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Edwin Sheddan Cunningham and the Change inthe U.S. Government's Attitudes during the January 28 Incident

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Abstract: The January 28 Incident in 1932 was Japan's first premeditated invasion of Shanghai, the gateway to East China. It was also the largest-scale and most far-reaching "hot conflict" between China and Japan between the September 18 Incident and July 7 Incident. Edwin Sheddan Cunningham, U.S. Consul General in Shanghai, was directly involved in almost all negotiations related to China and Japan during the incident and had a significant effect on U.S. decision-making in China. As the "window" for the United States to observe East China, the U.S. Consulate General in Shanghai quickly reflected the activities and positions of China, Japan and the United States in Shanghai from multiple angles. Apparently, Cunningham's activities in Shanghai were intended to protect American expatriates and national interests in Shanghai, but they involved complex changes in U.S. diplomacy with China. The rapid and repeated changes in U.S. diplomatic policy toward China resulted in uncertainties in Japan's policy toward China and brought about a complicated and volatile diplomatic environment for the National Government, which had a far-reaching impact on Sino–Japanese relations.

Keywords: January 28, Incident; Edwin Shedan Cunningham; American diplomatic mediation

Background

On January 3, 1932, the Japanese army advanced to Jinzhou, the gateway to Northeast China, greatly changing the power structure in the Far East. Japan's occupation in Northeast China was basically complete. This seriously threatens the security of the United States in China. The US Secretary of State Henry Lewis Stimson sent a note to the leaders of China and Japan, issuing a "nonrecognition" statement and exerting pressure on Japan. At the beginning of the September 18th incident, the Japanese civilian government and the military believed that too much international attention would be detrimental to maintaining Japan's vested interests in Northeast China. Therefore, they planned to deliberately stage a "fake war" in Shanghai to enable the League of Nations to promote peace, thereby saving some face for the League of Nations (1). According to this plan, Japanese spies put on a series of incidents in Shanghai, and the "Japanese Monk Incident" they orchestrated eventually became the prelude to the January 28 Incident.

During the January 28 incident, which lasted for more than three months, the Nationalist government was deeply fearful of Japan. Eugene Chen, then the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Nationalist government, said in a meeting with Johnson, the American Minister, to China: "Chinese leaders here seem to feel unanimously that China must suffer diplomatic distresses if faced with Japan alone (2)." For this reason, the Nationalist government's diplomatic notes to Japan were beating around the bush, while the activities of American diplomats posted in China can better reflect the complex situation in Shanghai at the time. As a senior diplomat at the center of the incident, Cunningham frequently engaged with the United States, China, and Japan and was directly responsible for the protection and assistance of American expatriates and citizens. The U.S. diplomatic decisions were also mostly made on the basis of Cunningham's direct reports. Cunningham's activities in Shanghai can provide insight into the changing attitudes of the United States during the January 28 Incident. At present, academic research on the United States' intervention at the time has focused mostly on U.S. senior diplomats who served in the U.S. capital during this period or explored the United States' mediation and protection of expatriates in the later stages of the incident (3). Little research has been conducted on diplomats stationed in China, such as Cunningham, who were closer to the scene of the incident, and there is still a lack of detailed discussion on the activities of envoys from various countries during the Sino-Japanese "hot conflict". Studying the conflict between China and Japan in the process of the January 28 incident through Cunningham's perspective can deepen our understanding of the changes in the U.S. diplomatic attitude toward China in the early 1930s, explore the complex impact of the transformation of the U.S. isolationist policy on East Asia at the time, and deepen the study of the history of Sino-U.S. relations during the Republic of China period.

I Introduction of Cunningham during his term

Edwin Shedan Cunningham was born in Tennessee, USA, in 1868. Since he was appointed the U.S. Consul General in Hankou in 1914, Cunningham had been engaged in Chinese affairs for 21 years and became a veritable Chinese expert. As former U.S. Consul General in Hong Kong, Everett Francis Drumright recalled (4): "As for Shanghai, of course, in the consulate general we had Edwin S. Cunningham. He had been consul general there for almost 20 years when I came into the post. He was an old line officer. He came from Tennessee. He was basically a treaty port type, having lived in Shanghai all those years. I think he was a hard-working officer, and he certainly devoted himself to looking after American interests there (5). " Cunningham's diplomatic work in Shanghai was highly praised by the American diplomatic community. In the biography of ambassadors to Shanghai, "Men of Shanghai and North China", he was described as "playing a remarkable role in maintaining order and restoring normalcy during the military crises of 1926 and 1927 and the Sino-Japanese situation in 1932 (6)." Cunningham also enjoyed a wide reputation among foreign diplomatic envoys stationed in Shanghai, so much so that when he left office in 1935, the China Press said, "If Cunningham did not know that he was very popular in Shanghai, then he certainly discovered it in his last few days in Shanghai (7)." This humorous description shows his personal charm. In fact, although Cunningham was supposed to retire in 1933, he was retained for two years by President Hoover in the form of a presidential order because of his outstanding work (8). It was not until 1935 that President Roosevelt signed a presidential order to approve his retirement application (8).

