Winter 1997

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FORUM

ANSON BURLINGAME: DIPLOMAT, ORATOR

Tim Brady

Like a previous article titled "Cross-Cultural Underpinnings of the Taiping Rebellion: Potential Modern Applications" (Brady, 1993), this article too is somewhat out of step with the mainstream of information normally presented in JAEER, but in this author's opinion it is an important deviation. Why? Because it looks into the essential character of an important civilization that we know very little about, the Chinese, and it provides a glimpse of what happened in the past when our two cultures came into significant contact. The relevance of this paper to aviation is that it posts warning signs as to what can happen if we are not properly prepared to deal with that great civilization on terms that are mutually beneficial. As reported in Aviation Week and Space Technology, China is expected to have the highest growth in air traffic of all Asian countries in the first half of the next decade (Mecham, 1993). The business opportunities, along with the training and education needs of China that will emerge as a result of this growth, signal the need for aviation educators and aviation business leaders to learn more about the Chinese people, their culture, their political philosophies, their religion, and their character. Whether we can deal with them successfully depends, in part, on how well we do our homework. Toward that end this paper seeks to examine the Chinese culture at a time when the Chinese nation was extremely vulnerable to outside influence.

INTRODUCTION

"He laid the foundation for a species of oratorical reporting on China that was to deceive the American public from that day to the present" (Clyde & Beers, 1971, p. 159). At first reading this statement seems innocent enough, but when the declaration is placed in the context of American foreign policy history, its importance is brought into proper focus.

The statement refers to Anson Burlingame; the oratorical reporting refers to a time in American history when Burlingame made a series of speeches in this country on behalf of China; the time was 1868. Through these speeches Burlingame established the attitude in American minds toward China that lasted close to 100 years and, to some degree, applies today.

With such obvious importance, it is surprising that Burlingame has been largely overlooked in American history. Perhaps the answer lies in the thesis that histories of foreign policy in America have concentrated on those great figures that made America what it is in terms of internal affairs. Certainly a book on great Americans in foreign affairs would have to include Burlingame.

The fact that Burlingame did establish an enduring impression suggests that we should look more closely at his career and at his performance as a diplomat. To do this, we will establish the synoptic historical background in which the United States and China found themselves at the time of Burlingame's appearance on the scene. We will then take a look at Burlingame from a biographical viewpoint, leading to his injection into the historical panorama. From that point, we'll move to a discussion of the Burlingame Mission in detail. Finally, we'll analyze Burlingame's contributions to foreign policy direction.

THE UNITED STATES AND CHINA

When the tiny vessel Empress of China sailed into Canton Harbor in August 1784, representing an American nation that had won independence from Britain scarcely eight years earlier, Chinese civilization was already 4,000 years old (Dulles, 1946). The Ch'ing
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(or Manchu) Dynasty had been in power for more than 100 years and was at its height; however, the Western invasion of China had already begun and in time would help bring down the Manchu Dynasty.

Although Western contacts with China date to Roman times, the resurgence of Western interest in this ancient civilization sprang from the visits of Marco Polo in the 13th century. The Portuguese were the first to establish trade missions in Chinese waters when they established themselves at Macao, a small peninsula south of Canton, in 1557. The Spaniards came next, followed by the English in 1635. The French came in 1698, the Danes in 1731, the Swedes in 1732, the Russians in 1753, and finally the Americans in 1784 (Clyde & Beers, 1971).

Trade was profitable for all concerned, but the intransigence of the Chinese leaders made the port time almost unbearable. Foreign traders were permitted contact with only selected Chinese trade ministers. Contact with the population was not allowed. Foreigners were neither free to visit Chinese cities nor to attempt contact with merchants other than those whom the government had designated. The Chinese, in fact, did not formally recognize the existence of Western nations. Ministers sent from Western nations could not gain audience with the Manchu leader, whom the Chinese called the Son of Heaven.

