Mao Zedong conquered the mainland from the nationalist Republic of China. The nationalist government of Jiang Jieshi was driven back and eventually found refuge on the heavily fortified island of Formosa. At the last minute, however, Jiang’s forces managed to hold the offshore islands of Quemoy and Matsu in the Battle of Guningtou (October 1949). Both islands sit so close to the mainland they could be easily seen by the naked eye. The standoff between the ROC and the PRC in the Taiwan Strait remained frozen over a decade: the communists controlled the entire mainland and the nationalists

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<sup>1</sup> Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (Greenwich: Fawcett Publications, Inc., 1965), 64.

controlled Taiwan, along with the nearby islands of Quemoy and Matsu. On several occasions, though, tensions between the PRC and ROC flared up, and it took U.S. intervention to prevent the renewal of the Chinese Civil War.

In 1954-1955, the United States found itself being dragged into the first of multiple Strait Crises. It began when President Eisenhower removed the Seventh Fleet blockade in the Formosa Strait on February 1953. This resulted from American domestic pressure to support Jiang in a possible clash with the PRC even though the ROC had no chance of victory. To the PRC, it appeared the nationalists and Americans were preparing for an invasion of the mainland when they began stationing thousands of troops on Kinmen and Matsu.<sup>2</sup> The communists responded with heavy artillery directed at Kinmen and Matsu. Some Americans called for nuclear weapons to stop Chinese aggression against Taiwan. President Eisenhower was reluctant to respond with nuclear weapons; instead the Americans passed the Sino-American Mutual Defense Treaty (1954), which declared that if Taiwan was attacked by the PRC, the United States would intervene.<sup>3</sup> However, this treaty did not apply to all the islands that Taiwan controlled and claimed to be vital to their national security.

The ROC had been an American ally since WWII, and most Americans viewed it as unacceptable to abandon it to the communists on the Mainland. For this reason, America committed itself to defending the nationalists from a communist takeover. For the PRC, Taiwan was a vital province of China that was openly in rebellion. Thus the PRC viewed Taiwan as an internal issue; threats of U.S. involvement challenged PRC sovereignty. The PRC demanded America abandon all commitments to Taiwan before it would open up formal relations. The

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<sup>2</sup> Nancy Bernkopf Tucker, *Dangerous Strait: The U.S.-Taiwan-China Crisis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 188-189.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 189.

United States refused to do this, chaffing at the notion of allowing any more territory to fall to communism. For this reason, Sino-American relations would not drastically improve until the 1970s.

### Kennedy's Anti-Communism Credentials

Though Taiwan looked at the Democratic John F. Kennedy with apprehension, ROC leaders could take comfort that he was a staunch anti-communist. Kennedy expressed his anti-communist sentiment particularly strongly in political debates and speeches — although sometimes in private, Kennedy signaled openness to improving relations with the PRC if it halted the anti-American rhetoric, accepted the American commitment to Taiwan, and was less aggressive in Southeast Asia.

In 1947 while serving in the House of Representatives, Kennedy called for the indictment on charges of perjury for Harold Christoffel, a United Auto Workers union member who called for a strike in 1941 against the Allis-Chalmers Company.<sup>4</sup> Kennedy suspected Christoffel of being a communist, and the Allis-Chalmers Company was vital to the national defense effort. Wisconsin Congressman Charles J. Kersten called Kennedy's early bold action against communism one of "[T]he first shots fired against American communism in this country."<sup>5</sup> To Christoffel, Kennedy opened the door for McCarthyism. Then in 1948, Kennedy broke from the Democratic Party and voted for the Mundt-Nixon Bill, which required domestic communists and their members to register with the federal government.

In 1949, Representative Kennedy even accused fellow party-member President Harry S. Truman and his administration of being soft on communism and blamed the loss of mainland

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<sup>4</sup> Thomas J. Whalen, *Kennedy versus Lodge: The 1952 Massachusetts Senate Race* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2000), 112-113.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 113.