Table 1: Key Events During the January 28 Incident (1932)

Date	U.S. Involvement	Japanese Actions	Chinese Response	Outcome/ Impact
Jan 3, 1932	U.S. Secretary Stimson issues "nonrecognition" statement.	Japan solidifies control over Manchuria.	Chinese government protests but lacks military response.	Escalates tensions in the Far East.
Jan 20, 1932	Cunningham warns Stimson of deliberate provocations.	Japan plans to divert League of Nations' attention.	Local Chinese authorities attempt to de-escalate.	Prelude to the January 28 Incident.
Jan 28, 1932	Cunningham declares state of emergency in Concession; mediates ceasefire.	Japan launches military offensive despite diplomatic promises.	19th Route Army resists fiercely.	Full-scale conflict begins; Concession

				becomes refugee zone.
Jan 29, 1932	U.S. sends four destroyers to Shanghai.	Japan violates ceasefire, continues attacks.	Chinese government demands Japanese withdrawal.	Ceasefire fails; U.S. military presence increases.
Feb 2, 1932	Cunningham protests Japanese atrocities.	Japan bombards Nanjing; escalates hostilities.	Chinese civilians form anti-Japanese resistance groups.	Conflict intensifies; international condemnation grows.
Feb 20, 1932	Cunningham focuses on refugee relief and expatriate safety.	Japan suffers heavy casualties but continues attacks.	19th Route Army maintains strong defense.	Stalemate develops; Japan seeks face-saving exit.
Feb 23, 1932	Cunningham coordinates publication, hardening U.S. stance.	Japan reacts angrily, views U.S. as an enemy.	Chinese leaders praise U.S. stance.	U.S. shifts toward open opposition to Japan.
	U.S. diplomats excluded initially; later involved.	Japan agrees to ceasefire but delays implementation.	China seeks neutral troop replacement for Japanese forces.	Temporary lull in fighting; negotiations ongoing.
	U.S. supports League efforts but avoids direct alliance.	Japan faces international pressure.	China appeals for League intervention.	Conflict gradually de-escalates.
	U.S. observes but does not sign.	Japan withdraws under international pressure.	China regains control of Shanghai but concedes demilitarized zone.	Formal end to the January 28 Incident.

Cunningham loved China.

On the issue of China's sovereignty, Cunningham sympathized with China. As early as November 1919, at a dinner hosted by Yang Cheng, a foreign affairs commissioner of Jiangsu Province, he bluntly commented on the Shandong issue that the international community needed to respect China's territorial integrity and demanded that China be treated fairly (9). Cunningham's remarks were contrary to those of the U.S. noninterventionist and isolationist policies at the time. As a senior US diplomat, such comments required great courage and conscience. He also paid close attention to the education of Chinese students studying in the United States and repeatedly taught them to focus on learning the spirit of patriotism and self-sacrifice and to actively build their own motherland (10). After Cunningham passed away in 1953, his tombstone in his hometown of Tennessee was only inscribed with information about his diplomatic tenure in China and emphasized that he had been twice awarded honors by the Chinese government.

Cunningham's position on China-related issues was to a certain extent influenced by his love for China. In terms of both reason and emotion, an idealistic Cunningham had his own views on the January 28 Sino-Japanese dispute. On the one hand, he continues to carefully safeguard the interests of the U.S. in China on the basis of isolationist policy; on the other hand, he deliberately shows partiality and sympathy for China in diplomatic activities. Cunningham's personal behavior not only reflects the complex attitudes and actual role of the United States in intervening in the January 28 incident but also reflects the complex history of the Far East.

II Cunningham's analysis of the situation in Shanghai at the beginning of the January 28 Incident

Table 2: U.S. Diplomatic and Military Actions During the Incident

Action	Date	Led By	Objective	Outcome	Challenges
Nonrecognition statement	Jan 7, 1932	Secretary Stimson	Protest Japanese occupation of Manchuria.	Moral victory but no practical impact.	Japan ignores U.S. stance.

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Cunningham's ceasefire mediation	Jan 29, 1932	Edwin S. Cunningham	Broker temporary halt to hostilities.	Ceasefire violated by Japan; short-lived.	Japanese military defiance.
Deployment of U.S. destroyers	Jan 29, 1932	U.S. Navy	Protect American expatriates and interests.	Deterrence limited; Japan continues attacks.	Insufficient forces to deter Japan.
State of emergency in Concession	Jan 28, 1932	Cunningham	Maintain order in Shanghai's international zone.	Concession remains stable; shelters refugees.	Japanese provocations within Concession.
Publication of "Letter to Borah"	Feb 23, 1932	Secretary Stimson	Condemn Japanese aggression; align with Nine-Power Treaty.	Hardens U.S. stance; angers Japan.	Isolationist opposition in U.S. Congress.
Refugee relief efforts	Feb 20, 1932	Cunningham	Provide aid to Chinese civilians in Concession.	Saves lives but limited by resource constraints.	Japanese obstruction.
Protest against Japanese atrocities	Feb 2, 1932	Cunningham	Document and condemn civilian targeting.	Raises international awareness.	Japan dismisses protests.
Intelligence gathering	Ongoing	U.S. Consulate/ Forbes	Monitor Japanese military movements.	Informs U.S. policy but often ignored.	Japanese misinformation.

Support for League of Nations	Feb-Mar 1932	U.S. State Department	Indirectly pressure Japan via international forums.	Limited impact; League lacks enforcement power.	U.S. avoids direct involvement.
Evacuation of American expatriates	Jan-Feb 1932	U.S. Consulate	Ensure safety of U.S. citizens.	Most evacuated safely.	Panic and logistical hurdles.

After the Japanese army captured Jinzhou on January 3, 1932, Japan secretly planned the "Japanese Monk Incident" to divert the attention of the League of Nations. The tension in Shanghai quickly escalated, and conflicts between the Chinese and Japanese people continued. As soon as noticing the tension, Cunningham immediately called the U.S. Secretary of the state Henry Lewis Stimson on January 20, postulating that there might be irresponsible people in China and Japan who deliberately provoked disputes, as the conflicts between the Chinese and Japanese people were not simple acts of revenge (11).