The Son of Heaven acknowledged no sovereign with whom he would deal on terms of equality and the foreign missions were casually dismissed as tribute bearers. Trade was allowed only as a generous gesture to peoples so dependent upon the Products of China that the Emperor felt moved to compassion in their behalf. Any further concessions were out of the question. (Dulles, 1946, p. 13)

The Chinese had always considered themselves the center of the civilized world, surrounded by peoples of a lesser culture who were required to acknowledge the superiority of Chung-kuo, literally the Central Country: the Chinese name for China (Fairbank, Reishauer, & Craig, 1965). Representatives from other nations and peoples were considered as lesser peoples and were required to pay tribute to the Son of Heaven. The formal tribute system under Confucian doctrine required the envoys to perform the kowtow ritual before the Son of Heaven. "The full kowtow was no mere prostration of the body but a prolonged series of three separate kneelings, each one leading to three successive prostrations, nose upon the floor" (Fairbank, 1971, pp. 138-139). The kowtow recognized that the Chinese emperor was the sovereign ruler of all mankind. The Western nations could neither accept the ritual of tribute-bearing nor prostrate themselves before a foreign ruler. Their loyalties were to their own sovereigns. With such a sharp division of cultural values it is little wonder that sharp clashes, skirmishes, and wars developed between Western nations and China.

Technologically, the Chinese were in the dark ages when compared to Western nations. With the advantages of advanced weaponry, Western nations, through a series of wars in the mid-1800s, forced China into a succession of unequal treaties designed to pry the lid off the tightly controlled Chinese market and provide the means for Western fingers to touch all corners of this nation of four hundred million.

The impact of the West on China does not, however, tell the complete story. Internal happenings in China also molded the scene in which the United States found itself.

Since the Han Dynasty (200 B.C.) the leadership of China had gone through a series of sine-wave-like fluctuations that historians refer to as the Dynastic Cycle. To generalize, a dynasty would come to power, rule for about 300 years, and then be replaced by another dynasty. During the first 100 years of rule under a new dynasty, the country would progress, reaching a highly stabilized social, economic, and political position. After about 150 years, the dynasty would begin a long, gradual, 150-year decline until it could no longer capably rule the country. The last 50 or 60 years of dynastic rule would be marked by widespread unrest, economic instability, numerous rebellions and uprisings, and finally collapse (Fairbank, 1971).

The Manchu Dynasty was gasping its last breaths and struggling to regain consciousness when Anson Burlingame was dispatched by President Lincoln as the American minister to China.

ANSON BURLINGAME

Anson Burlingame was born November 14, 1820, at
New Berlin, New York, the son of a Methodist preacher. As a child, he moved with his parents to Seneca County, Ohio, and then to Detroit (Johnson, 1929).

Burlingame's early education was in the public school system, where he displayed a gift for oratory. This natural ability led him to pursue training in the legal profession and when he was 23 he attended Harvard Law School. After graduating, he entered a private law firm in Massachusetts. His legal training and gift for oratory paved his way into state government; he was elected to the Massachusetts Senate in 1852. Following a successful three years in state government, he was elected to Congress (Williams, 1912).

Burlingame's most notable performance in Congress netted him little more than an opportunity to lose his life at the hands of Preston Brooks, congressman from South Carolina.

In the highly turbulent congressional arena preceding the Civil War, Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts, a leading abolitionist, made a blistering speech titled "The Crime Against Kansas" in which he condemned pro-slavery men as "hirelings picked from the drunken spew and vomit of an uneasy civilization." Congressman Brooks, hot-tempered and vengeful, took matters into his own hands and beat Sumner over the head with a cane until the cane broke (Bailey, 1971). Burlingame then made a stinging speech castigating Brooks for his inhumane treatment of Sumner. Brooks, in turn, challenged Burlingame to a duel. Burlingame, wanting at the same time to retain both his life and his honor, formally accepted the challenge and cleverly chose as the site for the duel the Canadian side of Niagara Falls. Brooks, fearing for his life in the nesting grounds of the abolitionists, declined to meet Burlingame (Williams, 1912).

Burlingame's actions gained him great popularity in the North, enough to keep him in Congress for three terms, but not enough for the fourth. He was defeated by William Appleton in 1860.

During his unsuccessful 1860 campaign, Burlingame did a great deal of yeoman work for the Republican Party, the party that put Lincoln into office. As his reward, Burlingame was offered a post as minister to Vienna. He accepted, but he was unacceptable to the Austrian government because of his views on European politics. Burlingame actually reached Paris on his trip to assume his new post, but once at Paris he was detained by notice from the Austrian Court.