China exclusively on the White House and State Department — a position normally associated with Republicans.<sup>6</sup> Probably the most interesting display of Kennedy’s anti-communist background was in his friendship with Joseph McCarthy. McCarthy was the face and heart of the Red Scare of the 1950s and was a family friend of the Kennedys dating back to a friendship with Joseph Kennedy Sr., the controversial father of the senator. This family friendship is no more apparent than in the fact that Bobby Kennedy got his first start in politics working for McCarthy.<sup>7</sup>

During a House session on May 9<sup>th</sup>, 1951, Rep. Kennedy criticized Great Britain and other countries for providing the PRC with rubber and other war materials. At this point, American troops were fighting and dying against the Chinese troops in Korea. Kennedy wanted the legislature to disrupt the PRC’s ability to wage war. “The Congress of the United States must in conscious take action that will condemn and forbid any further shipment of materials, useful in war, to Communist China directly, or indirectly through Hong Kong,” declared the young congressman.<sup>8</sup>

In 1952 when running for the Massachusetts Senate Seat against incumbent Henry Cabot Lodge, Kennedy brazenly accused his opponent of being the number one supporter of the Truman foreign policy that appeased the communists. Kennedy also accused Lodge as failing as a senator because he refused to support legislations that would have halted the trading of war materials to the communist nations.<sup>9</sup> Kennedy’s campaign secretary William Sutton went as far

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 113-114.

<sup>7</sup> Marc J. Selverstone, *A Companion to John F. Kennedy* (United Kingdom: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), 99-100.

<sup>8</sup> John F. Kennedy, *A Compilation of Statements and Speeches Made During His Service in the United States Senate and House of Representatives* (Washington: The Library of Congress, 1964), 78.

<sup>9</sup> Whalen, 111.

as to call Kennedy “ultraconservative” and said that many of his speeches when running for Congress in 1946 stressed anticommunism.<sup>10</sup>

### Kennedy Displays Some Flexibility

Though Kennedy was constantly reasserting himself as a leading anti-communist, he believed that relations with communist China could slowly be improved without hurting the American relationship with Taiwan. He took a pragmatic approach to gradual rapprochement. A message that Kennedy promulgated, which actually echoed the communist line, was his extreme anti-colonialism, especially against continued colonialism in French Indo-China. In Kennedy’s own words in his book *The Strategy of Peace*, “to pour money, materi[a], and men into the jungles of Indo-China without at least a remote prospect of victory would be dangerous, futile, and self-destructive.”<sup>11</sup>

Kennedy also preached the importance of India and the PRC to the development of the world, and how they would be models of development in Asia, calling them “poles of power.”<sup>12</sup> Unlike many officials, Kennedy doubted any possibility of ROC President Jiang Jieshi regaining the mainland and accepted the fact that America would have to learn to live alongside the People’s Republic of China.<sup>13</sup> As much as America would have liked for the nationalist Chinese to regain the Mainland, it would be futile and dangerous to encourage Jiang to engage in aggressive behavior.

In 1957, a few years before he ran for the presidency, Kennedy admitted in an article that “United States policy was ‘probably too rigid’ and ran the risk of missing opportunities to

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 112.

<sup>11</sup> John F. Kennedy, *The Strategy of Peace* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960): 59.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 141.

<sup>13</sup> Jean S. Kang, “Firmness and Flexibility: Initiations for Change in U.S. Policy Toward Communist China, 1961-1963,” *American Asian Review* 21, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 111.

improve relations with China.”<sup>14</sup> On June 14<sup>th</sup>, 1960, Kennedy suggested in a speech that the next administration should try to bring the PRC more into the global community. Kennedy asserted that the PRC in particular could be involved in the Geneva negotiations and an effort to limit nuclear bomb testing — one of the most important global issues of the times. Kennedy told the American people,

[In discussing how to open up Sino-American dialogue] Perhaps a way could be found to bring the Chinese into the nuclear ban talks at Geneva — so that the Soviets could not continue their atomic tests on the mainland of China without inspection — and because Chinese possession of atomic weapons could drastically alter the balance of power.<sup>15</sup>

Kennedy went even further than just including the Chinese in the Geneva accords. “If that contact proves fruitful, further cultural and economic contact should be tried,” he asserted.<sup>16</sup> In 1960 at least, Kennedy envisioned a China that would back off from the anti-American rhetoric and informal relations could begin to develop in the country. He was aware that the relations would not happen overnight and would be miniscule at first. In essence, Kennedy knew opening the front door for China would be impossible — but cracking a window might be achievable. If a window was cracked between the two countries, it could be slowly opened until real diplomatic relations became feasible.

### Factors that Hindered Rapprochement with China

One of the President Kennedy’s biggest obstacles when it came to improving relations with China was his political party. Kennedy, though an extreme Cold War Warrior, was still a Democrat. It was under Democratic President Harry S. Truman in 1949 that the Communist

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<sup>14</sup> Thomas Paterson ed. “Clinging to Containment: China Policy,” *Kennedy’s Quest for Victory: 1961-1963* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989): 180.