As of January 21, the conflict between the Chinese and Japanese people in Shanghai caused a new round of casualties. Japanese criminals seriously injured a foreign police officer, which made the mass rally held by Japan the next day more sensitive, and how to make it less so became Cunningham's main task (12). On the same morning, Ernest Brander Macnaghten, the general director of the Shanghai Municipal Council, discussed the security matters of the Japanese mass rally with Cunningham (13). After learning from the U.S. Ambassador to Japan, W. Cameron Forbes, that Japan had sent a cruiser, an aircraft carrier, and four destroyers to Shanghai, with a landing force of 400 to 500 people, Cunningham keenly noted that if the Japanese Navy was responsible for security, it would give Japan an opportunity to militarily infiltrate Shanghai and the Concession area (14). Therefore, Cunningham strongly recommended that the police of various countries in the Concession be responsible for the security of the rally to prevent the Japanese navy from launching a military attack. The U.S. government agreed with Cunningham.[5] However, to cover their intentions, the Japanese military, the general shirakawa Yoshinori, and the Japanese Consul General in Shanghai, Murai Kuramatsu expressed their willingness to follow the advice of the general director of the municipal council during their initial negotiations with representatives of various (14) countries and further offered to ask their own citizens to cancel mass rallies (15). This response made Cunningham less sensitive to a possible escalation of the situation and suggested that the Shanghai riots were purely local, such as those in Qingdao or Fuzhou, and would not have evolved into a more complicated situation.

However, the Japanese Navy's position made a U-turn, to the big surprise of Cunningham. While the Chinese military and police exercised absolute restraint, Japanese Navy Rear Admiral Koichi Shiosawa arrogantly stated on the evening of the 22nd that "appropriate measures will be taken to protect the rights and interests of the Japanese Empire," demanding that Shanghai Mayor Wu Tiecheng accept all five unreasonable demands made by Murai Kuramatsu on January 20 and threatening the Chinese government that the Japanese Navy fleet was ready at the Sasebo Naval Base (16). However, this ultimatum-like demand was not sent directly to Tiecheng Wu, who told Cunningham that he had not received the message and believed that it was just a warning without a time limit. Japan deliberately downplayed the accuracy of the ultimatum, making it even more difficult for Cunningham to predict the actions of the Japanese army.

On January 23, 1932, when Tiecheng Wu consulted Cunningham, he said that he could accept only the first three demands of Consul Murai. At this time, Cunningham lost trust in Japanese diplomatic and military chiefs in Shanghai and believed that if the agreement met Japan's needs, they would not hesitate to ignore the agreement and continue to provoke disputes (17). In the next two days, Cunningham repeatedly reported to the U.S. State Department that the situation in Shanghai worsened under the "fueling" of the Japanese side. On the same day, another five Japanese warships arrived in Shanghai. In view of this situation, the US government Deputy Secretary of State William R. Castle stated 23rd that the U.S. Consul General in Shanghai, Cunningham, had great liberty in addressing any issues that might involve the U.S. and delegated a great deal of discretion to Cunningham (18). Autonomy was an important guarantee and asset for Cunningham to intervene on behalf of the U.S. government. Although Japanese diplomatic officials in Shanghai asserted that Japan would not consider taking drastic measures, Cunningham still insisted on calling for additional warships to deter Japanese navy and believed that if Japan continued to exert pressure, the United States needed to rescue and transfer its citizens immediately (19). This was the first direct suggestion made by Cunningham after he was given independent discretion. This made Stimson, who had always been averse to the policy of "collective security", very hesitant. He hoped that the United States could still stay behind Britain instead of directly intervening in the situation in Shanghai. American diplomats stationed in Shanghai and the U.S. government differ in how they deal with things in Shanghai.

On January 24, with both the Chinese and Japanese armies refusing to concede, the accidental explosion of a Chinese munitions ship on the Huangpu River caused greater panic among locals. They feared that war was imminent. Helen Foster Snow, who worked at the Consulate General in Shanghai, recalled, "We were always thinking about the Japanese attack. As soon as the door slammed or the rickshaw tires exploded, we had to be dragged out from under the Consulate General desk (20)." Cunningham naturally sensed the panic permeating Shanghai. In the ambiguous scenario where the Chinese government showed its intention to postpone replying to Japan and Japan did not set a "reasonable time limit", especially when the U.S. government had not provided clear guidance, Cunningham began to presume the worst possible outcome.

By January 27, major newspapers in Shanghai simultaneously published on their front pages that Mayor Tiecheng Wu would accept Murai Kuramatsu's five demands. At the same time, Murai Kuramatsu sent out a "goodwill" signal, saying that the closure of anti-Japanese publications in Shanghai was not necessary and would be coordinated with the consent of the Concession Municipal Council (21). Cunningham was not happy about this. As early as the 25th century, Murai Kuramatsu visited Cunningham and promised to inform the United States in advance of any military actions that Japan would take, and he also promised not to take any action within 40 hours of the ultimatum (14). However, Cunningham remained skeptical of any verbal commitment from Japan. Stirling Fessenden, the secretary of the Shanghai Municipal Council, also endorsed Cunningham's caution. When Cunningham asked him whether it was necessary to immediately strengthen the U.S. naval forces in Shanghai, he bluntly said, "If I were in your position, I would bring everything in the U.S. government’s capacity to Shanghai (14)." After a conversation with Colonel R.S. Hooker of the U.S. Marine Corps, Cunningham believed that the current situation was most severe and that conditions were not ready to address a sudden conflict between China and Japan, although there were a certain number of military and police forces from various countries in the Concession. Therefore, Cunningham requested that a state of emergency be declared in the Concession, using the special relationships and influence of the officers in the emergency state to prevent chaos and impulsive behavior.