The Austrian Court was disinclined to receive him because he had in Congress expressed sympathy with Hungarian patriot Kossuth and with the rising Italian kingdom of Victor Emanuel. In this dilemma the mission to China, which had remained vacant for sometime, was offered him, and Mr. Burlingame reluctantly changed his journey from Vienna to Peking. (Foster, 1903, pp. 257-258)

Burlingame, the new American minister to Peking, reached Canton in November 1861. Before assuming his post at Peking, he remained in Canton for several months to become familiar with American interests and the general state of affairs. In July 1862 he reached Peking. The Russian, French, and British ministers had been in Peking for some time but had not established as cordial relationships with the Chinese leadership or with each other as Burlingame was able to do very shortly after his arrival. Even though Burlingame was not an experienced diplomat he surpassed the other diplomats with his frankness, enthusiasm, attractive personality, and genial manners, becoming the most respected foreign minister in China (Foster, 1903).

Understandably, the United States paid little attention to the events in China during the first few years of Burlingame's tour of duty. The Civil War was raging at home, consuming the energies and thoughts of the American people from the highest-ranking government employee to the lowest-ranking slave. Burlingame was on his own.

Although Secretary of State Seward had given Burlingame broad policy measures before Burlingame assumed his post, the policy of the United States in the Far East was essentially a Burlingame policy. Burlingame was predisposed toward the Chinese; his goals were to prevent the carving-up of China by Western powers, to protect American trade, and to "engraft western upon eastern civilization, without a disruption of the Chinese Empire" (Dulles, 1946, pp. 64-65).

Upon Burlingame's arrival the Treaty of Tientsin was...
forced on the Chinese in the wake of the Arrow War. This treaty forced the door of China open to Westerners and created an easy path for territorial acquisitions by Western powers. In fact, several nations had begun to move toward land-grabbing measures. Burlingame was decidedly opposed to any territorial acquisitions by any Western nation, including the United States. In a report sent to Secretary Seward, Burlingame laid out his (and thus the U.S.) policy in China:

The policy upon which we agreed is briefly this: that while we claim our treaty right to buy and sell and hire in the treaty ports, subject, in respect to our rights of property and person, to the jurisdiction of our own governments, we will not ask for, nor take concessions of, territory in the treaty ports, or in any way interfere with the jurisdiction of the Chinese Government over its own people, nor ever menace the territorial integrity of the Chinese Empire. (Dulles, 1946, pp. 64-65)

This policy was termed the "cooperative policy." Burlingame, through his influence with the Chinese, as well as with the other foreign emissaries, established the cooperative policy as not only a policy of the United States but of the other Western nations as well. He also sought out means to help the Chinese understand the West by sponsoring the translation of a text on international law and by hiring an American geologist to survey China's coal resources. It is important to note that during Burlingame's stay in China no serious difficulties arose between the United States and China (Foster, 1903). Burlingame's influence also was felt in the internal workings of the Manchu Dynasty. It began to appear as though the Manchus were going to foil the Dynastic Cycle by recovering full control. Under the influence of Burlingame, the Manchus did actually recover; the recovery was short, however, perhaps because of Burlingame's death in 1870 (Latourette, 1946).

As an example of Burlingame's influence with the Chinese, we can turn to an incident springing form the effects of the American Civil War.

The Confederate cruiser Alabama had appeared in Chinese waters, where it set about destroying American (Yankee) vessels. Burlingame requested that the Chinese leaders forbid the entry of the warship into Chinese ports and forbid their people from furnishing supplies to the ship. A Imperial Edict was immediately published, distributed, and enforced that severely curtailed the Alabama's ability to operate. This was striking evidence of the influence of Burlingame and of the friendship the Chinese leaders felt for him (Foster, 1903).