<sup>15</sup> Russell Bakers, “Kennedy Favors Peiping Contacts: In Major Foreign Policy Talk, He Suggests Red China Join Atom-Ban Parley”, *New York Times*, June 15, 1960.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

Chinese defeated the Nationalist forces of Jiang Jieshi and claimed the mainland. Though Truman protected Jiang's regime and helped fortify it on Formosa, the Republican Party still relentlessly attacked the Democrats for being "soft on Communism."<sup>17</sup> For this reason, presidential candidate Kennedy would have to be very careful in re-evaluating Chinese foreign policy; if he strayed too far from the status quo, he could easily catch Republican censure for being another "Pink Democrat."<sup>18</sup> The worst thing that could happen to the Democratic Party and President Kennedy, they believed, would be to lose another Southeast Asian country to communism. This would be the atmosphere of political turmoil in which Democratic Kennedy would run for the presidency.

#### Election of 1960 and the Presidential Debates

Though Kennedy made his anti-communism credentials clear long before claiming the presidency, he also showed he would be open to bringing China into the international community if they would abide by American standards. Kennedy himself advocated for an "Open Door" where the U.S. would be willing to negotiate with the PRC if it showed it was open to such an approach. Senator Kennedy, writing in *Foreign Affairs* in 1957, said, "We should indicate our willingness to talk to them when they so desire to do so and to set forth conditions of recognition which seem responsible to the watching world."<sup>19</sup>

Later, in 1960, Chester Bowles, Kennedy's campaign advisor and future under-secretary of State, echoed this earlier flexibility, asserting that "Sen. John F. Kennedy has time and again warned of the dangers of the inadequate, insensitive and inept policies with which we have

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 178-179.

<sup>18</sup> This is my term. It is not historically accurate.

<sup>19</sup> Kang, 114-115.



attempted to deal with the vital questions of foreign policy.”<sup>20</sup> Bowles continued that Kennedy realized that international dilemmas could not always be solved by having the biggest bombs. Instead, the key was to find agreements with the Soviets and Chinese, whether it was through nuclear testing controls, arms limitation, or space exploration.<sup>21</sup> Bowles cited Kennedy as concluding, “The problem is to find a beginning.”<sup>22</sup>

By the fall of 1960, Kennedy and Republican Richard Nixon were in the midst of the heated presidential debates. This was the first time a presidential debate was nationally televised and much of the American population tuned in. On October 7, 1960, Kennedy and Nixon engaged in the second presidential debate in Washington, D.C. Near the end of the debate, the topic turned to Quemoy. Kennedy took a pragmatic approach and posited the islands as “indefensible” and not of vital interest. If the PRC seized the islands, the United States should not go to war over it. In Kennedy’s own words: “These islands are a few miles — five or six miles — off the coast of Red China, within a general harbor area and more than a hundred miles from Formosa. We have never said flatly that we will defend Quemoy and Matsu if it’s attacked. We say we will defend it if it’s part of a general attack on Formosa.”<sup>23</sup> Sensing an opening, Nixon immediately attacked Kennedy, declaring the islands lay in the zone of freedom. More importantly, the communists do not want these islands, but rather coveted Taiwan itself, claimed the vice president. The PRC would not be satisfied until it conquered Taiwan. Nixon further

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<sup>20</sup> Chester Bowles, “The Foreign Policy of Senator Kennedy,” *America* 104, no. 3 (1960): 69.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> “October 7, 1960 Debate Transcript: the Second Kennedy-Nixon Presidential Debate,” Commission on Presidential Debates, accessed May 2, 2015, [www.debates.org/index.php?page=october-7-1960-debate-transcript](http://www.debates.org/index.php?page=october-7-1960-debate-transcript)

asserted that the Democratic nominee viewed the islands as little more than “indefensible rocks,” instead of the highly fortified protective islands that they actually were.<sup>24</sup>

Nixon declared that if Kennedy was elected, the PRC would invade Quemoy and Matsu, knowing the United States would not respond.<sup>25</sup> Land that had been secured by the nationalists for ten years, Nixon asserted, would fall to communism due to an unexperienced Kennedy dealing with the aggressive communist threat. If China was able to conquer Quemoy and Matsu without a struggle, then they would naturally invade Taiwan and drag the United States into another war. In the words of Nixon, “The last Democratic administration left the nation with one of the bloodiest and costliest wars in its history, and another Democratic regime would plunge it into another.”<sup>26</sup>