Facts proved that Cunningham's concerns and requests for contingency treatment were necessary. As of the 27th, 10 Japanese warships were anchored in Shanghai Port, with 1,400 soldiers in the port, and another 14 warships were on standby at the Sasebo Naval Base, which is near China. The Japanese military attaché in Shanghai, Major General Jiro Tadashi, recalled to Japan two months ago and returned to Shanghai ahead of schedule on the 27th because the Japanese general staff believed that the situation in Shanghai was serious (22). At the same time, the third round of Japanese reinforcements was underway. According to intelligence from the US Ambassador to Japan, Forbes, on the 27th, the Japanese Navy dispatched a destroyer squadron consisting of a cruiser and 12 destroyers from Sasebo to Shanghai, carrying a landing force of 400--500 people, which was expected to arrive in Shanghai on the 28th,[4] and Japan was fully prepared for a low-intensity war in Shanghai. In contrast, the United States had only one warship and 1,159 marines in Shanghai, and the U.S. Asiatic Fleet, which was stationed in the Philippines and was closest to Shanghai, was not strong enough and would take 48 hours to reach Shanghai.[1] Thus, the military force that Cunningham could rely on was very weak. Even with the British and French military in Shanghai, the forces combined were not enough to deter Japan from attack. The existing military forces can only be deployed in the Concessions for passive defense. In fact, at this time, it had become a consensus in the Concessions that Japan would surely launch a military attack. Therefore, for Cunningham, the focus of work shifted from preventing Japan from launching military operations to protecting the security of the Concessions and curbing the scope of Japanese activities (12).

At 3 a.m. on January 28, the Shanghai Concession Municipal Council held a meeting and agreed with Cunningham's proposal. At 4 p.m. on the same day, a state of emergency was declared in the Concession area (18). Cunningham believed that a clearly worded evacuation notice for American expatriates was not advisable at this time, as it would cause unnecessary panic and confusion. Therefore, only a suggestive notice was issued that morning, calling for the evacuation of those who were ready (23). This action helped stabilize society and prevented the public from acting too radically, which would only enable Japan to launch a military attack in advance under the pretext of protecting expatriates.

In addition to comforting and protecting the people, Cunningham continued to quickly pass diplomatic messages between parties. After communicating with Wu Tiecheng that day, Cunningham believed that Wu Tiecheng had conceded to Japan many times and agreed with

Japan's five unreasonable demands, which was quite sincere. The position of the Chinese government fully made sense that it seemed meaningless to take the initiative to negotiate with Japan (22). On the other hand, the intelligence that Cunningham obtained showed that, no matter how China responded, the Japanese army would take action on the morning of the 29th.[5] However, the Nationalist government represented by Tiecheng Wu continued to concede and make the final reply to the Japanese, unconditionally accepting all of Japan's demands. However, Japan's attack was deliberate, so the situation deteriorated faster than Cunningham expected. The U.S. government repeatedly reminded the Japanese government that the Japanese Consul General in Shanghai, Murai Kuramatsu, had informed the consular offices of various countries of the reply he had received from the Chinese mayor and considered the reply satisfactory; however, (24). The Japanese Navy ignored it and brazenly launched an attack on the Zhabei area on the evening of the 28th, only nine hours after receiving the reply, seriously violating its previous promise to Cunningham and the Shanghai Concession Municipal Council. However, since this was predicted by Cunningham and others, the Concession District deployed defense on the early morning of the 29th, which was jointly undertaken by Colonel Hooker of the 4th Regiment of the U.S. Marine Corps, Brigadier General Fleming, the commander of the British Army and the commander-in-chief of the colonial army, and Colonel A.F.M. Marcaire, the commander of the French Army (25). Therefore, at the beginning of the Japanese attack on Zhabei, order was basically maintained in the Shanghai Concession District. Many Chinese refugees took shelter here, and the Concession District played a certain role in protecting the Chinese people.

As the most senior U.S. diplomat in Shanghai, in the early days of the January 28 Incident, Cunningham flexibly used diplomatic skills under Japanese military pressure, with deep sympathy for the Chinese government, and tried his best not to give Japan any opportunity to intervene by force. Faced with the pacing pressure of the Japanese army, Cunningham countered by "ensuring the normalcy of the Concessions" and tried to maintain the stability of Shanghai to the greatest extent. As Japan's diplomatic deceptions were repeatedly exposed and its military projections against Shanghai increased, Cunningham was the first among foreign diplomats in Shanghai to give up his illusions about Japan, advocating partial abandonment of traditional noninterventionism and increasing U.S. military strength to show muscles to Japan.

III The Escalation of the Sino-Japanese Conflict and Cunningham's response

As an enormous international hub, taking military action in Shanghai is not just a matter of China and Japan. Many countries face the danger of conflict and suffer losses. Since the conflict broke out at the beginning of the 28th century, the Japanese army advanced rapidly in Zhabei and was fiercely resisted by the 19th Route Army led by General Tsai Tingkai.