When Burlingame announced in 1866 that he intended to retire from his post, Chinese leaders asked him to serve as a representative of the Chinese government. At first Burlingame rejected this proposal, thinking it had been presented in light-hearted jest. However, when the Chinese approached him again in dead seriousness, Burlingame reconsidered. He had been attempting to get the Chinese government to hire foreign officials to take the Chinese case to the world, but he had not intended to be one of those officials. His desire was to return to the United States and re-enter the political arena. Burlingame, though he had some doubts and misgivings, accepted the post and thus began the Burlingame Mission, in which he displayed his considerable skills to the American public (Dulles, 1946).
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minister, empowered to attend to every question arising between China and those countries. This is from the Emperor. (Foster, 1903, p. 263)

The origin of Burlingame’s mission lay in the unequal treaty status of which China considered herself a victim. China had been dictated to by Western powers and had lost a great deal of her sovereignty. The last treaty into which China had been forced, the Treaty of Tientsin, was coming up for renegotiation in a year and China wanted to carefully prepare its case and take it to the treaty-power capitals in an effort to win their sympathy and cooperation. The mission was scheduled to visit first the United States, followed by England, France, Germany, Russia, and six other capitals with which China had treaty responsibilities (Foster, 1903).

The Burlingame Mission departed China complete with two other Chinese envoys of high rank, interpreters, writers, and an entourage of attendants. The mission arrived in San Francisco in April 1868 and was greeted by the residents with immense enthusiasm, great friendliness, and no small amount of curiosity (Dulles, 1946).

The mission remained in San Francisco for just under a month, during which time the Chinese visitors were treated to tremendous amounts of American hospitality topped off by a huge state dinner honoring them on April 28. The dinner was hosted by Governor Haight of California and was attended by some 225 guests, including representatives from the U.S. government, representatives of many other nations, military leaders, judges, men of high position in California, and representatives of local Chinese merchants. As reported in the San Francisco Bulletin of April 28:

The dinner itself was one of the best as to bill of fare, appointments and service ever given in this city ... The courses comprised about 100 dishes. The wines were varied and of the very best brands. Nothing was overlooked that was essential to enjoyment. ("The Chinese Embassy Banquet in San Francisco," 1868, p. 8)

More important than the bill of fare was that Burlingame gave his first important speech at this dinner. Here he began his crusade on behalf of the Chinese government.

In his speech before the Chinese Embassy banquet audience on April 28, 1868, in San Francisco, Burlingame said:

In rising to respond to the sentiment which you have just done me the honor to propose, I feel the weight of responsibility such as never before pressed upon me. I stand between two civilizations, now for the first time, by their representatives, face to face; and, belonging to one, I am called upon to respond for the other. ("The Chinese Embassy Banquet in San Francisco," 1868, p. 8).

The statement "I stand between two civilizations" was a beautifully constructed line that used as its foundation the almost boundless pride the American people expressed in their country and their form of government. This statement capitalized on that pride and used it to establish the speaker before the audience; the audience loved it.

To establish the foundation for his mission as Chinese minister, Burlingame said:

This mission means progress. It means that China desires to enter into warmer and more intimate relations with the west. It means that she desires to come under the obligations of ... international law ... It means that China, conscious of her own integrity, wishes to have her questions stated -- that she is willing to submit her questions to the general judgement of mankind. ("The Chinese Embassy Banquet in San Francisco," 1868, p. 8)

The importance of these statements in providing the foundation for the Burlingame Mission lies not so much in what was said but rather in what was implied. In essence, Burlingame was saying that China had seen the error of its ways and was now ready to do business in Western terms. This, in fact, was not the case.

Chinese officials were still displaying the arrogance associated with people who believe their civilization is superior to all others. Their only purpose in sending Burlingame on his mission was to forestall additional encroachments by Western powers. Westernizing China was the farthest thing from the minds of the Manchu
leaders. Preserving what they had in hopes of regaining what they once had were the real driving forces behind the Burlingame Mission (Dulles, 1946).

Nevertheless the American people became bound up in the belief that China would be recreated in America's image, a belief that Burlingame founded through his inventive oratory.

Burlingame showed himself creative in other ways. In trying to appeal to the traditional American Christian ethic in support of his mission, Burlingame said in his April speech in San Francisco: "The influence of Christian missions has been advanced from the Yellow Sea even to the great plains of Mongolia" ("The Chinese Embassy Banquet in San Francisco," 1868, p. 8).

In his June 24, 1868, speech before a banquet audience in New York, Burlingame said: "She invites your merchants, she invites your missionaries, she tells them to plant the shining cross on every hill and in every valley, for she is hospitable to every argument" ("The Banquet Last Evening at Delmonico's," 1868, p. 8).