As a matter of principle, Quemoy and Matsu could not be lost to the communists, insisted Nixon. Republican Senator Hugh Scott (R-PA) later joined the attack, blasting Kennedy’s declaration as “fuzzy” on the issue and condescendingly adding that Kennedy “would be better qualified to speak on relations between the United States and Communist China after he had a little more maturity and experience.”<sup>27</sup>

Jiang Jieshi also angrily renounced Kennedy’s assertion on the nationalist islands. The ROC’s foreign office said that Nationalist China had not required any American soldiers to defend these islands over the past ten years, and it refused to surrender any more land to the communists.<sup>28</sup> The islands were of strategic importance to Taiwan because they offered

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<sup>24</sup> Willard Edwards, “Nixon Blasts ‘Retreat’ on Chinese Isles: Warns Kennedy Would Blunder Into War,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, October, 12<sup>th</sup>, 1960.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> “Scott Says Kennedy is Fuzzy on Taiwan,” *New York Times*, July 16, 1960.

<sup>28</sup> “Formosa to Kennedy: We Won’t Yield Inch to Reds,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, October 15, 1960.

positions that keep the PRC from staging further attacks into Taiwan, explained Jiang.

According to Admiral Liu Yuzhang of the Nationalist Navy, “The Communists cannot fully use the nearby ports of Amoy and Foochow for invading Formosa as long as Quemoy and Matsu are under Nationalist control.”<sup>29</sup> If Kennedy allowed these islands to be abandoned, Liu asserted, the American president would open an alley for the invasion of Taiwan. The Republicans and the China Lobby refused to allow this to happen.

Despite the onslaught, Kennedy stuck by his guns and refused to apologize or change policy. The Democratic nominee accused Nixon of wanting war and willing to fight the Chinese over a small matter. At a Democratic party dinner speech on October 12, 1960, a day before the third presidential debate, Kennedy explained, “I will not risk American lives and a nuclear war by permitting any other nation to drag us into the wrong war at the wrong place at the wrong time through an unwise commitment that is unsound militarily, unnecessary to our security, and unsupported by our allies.”<sup>30</sup> By taking a public stand of pragmatism on the islands, Kennedy is trying to channel some flexibility to the PRC.

On October 13, 1960, Kennedy and Nixon engaged in the third debate. This debate broke new technological ground because it occurred on a split screen with Nixon in Los Angeles and Kennedy in New York. Due to identical sets, it appeared the politicians were debating in the same room when in reality they were across the country from each other. But if the technology was new, the main topic remained Quemoy and a large portion of the debate was a continuation from the second debate. When asked if he would defend the islands of Quemoy from Chinese attack, Nixon talked around the question. The Chinese, he explained, would not be attacking the

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Peter Kihss, “Kennedy Charges Nixon Risks War: Opponent ‘Trigger-Happy’ on Quemoy,” *New York Times*, October 13, 1960.

islands solely for the islands but as an effort to conquer Formosa. Since this would be the case, Nixon said, “In the event that their attack then were a prelude to an attack on Formosa, there isn't any question but that the United States would then again, as in the case of Berlin, honor our treaty obligations and stand by our ally of Formosa.”<sup>31</sup>

Kennedy also stuck by his earlier statement during the debate, saying, “Now, that is the issue. I believe we must meet our commitment to uh — Formosa. I support it and the Pescadores Island. That is the present American position. The treaty does not include these two islands.”<sup>32</sup>

Kennedy also talks about how Quemoy, only a few miles from the mainland, was not within the border of the treaty area. Kennedy also cited Admiral Yarnell, commander of the Asiatic fleet, as saying, “These islands [Quemoy and nearby islands] are not worth the bones of a single American.”<sup>33</sup> Kennedy was clearly sending the message that he was not going to back down on his stance regarding Quemoy from Republican pressure.

### Winning the Presidency: Realizing Rapprochement Must Wait

Less than a year into his presidency, sailing off the coast of Massachusetts, the intense campaign behind him, we find a very different Kennedy. At the mere mention of foreign policy talk about China, the president was to have said, “Jackie, we need the Bloody Marys now.”<sup>34</sup> At this point in his presidency, Kennedy realized that the New Frontier would not as easily be applied to China as it was to other global issues. It became clear that China was unwilling to budge on the topic of Taiwan and its continued aggression toward India remained a serious

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<sup>31</sup> “October 13, 1960 Debate Transcript: The Third Kennedy-Nixon Presidential Debate,” Commission on Presidential Debates, Accessed May 2, 2015, [www.debates.org/index.php?page=october-13-1960-debate-transcript](http://www.debates.org/index.php?page=october-13-1960-debate-transcript)