On January 29, Murai Kuramatsu and Shiozawa Koichi visited Cunningham again and tried to explain that "their occupation of Zhabei was a measure for the protection of their nationals and a part of the general defense scheme of the Settlement; that it was not connected with the Consul General’s demands (11)." On the same day, Prime Minister Inukai Tsuyoshi issued a statement in Tokyo claiming that Japan's actions were only intended to close the offices of anti-Japanese associations outside the Concession by force and expressed regret for "the misunderstanding that Washington seemed to have fallen into (26)." However, Cunningham was skeptical about this. He observed that the Japanese army cut off the Shanghai–Hangzhou Railway at the Dongwu River Bridge and believed that the Japanese army might extend their military actions (14).[3]This supposition was supported by most diplomatic officials in various countries. Albert de Bassompierre, a Belgian ambassador to Japan, was worried about his conversation with Forbes, a U.S. ambassador to Japan, believing that Japan's army and navy in Shanghai were out of control and that the Japanese civilian government had no power to tell the army and navy what to do or what to abide by. The situation in Shanghai would only escalate (14). Assistant Military Attaché to China, Lieutenant General Tenney of the United States Army, bluntly stated that the Japanese General Staff was now quite enthusiastic about the war and believed that the goal of occupying Shanghai should be achieved. If its route was blocked, Japan would not hesitate to engage in hostile actions with the United States (27). These suppositions were partially correct, and the situation in Shanghai was indeed going out of control.

In anticipation of the worsening situation, Cunningham and Secretary-General of the Municipal Council, Sterling Fessenden, planned before the conflict broke out to have the Concession Police take charge of the public security of Zhabei in the Japanese-occupied area to ensure the safety of Chinese civilians there and separate the conflict zone from the Concession area. However, this idea was strongly opposed by the U.S. minister to China, Nelson Trusler Johnson (28). He believed that the U.S. government should not be directly involved in the Sino-Japanese conflict, so the plan of Cunningham and others was not implemented. This was also because the U.S. military strength in the Concession was indeed stretched to its limits at the time. According to Helen Snow's recollection, "The 31st Infantry Regiment was stationed here, with only 17 soldiers, temporarily living on the eighth floor above us (29)." Even with the plan, the initial defense of the Concession was inadequate. In response to Cunningham's repeated warnings about the deteriorating situation in Shanghai, the U.S. government finally responded by sending four destroyers from Manila to Shanghai on the mornings of the 29th. The US Navy also instructed Montgomery M. Taylor, commander-in-chief of the US Asiatic Fleet, to take action in Shanghai if necessary (30). The increase in American military power in Shanghai gave Cunningham confidence in confronting the Japanese military threat. After the U.S. assets in Shanghai were protected, Cunningham’s focus shifted to mediating the Sino–Japanese conflict.

On the morning of the 29th, Tiecheng Wu called Cunningham, asking him and the British Consul General in Shanghai, Sir John Fitzgerald Brenan, to mediate a temporary ceasefire between the National Government and the Japanese representatives in Zhabei as soon as possible. Under the mediation of Cunningham and others, Tiecheng Wu and Murai Kuramatsu reached a verbal agreement, and the temporary ceasefire took effect at 8 pm on the 29th, but the Japanese army still launched an offensive in some areas and took the opportunity to seize key areas of Zhabei (31). Cunningham was disgusted with the actions of the Japanese army. Since the outbreak of the conflict, the Japanese navy has repeatedly forced its way into the American Concession under the pretext that one of the protection zones of the Shanghai Concession was given to Japan and that the Japanese navy has fired at the Chinese army. The Japanese plainclothing police also interfered with the work of the Concession police several times (11). In fact, the temporary ceasefire did not last long, and the Japanese army was in a state of continuous attack. As the initial mediation did not work, American diplomats in Shanghai and senior officials in Washington, DC, began to differ in situation.

Two days after the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese conflict, Cunningham repeatedly noted that the Japanese army was seeking the "destruction" of its rival and had no interest in peace talks (12). Cunningham cited the example of Japanese vigilantes and fully armed Japanese marines brutally closing down the American Law School and the Middle School affiliated with Soochow University, hoping to attract the attention of the U.S. government and send more landing troops to stabilize the situation in Shanghai. However, the U.S.

Secretary of State Stimson repeatedly asked Cunningham to stay strictly neutral and not to provoke the Japanese army, hoping to reconcile with the Japanese army at the cost of giving up Sthe U.S. military-controlled areas.

With Stimson's restrictions, the mediation plan proposed by Cunningham on the 29th was rejected by the National Defense Committee of the National Government. It demanded that the Japanese army completely retreated to the Concession. The National Government's tough position was strongly protested by the Japanese army but was then temporarily accepted. Murai Kuramatsu agreed to submit the proposal of the National Defense Committee to the Japanese government for review. Cunningham still had no confidence in the ceasefire and believed that the proposal of the National Defense Committee would be an ideal solution, but neither the Japanese admiral nor the consul generally would agree.

To put pressure on the Japanese side, Cunningham and Brenan submitted three strongly worded protest letters to Murai Kuramatsu on the 30th, stating that "all countries are shocked by Japan's use of the Concession as a base to attack China"(32). However, Cunningham did not expect how far the Japanese army would go. On the evening of the 30th, disguised Japanese soldiers opened fire on the U.S. Marine sentries stationed at their posts. After being arrested, they claimed to be teachers and students. However, they carried a large number of light and heavy weapons with them,[2] making Cunningham realize that the Japanese army's large-scale infiltration and deliberate provocation of Sino-US relations still existed during the armistice period. The short armistice only gave the Japanese army time to mobilize more fully (14). However, given its neutral policy, the U.S. government did not pay much attention to this information.