Again, these statements were more a statement of idealism than of reality. In fact, China viewed with abject horror the idea of Christian missions. Manchu leaders fostered in their subjects the belief that Christians were "eaters-of-flesh" who particularly sought out children to slay, plucking out their eyes, heart, and liver to concoct a beverage.

The common thread that weaves itself through Burlingame's mission for China was that of homology. In each of his major points, he indicated how the goals of China were consistent with American political, religious, social, and moral thought. To provide an example, Burlingame could just as easily have been talking about America to a foreign audience when he said:

She wishes no war, she asks of you not to interfere in her internal affairs; she asks you not to send her incompetent men; she asks that you will respect the neutrality of her waters and the integrity of her territory; she asks, in a word, to be left perfectly free to unfold herself precisely in that form of civilization of which she is most capable; she asks you to give to those treaties which were made under the pressure of war a generous and Christian construction. ("The Banquet Last Evening at Delmonico's," 1868, p. 8)

Burlingame used the technique of alliance to make the audience feel that the country he was representing was much like the country that reared him. Speaking before a Boston audience on August 22, 1868, he said: The land of Washington has greeted the land of Confucius. The great thought of one has been wedded to the great deeds of the other ... the physical condition of the United States ... China lies along the Pacific as the United States lies along the Atlantic. It has, as you say the same area; it has the same isothermal lines; it has the same system of rivers and mountains, or a like system. The great river Yangtze King empties to a bucketful the same amount of water as the Mississippi River. The distant plains of Mongolia answer to the great plains of the Northwest. ("The Chinese Embassy," 1868, p. 8)

These statements were not misrepresentations of the truth but they made the audience receptive to Burlingame's next comments, which overstated China's political philosophy and seemed to mold something entirely undemocratic into something the audience could interpret as a slightly flawed mirror image of the democratic government they held so dear. Burlingame created that image with these words:

China is divided into provinces as this country is divided into states. They hold to the great doctrine that the people are the source of power. You vote by ballot; in China they vote by competitive examination. You shout when your citizen is elected; they shout when their scholar has received his degree. They are scornful of caste, and so are you. You tolerate every faith and so do they. And you proceed to make a law by petition, and they proceed by memorial. This memorial is recorded; it is passed to the great council, and if approved by the government it is handed over to the great secretariat ... So that in China is a system not of caprice, but it is a system of laws. ("The Chinese Embassy," 1868, p. 8)

Burlingame distorted the truth by not telling the
entire story. It is accurate to say that in China the people were the source of power, but not the direct source of power as in this country. The Chinese people directly exercised their power about once every 300 years. The Mandate of Heaven political philosophy under which the Chinese had ruled themselves for more than 2,000 years gave the people the right to rise up and overthrow the ruling dynasty when the dynasty had lost the ability to govern. Through this means the people displayed their power, not through any continuing direct means such as in a democracy where the ballot becomes the expression of the people's power. Indirectly the Chinese supported a particular dynasty by allowing it to continue as long as it met their needs.

Burlingame also said that in China the people vote by competitive examination. He implied that it was much the same system as ours. Not so. The competitive examination system did provide the people a means of upward mobility, but comparing this system to the ballot is ridiculous. The number of Chinese commoners able to reach positions of influence was very few when compared to the total population. In essence, it would be analogous to giving two people in Sedalia, Missouri, once each generation, the power to "vote" by successfully completing the civil service examinations.

Burlingame further stated that China was a system of laws. This was not accurate. China was a system of complex traditions and customs designed to determine social conduct. It is true that laws were imposed, but the government shielded away from any legal system as we know it in the Western world. No legal profession existed and disputes between individuals or concerns were handled at the local level by a magistrate who often decided in favor of the largest briber.

Burlingame was perhaps too consumed by the goals of his mission to separate truth from fiction. Or perhaps he was too ready to draw an association between the American and Chinese peoples that simply wasn't there. He had seen China as the victim of Western incursions and with a government that was toppling, but he also had seen China's potential. He wanted to bring China, with its rich history and vast amount of philosophical thought, into the 19th century. He wanted to preserve the beauty and eliminate the corruption.

Through the power of his personality, Burlingame had won the confidence of the Chinese rulers and through his influence he felt he could shape China's destiny. Thus when he said "I stand between two civilizations" he believed that his visions and hopes were real, just, and true.