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Paterson, 178.

problem for America. Americans were also gravely concerned over Chinese progress toward nuclear weapons since the PRC was showing more aggressive tendencies than even the Soviets. On August 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1961, Kennedy reaffirmed U.S. opposition to the admission of the PRC into the United Nations. Even more antagonizing to the PRC, Kennedy promised to continue military and economic aid to Taiwan.<sup>35</sup>

President Kennedy won the 1960 presidential election against Richard Nixon by a slim margin. He beat Nixon in the electoral vote 303 to 219, but if Nixon had been able to get Illinois and Texas' votes, he would have won the election. When it came to the popular vote, Kennedy got 49.7% of the votes compared to Nixon's 49.6%.<sup>36</sup> As this election illustrated, Kennedy did not have a lot of wiggle room and could not do anything that would alienate a large number of voters. In July 1961, Congress sent a clear message that it did not want a drastic change in foreign policy to China. The Senate passed a resolution that would ban the admission of China into the U.N. and would continue to not formally recognize the PRC. This resolution passed the Senate 76-0, and the House also passed it 395-0.<sup>37</sup>

The Legislative Branch had sent a clear message to Kennedy that it was not interested in improving relations with China. Instead, it wanted to keep the PRC out of the U.N. and out of formal relations with the United States. The American people themselves spoke up through public surveys. In 1959, 61% of Americans voted to keep China out of the U.N., but the percentage rose to 71% in 1964, largely due to their aggressive policies in India and continual rhetoric against America.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Tom Wicker, "Kennedy Renews Pledge to Taiwan," *New York Times*, August 3, 1961.

<sup>36</sup> Selverstone, 69.

<sup>37</sup> Kang, 115.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

Like all good politicians, Kennedy tried to gauge the domestic ramifications for any diplomatic positions that he took abroad.<sup>39</sup> Aware that trying to improve relations with China would destroy almost any hope of reelection, Kennedy accepted the need to maintain the “status quo” in regards to China and Taiwan. It became clear that formal relations would not develop between these two countries during Kennedy’s presidency; the president instead focused on informal diplomacy. This would be the foundation of Sino-American relations until 1972. Kennedy wanted to be flexible with Communist China while preserving his commitment to Taiwan. He saw the ability to do this through developing informal relations with China.<sup>40</sup>

President Kennedy wanted to apply the “New Frontier” to China. He energetically sought a pragmatic and progressive relationship with the PRC. However, the chains of the 1950s Cold War could not be broken immediately by a young and ambitious Easterner. Kennedy tried to move too quickly to open relations with the Chinese and felt an immediate backlash from the Republican Party, the China Lobby, and Taiwan itself. When this was combined with increased Chinese aggression in the early 1960s, persistent anti-American rhetoric, and a closing in on nuclear weapons, China was deemed too aggressive still for Kennedy to reach out to.

However, Kennedy did lay groundwork by stressing the need to find common ground and move slowly. Kennedy was right that rapprochement would begin over a common issue, or in his own words, “The problem is to find a beginning.”<sup>41</sup> Interesting enough, it is Republican

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<sup>39</sup> It is important to note here the possible impact of the political career of Joseph Kennedy, John Kennedy’s father. Joseph was the ambassador to Great Britain from 1937 to 1940 under Roosevelt. He resigned in 1940 because he believed Britain was doomed to be conquered by Nazi Germany and America’s only chance for survival was to remain isolated from Europe. Roosevelt attacked Joseph as a defeatist and ruined ambitions Joe had of running for the Presidency himself. This was certainly in John Kennedy’s mind when he was discerning if he should take an unpopular stand on China or not. How huge of a role the ruin of his father’s political career played is impossible to gauge.

<sup>40</sup> Kang, 111.

<sup>41</sup> This same quote is cited on page 7 of paper.

Richard Nixon, one of Kennedy's biggest critics for not being hard enough on the communists, who visited China in 1972. This visit greatly improved Sino-American relations and led to official recognition in 1979.

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Newspaper sources all come from Booth's digital collection. Other primary

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### Statement on sources and Booth Library

This paper, which is a chapter of my honors thesis, relies almost exclusively on sources found in Booth Library — both primary and secondary sources, digital and hard copy. Access to online newspapers proved particularly helpful, as did Booth's collection of the *Foreign Relations of the United States* documentary collections. Instructional librarian Pamela Ferrell first alerted me to key sources at Booth when she ran a workshop for HIS 2500 students my freshman year. Her help and the help of other members of the Booth staff have been essential.