By February 1, the Japanese army took the lead in using the 19th Route Army's violation of the armistice agreement as an excuse to relaunch a more fierce offensive in Zhabei. Japanese destroyers even bombarded Nanjing city, and the truce was no longer effective. Some senior officials of various governments began to think the same as diplomats stationed in Shanghai, such as Cunningham. Paul Claudel, a French ambassador to the United States, bluntly said to Stimson, "the situation was very serious; that Japan was mad." He conveyed that the French government believed that Japan would not have revolution at any time. The situation in Japan was extremely unstable, with poverty and various troubles intertwined. Once the military action is reversed, it becomes easy for a revolution to occur immediately. When Stimson showed him information about bombing Nanjing, Claudel raised his hands and said, "They are mad (19)." In reality, it was proven that Japan's need for war would not end. It was unrealistic to reach an armistice agreement before Japan achieved its goal. Under the repeated suggestions of various countries, Stimson could no longer insist on a completely isolationist policy. On January 31, Cunningham's suggestion to send more troops to Shanghai was approved (33).

Koo that he supported Gu Weijun's proposal that the Japanese army withdraws from the occupied area in Zhabei and is replaced by neutral troops, after which China and Japan resume negotiations. However, things did not play out this way. On February 2, Murai Kuramatsu replied that the Japanese government could not accept the ceasefire proposal of Cunningham and others. Shortly after 2 a.m. that day, fierce exchanges of fire began, and the truce was completely broken.

On February 2, on behalf of the Concession Defense Committee, Cunningham lodged a solemn protest to the Japanese side, demanding that the Japanese army explain its brutal persecution of Chinese civilians, including the wanton shooting of Chinese children and the stabbing of Chinese laborers, and that its intimidation to the U.S. military to withdraw, or their safety cannot be guaranteed. In the days following the full-scale outbreak of conflict, Cunningham's telegrams to the United States gradually became less objective and official, and more sentimental language was used. "These irregulars, as well as the Japanese marines are still treating the terrorized civilians practically with little or no consideration, bayoneting or shooting with little compunction.... The Chinese residents of Shanghai are showing good deal of patriotism in coming to the assistance of the Chinese Army in their defense against Japanese invaders. Special patriotic societies contribute money and food supplies to assist Chinese soldiers. An anti-Japanese “dare to die” corps was formed to support the 19th Route Army. Various anti-Japanese patriotic societies are being formed. Some of these are now functioning for defense purposes. These societies are issuing circulars exhorting the people to come to the defense of the country." Although guided by the isolationist policy of the U.S., American diplomats, such as Cunningham, who were actually facing Japanese invasion, still showed great sympathy for China and clearly favored the Chinese government in their diplomatic activities. As the war intensified, in addition to routinely reporting the progress of the war to the U.S. government, Cunningham's obvious partiality toward the Chinese government was protested by the Japanese side. Therefore, Stimson had to remember the principle of impartiality between China and Japan (11).

In the following ten days, the Japanese army repeatedly reinforced its troops, but they were all repelled by the 19th Route Army. Although the war expanded on the surface, Cunningham believed that it was still controllable. He believed that the Japanese army could not advance without reinforcements. Moreover, the Chinese army was not out of control. The US Ambassador to Japan Forbes held a similar view. He believed that the situation of junior officers usurping control of the army was obviously nonexistent in the Japanese navy. The actions of the navy were not caused by the pressure exerted by the army. The battle in Shanghai has not evolved into a full-scale war between China and Japan (11). However, as the conflict has expanded, the Concession inevitably came under heavy bombardment, causing heavy casualties among citizens and soldiers of various countries. During these few days, Cunningham focused mainly on comforting American expatriates and negotiating with Japanese expatriates on the issue of compensation (34).

On February 17, Cunningham received intelligence that "the Japanese frankly admitted that, owing to cost issues, they did not want to continue the fight. As long as they could find a way to save face, that is, if senior officers of the 19th Route Army were willing to take the initiative to plan a retreat, the Japanese army could consider a ceasefire." Cunningham did not comment on the message and believed that a ceasefire was difficult to achieve at the moment.

On February 18, under the mediation of the British Minister to China Miles Wedderburn Lampson, the Chinese and Japanese militaries launched rounds of negotiations. Unlike Cohen, the US Secretary of State Stimson was very interested in this and was optimistic. When talking with French Ambassador to the United States Paul Claudel and Italian Ambassador to the United States Giacomo De Martino, Stimson Italy suspended its protest against Japan on the grounds of avoiding stimulating the sensitive sentiments of the Japanese on the eve of their general election on February 20 and preventing the Japanese government from using the current protest to incite nationalism,[1] maintaining a state of mobility between China and Japan and demonstrating the impartiality of the U.S. government was always Stimson's primary consideration. However, this attitude also led him to selectively ignore the messages conveyed by frontline diplomats such as Cunningham, causing the U.S. government to misjudge the situation in Shanghai.