In each of his speeches given in this country, Burlingame first established his authority and at the same time won the respect of the audience by telling them that China was at an important juncture in its history and that China was reaching out to Americans for help. China had chosen a representative from the youngest nation in the world to represent the oldest. Through these means Burlingame appealed to the sense of national pride the Americans felt.

Burlingame knew the makeup of his audiences well. To the merchants he said:

I say she is willing to strike off the shackles from trade. She offers you almost free trade today. Holding the great staples of the earth, tea and silk, she charges you scarcely any tariff on the exports you sent out in exchange for them. ("The Banquet Last Evening at Delmonico's," 1868, p. 8)

To the religious leaders he said, "She invites your missionaries, she tells them to plant the shining cross on every hill and in every valley" ("The Banquet Last Evening at Delmonico's," 1868, p. 8). To the men of science he said, "She tells you that she is ready to take back her inventions with all their developments" ("The Banquet Last Evening at Delmonico's," 1868, p. 8). To the diplomats he said, "She comprehends very well that she must come into relations with the civilization which is pressing all around her; and comprehending that, she does not wait to be approached, but comes out and extends to you her hand" ("The Banquet Last Evening at Delmonico's," 1868, p. 8). And to each of them he said, "She tells you she is ready to take upon her ancient civilizations the gift of your civilizations" ("The Banquet Last Evening at Delmonico's," 1868, p. 8).

In relying on optimism rather than reality, Burlingame created a China out of his imagination. Perhaps this was the overriding feature of his style. It is unfortunate that the China Burlingame created was the
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China in which America came to place its faith and the one for which America lost its faith in the following century.

Burlingame’s mission was impressive. Here was a son of the youngest country representing the most ancient amid the flowing silks, awesome dragons, flashing costumes, and objects of Chinese arts and crafts. Here was a modern crusader for the American way of life about to invoke a change in a society, a change that would produce the mirror of America. Here was a man in whom all of America could be proud. Here was a man in whom the Celestial authorities had vested the right to take a step such as had never been taken before ("The Chinese Embassy Banquet in San Francisco," 1868, p. 8).

He was a visionary and his mission reflected it. He appealed to the very things that made Americans feel like Americans. He played on the emotions of the American people with unquestionable success. He gave speeches in California, New York, Boston, and Washington to merchants, churchmen, military men, governors, and the president. To assess the impact of his speech on American thinking, we can turn to an editorial appearing in the May 18, 1868, edition of the New York Times:

We do not wonder at the enthusiastic spirit and eloquent language of Mr. Burlingame. He does not unduly estimate the vast importance of his mission, or the world changing results which are likely to flow from it. Never before in all the ages have the Celestial authorities taken such a step. ... They (the Chinese) have seen with their own eyes, and upon their own soil, at once the superior power of the foreigner and his superior genius in the arts of civilization. Recognizing the new facts, they adopt a new policy, and prepare a new order of things. ("The Chinese Embassy -- Its Arrival in New York," 1868, p. 4.)

Burlingame gave his last important speech at Boston in late August. The finality with which the American public had accepted the Burlingame premises on China were echoed in an editorial written on the eve of Burlingame’s departure for England. In the article, the author scolds England for viewing with skepticism the views being espoused by Burlingame: "When the mercantile classes of Europe ... see that China seeks to obtain nothing but what is reasonable and just, they will undoubtedly become supporters of a policy which promises such good results" ("The Chinese Embassy," 1868, p. 4).

The Burlingame Mission left the United States for the capitals of Europe on September 9, 1868. The mission visited London, Paris, Berlin, and was in Russia when Burlingame was stricken with pneumonia and died in February 1870. Thereafter, the Burlingame Mission collapsed and whatever hope the Manchu Dynasty may have had seemed to have died with him.

CONCLUSION

It has been the purpose of this paper as well as the one that preceded it to help those of us in aviation approach the widening market in China with an understanding of the Chinese culture and a deep sensitivity to the Chinese people and to the potential effects of our forays. We must ask ourselves, "How will this aviation activity that we have already determined will benefit our own society also benefit the Chinese, their culture, their value system, their educational system, their national goals, and their national will?"

The success of our endeavors likely will hinge on our ability to provide an effective answer to this question.

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REFERENCES