The fact is that, as Cunningham expected, the negotiations inevitably failed because of the unreasonable demands of the Japanese side. Cunningham also keenly realized that hostilities on a larger scale might break out in the next one or two days (35). As expected, the Japanese army issued an ultimatum to the Chinese army on the 20th and launched a general offensive, fiercely attacking Jiangwan Village in Shanghai. Under the fierce resistance of the Chinese army, the Japanese army has suffered heavy casualties. Cunningham was even more indignant about the new round of Japanese attacks. "The Japanese invaders have ruthlessly burned thousands and slaughtered innocent peasants to protect themselves from attack. They showed such ruthlessness in Hongkew and adjacent areas where Japanese marines and armed civilians broke into American and Chinese property and where hundreds of innocent Chinese civilians were said to be bayoneted or shot (12)." Therefore, in the days after February 20, Cunningham's main work turned to evacuating American expatriates and providing relief to Chinese refugees. Cunningham rejected Stimson's suggestion to evacuate them to Nanjing and supplied famine wheat to the refugees in the Concession.[4]When the Japanese consul condemned the American pilot Robert Short for shooting down a Japanese plane, Cunningham simply ignored the protest and said that he would investigate (15). His personal opposition to Japanese aggression was already very obvious.

The United States intervened in the Sino-Japanese conflict twice and coordinated their negotiations twice but was deceived by the Japanese side both times. Japan's arrogance and contempt to the U.S. caused a strong reaction from the U.S. government. With the public release of the "Letter to Borah" by the U.S. Secretary of State Stimson on the 23rd, the United States began to openly harden its attitude toward Japan. On February 26, Cunningham coordinated the reprinting of Secretary of State Stimson's letter to Senator Borah in all English newspapers in Shanghai. In response, Sun Fo and Eugene Chen published an editorial emphasizing that Stimson's linking of the "Nine-Power Treaty" with the Washington Naval Treaty was highly important. Since Japan violated the treaty and took war as its goal, the United States should build a large navy to contain Japan (19). Cunningham strongly agreed with this view and conveyed it to Stimson (36). The publication of the "Letter to Borah" in Shanghai was also a reguidance by the U.S. government on Cunningham's attitude toward Japan. British Ambassador to Japan, F.O. Lindley believed that the publication of the "Letter to Borah" had made the Japanese people regard the United States as an enemy.[4]On the other hand, it also showed that the U.S. government's tough attitude toward Japan objectively exerted tremendous diplomatic pressure on Japan.

On February 28, Cunningham stated, "Thirty-one days of successful defense by Chinese forces in the vicinity of Shanghai has astounded and aroused the admiration of all observers." The tenacious resistance of the Chinese army forced the Japanese army to suffer enormous casualties and made the Japanese high command consider whether the war was worth continuing. Although the Sino-Japanese conflict still showed intense colors, the news that Puyi would assume the position of the temporary administrative chief of the new state in Changchun on February 29 and issue an "independence declaration" to be handed over to foreign governments aroused the sensitivity of Cunningham. He believed that Japan's there might be a possibility of a ceasefire in the near future.

Interestingly, on the evening of the 28th, the representative of the Japanese prime minister, Matsuoka Yosuke, actually reached a five-point understanding with Wellington Koo on the British ship "Kent". American diplomats in China, such as Cunningham and Johnson, were not immediately informed of the news (36). However, Stimson did not consider this. Owing to the conflicting attitudes of the U.S. government toward Japan, it neither wanted to be regarded by Japan as an imaginary enemy nor wanted to keep compromising with Japan. Therefore, Stimson hoped that Britain, which had stronger military strength in the Far East, would come forward, whereas the United States could stay behind the scene and focus on the League of Nations, which was not directly related to the situation in Shanghai. In this way, the United States could still implement an isolationist policy. At this time, U.S. officials still advocated risk-free, nonalliance diplomacy, and they tended to play moral cards rather than realpolitiks.

On February 28, when Stimson instructed Hugh Wilson, U.S. Minister to Switzerland, on the wording for negotiations at the League of Nations Conference, he first emphasized that "An immediate cessation of hostilities consolidated by arrangements made between the commanders in consultation with the military and naval authorities" should be changed to "the military, naval and civilian authorities", giving Cunningham and others the right to participate in mediation, and stated that "The Government will instruct its representatives in Shanghai in the event that this offer is acceptable to the Chinese and Japanese governments to cooperate with the representatives of the other powers." The next day, Stimson again gave Cunningham a separate instruction to attend any proposed meeting in Shanghai and hoped that Cunningham could provide the latest, complete and accurate evidence of any damage suffered by American citizens to prevent the Japanese side from shirking responsibility (14).

Table 3: Key figures and their roles in the incident

Name	Role	Nationality	Key Actions	Impact	Challenges Faced
Edwin S. Cunningham	U.S. Consul General in Shanghai	U.S.	Mediated ceasefires, protected Concession, reported Japanese atrocities.	Stabilized Concession; influenced U.S. policy shift.	Balancing U.S. neutrality with personal sympathy for China.
Henry L. Stimson	U.S. Secretary of State	U.S.	Issued "nonrecognition" doctrine and "Letter to Borah."	Moral leadership but limited practical effect.	Isolationist opposition in Congress.
Murai Kuramatsu	Japanese Consul General in Shanghai	Japan	Orchestrated diplomatic deceptions; delivered ultimatums.	Facilitated Japanese military actions.	Lost credibility with foreign diplomats.
Wu Tiecheng	Mayor of Shanghai	China	Negotiated with Japan; sought international mediation.	Delayed Japanese advance but forced to concede.	Pressure from Japanese military threats.
Koichi Shiozawa	Japanese Navy Rear Admiral	Japan	Led initial attacks on Zhabei; violated ceasefires.	Escalated conflict; damaged Japan's international image.	Resistance from 19th Route Army.

Tsai Tingkai	Commander, 19th Route Army	China	Defended Shanghai against Japanese forces.	Boosted Chinese morale; inflicted heavy Japanese casualties.	Limited supplies and reinforcements.
Nelson T. Johnson	U.S. Minister to China	U.S.	Advised caution; later focused on Manchukuo issue.	Limited U.S. involvement in Shanghai.	Conflicted with Cunningham's proactive stance.
Stirling Fessenden	Secretary-General, Shanghai Municipal Council	British	Collaborated with Cunningham on Concession security.	Strengthened international zone defenses.	Japanese military interference.
W. Cameron Forbes	U.S. Ambassador to Japan	U.S.	Reported Japanese military plans to Washington.	Provided critical intelligence.	Japanese government obfuscation.
Paul Claudel	French Ambassador to U.S.	France	Warned Stimson of Japan's "madness"; supported U.S. stance.	Strengthened Franco-U.S. alignment against Japan.	Limited French military presence in Asia.

In fact, all countries agreed that the Sino-Japanese conflict would come to an end after February 28, and how to accelerate this process and address it fairly became the primary problem. In view of the establishment of the puppet Manchukuo, Johnson, an American ambassador to China, began to be busy dealing with the Northeast Japan-Manchukuo issue, and the Shanghai Incident was actually handled mainly by Cunningham. In addition to investigating the progress of the war and stabilizing the situation in the Concession, Cunningham's work focus once again turned to mediation, which continued until the end of the January 28 Incident.

From the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese conflict on January 28 to the full launch of the League of Nations mediation at the end of February, during this month, Cunningham's activities in Shanghai reflected the two attitudes of the U.S. government from beginning to end, namely, isolationist policy, which represented realism, and traditional American diplomacy, which represented idealism. As frontline US diplomats in Shanghai, Cunningham and colleagues undoubtedly had great sympathy for China. How to handle the conflicts between U.S. national interests and personal emotions properly was a large test. Cunningham finally chose to deliberately lean toward the National Government in diplomacy and reported Japanese atrocities in detail to the U.S. government and the media, hoping that the U.S. government would no longer insist on isolationist policies and would attract the attention of the international community and restrain the Japanese army. It was not until the publication of the "Letter to Bola" that the U.S. Secretary of State Stimson acquiesced to Cunningham's diplomatic activities in Shanghai, and Cunningham's subsequent work was able to proceed in part according to his own ideas.

IV Conclusion

In 1908, French Prime Minister Andre Tardieu visited the United States and gave a speech at Harvard University, saying that "America is sitting at the great game table and cannot leave it (37) (37). "1However, its rapid growth in national strength and the rise of its international status as a world power did not bring about a fundamental change in the nature of the United States' East Asian policy. In fact, many Americans have not yet realized that their country has become a world power, and they still follow the "noninterventionism" in foreign policy proposed by its founding father, George Washington.

However, the superior national strength of the U.S. has made it impossible to avoid the world's competition. Only when it was separated from the power competition at that time could it become a peaceful isolationist country, which could only be first perceived by Americans who were stationed abroad, such as Cunningham, who was on the frontline of the war. During the January 28 Incident, even if the US government only acted in accordance with international law and the law of war and followed the principle of respecting its territorial integrity and providing humanitarian assistance in dealing with China, it was still regarded as the first and foremost competitor by Japan. In the view of Cunningham and others, if they blindly gave in to Japan during the conflict, their interests would only be given up to Japan faster. Only by showing a tough attitude toward Japan in a timely manner can they curb Japan's expansionist momentum in East Asia.

On the other hand, since the United States was a major power, many countries were paying attention to its attitude toward the incident in Shanghai from beginning to end. France and Italy were among them. When Stimson responded to foreign envoys stationed in the United States, he often relayed reports from diplomatic officials such as Cunningham. Cunningham's attitude in the report not only affected the diplomatic decisions of the U.S. government but also indirectly affected those of various countries toward Japan.

Since the Sino-Japanese conflict broke out, Cunningham's activities in Shanghai revealed a unique brilliance of idealism. The American envoys to China, whom he represented, always had a contradictory mindset between their own perceptions and the requirements of the US government during the January 28 Incident, which continued until the outbreak of World War II. Like Evans Fordyce Carlson, U.S. military attaché in China, described Harry E. Yarnell, then commander of the U.S. Asiatic Fleet, five years later: "Asia Nell watched Japan encroach on China with intolerable emotion. The old navy man was not a hot-tempered person. He had no intention of creating trouble and tightening the cord of polite cooperation diplomacy between the United States and Japan. However, he hated injustice and Japanese militarism. He wished that he could use the cannons of his flagship, Augusta, to bombard the Japanese destroyers that were neutral. Therefore, he will concentrate on implementing it, even if it is a thorn in his throat.” However, it was this mindset that gave an enormous impetus to the U.S. government, which was already in a contradictory attitude toward Japan, to gradually abandon its isolationist policy. In fact, Cunningham's behavior not only is a manifestation of idealism but also represents the existence of a considerable number of far-sighted people in American political and military circles. Their existence prompted the U.S. government to gradually abandon isolationist policy and realize that there would be a war between the U.S. and Japan.

It was not until thirty years later that Tardieu’s description of America’s place in the world became accurate. During this time, the United States continued to debate whether to sit at the table “where the great game was played,” and at one point during the League of Nations, Secretary of State Henry Stimson instructed Prentiss B. Gilbert, American minister in Geneva, to sit down from the table in order not to anger Japan. This made both the British and the French so uneasy that Stimson relented and decided, as he recorded in his diary, that Gilbert could continue to sit at the "damned table," but he was to remain silent. Unlike Gilbert, the diplomats represented by Cunningham took the initiative, consciously sat down, and led American government officials to sit down with them.

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