

McKinley on the Boxer Rebellion

President McKinley conveyed this account of the Boxer Rebellion and the multinational force that subdued it to the U.S. Congress in December 1900.

The recent troubles in China spring from the antforeign agitation, which for the past three years has gained strength in the northern provinces. The Taiping rebellion and the opening of Chinese ports to foreign trade and settlement disturbed alike the homogeneity and the seclusion of China. Meanwhile foreign activity made itself felt in all quarters, not alone on the coast, but along the great river arteries and in the remoter districts, carrying new ideas and introducing new associations among a primitive people which had pursued for centuries a national policy of isolation. The telegraph and the railway spreading over their land, the steamers plying on their water ways, the merchant and the missionary penetrating year by year farther to the interior, became to the Chinese mind types of an alien invasion, changing the course of their national life and fraught with vague forebodings of disaster to their beliefs and their self-control. For several years before the present troubles all the resources of foreign diplomacy, backed by moral demonstrations of the physical force of fleets and arms, have been needed to secure due respect for the treaty rights of foreigners. The posting of antforeign placards became a daily occurrence, which the repeated reprobation of the Imperial power failed to check or punish. These inflammatory appeals to the ignorance and superstition of the masses, mendacious and absurd in their accusations and deeply hostile in their spirit, could not but work cumulative harm. They aimed at no particular class of foreigners; they were impartial in attacking everything foreign. Hostile demonstrations towards the stranger gained strength by organization. The sect, commonly styled the Boxers, developed greatly in the provinces north of Yangtze, and, with the collusion of many notable officials, including some in the immediate councils of the Throne itself, became alarmingly aggressive. No foreigner's life, outside of the protected Treaty ports, was safe. No foreign interest was secure from spoliation. The diplomatic representatives of the powers in Peking strove in vain to check this movement. Protest was followed by demand, and demand by renewed protest, to be met with perfunctory edicts from the palace, by evasive and futile assurances from the Tsung-li Yamen. The circle of the Boxer influence narrowed about Peking, and while nominally stigmatized as seditious, it was felt that its spirit pervaded the capital itself, that the Imperial forces were imbued with its doctrines, and that the immediate counselors of the empress dowager were in full sympathy with the antforeign movement. The Chinese government proved unable to check the rising strength of the Boxers, and appeared to be a prey to internal dissensions. In the unequal contest the antforeign influences soon gained the ascendancy under the leadership of Prince Tuan. Organized armies of Boxers, with which the Imperial forces affiliated, held the country between Peking and the coast, penetrated into Manchuria up to the Russian borders, and through their emissaries threatened a like rising throughout northern China. Attacks upon foreigners, destruction of their property, and slaughter of native converts were reported from all sides. At this critical juncture, in the early spring of this year, a proposal was made by the other powers that a combined fleet should be assembled in Chinese waters as a moral demonstration. The United States, while not participating in the joint demonstration, promptly sent from the

Philippines all ships that could be spared for service on the Chinese coast. A small force of marines was landed at Taku, and sent to Peking for the protection of the American Legation. Other powers took similar action, until some four hundred men were assembled in the capital as Legation guards. Still the peril increased. The Legations reported the development of the seditious movement in Peking and the need of increased provision for defense against it. While preparations were in progress for a larger expedition to strengthen the Legation guards and keep the railway open, an attempt of the foreign ships to make a landing at Taku was met by a fire from the Chinese forts. The forts were thereupon shelled by the foreign vessels, the American admiral taking no part in the attack. Two days later the Taku forts were captured after a sanguinary conflict. By the 19th June the Legations were cut off. An identical note from the Yamen ordered each Minister to leave Peking, under a promised escort, within twenty-four hours. To gain time they replied, asking prolongation of the time, which was afterwards granted, and requesting an interview with the Tsung-li Yamen on the following day. No reply being received, on the morning of the 20th the German minister, Baron von Ketteler, set out for the Yamen to obtain a response, and on the way was murdered. An attempt by the Legation guard to recover his body was foiled by the Chinese. Armed forces turned out against the Legations. Their quarters were surrounded and attacked. The Mission compounds were abandoned, their inmates taking refuge in the British Legation, where all the other Legations and guards gathered for more effective defense. Four hundred persons were crowded in its narrow compass. Two thousand native converts were assembled in a near-by palace under protection of the foreigners. Lines of defense were strengthened, trenches dug, barricades raised, and preparations made to stand a siege, which at once began. "From the 20th June until the 17th July, writes Minister Conger, "there was scarcely an hour during which there was not firing upon some part of our lines and into some of the Legations, varying from a single shot to a general and continuous attack along the whole line." Artillery was placed around the Legations and on the overlooking palace walls, and thousands of three-inch shot and shell were fired, destroying some buildings and damaging all. So thickly did the balls rain that, when the ammunition of the besieged ran low, five quarts of Chinese bullets were gathered in an hour in one compound and recast.

Attempts were made to burn the Legations by setting neighboring houses on fire, but the flames were successfully fought off, although the Austrian, Belgian, Italian, and Dutch Legations were then and subsequently burned. With the aid of the native converts, directed by the missionaries, to whose helpful cooperation Mr. Conger awards unstinted praise, the British Legation was made a veritable fortress. During the siege the defenders lost 65 killed, 135 wounded, and 7 by disease, — the last all children.

Mr. Conger's letter to the Secretary of State at Washington, dispatched from Peking on the 18th July, afforded to the outside world the first tidings that the inmates of the Legations were still alive and hoping for succor. This news stimulated the preparations for a joint relief expedition in numbers sufficient to overcome the resistance which for a month had been organizing between Taku and the capital. Reinforcements sent by all the cooperating governments were constantly arriving. The United States contingent, hastily assembled from the Philippines or dispatched from this country, amounted to some 5000 men, under the able command first of the lamented Colonel Liscum and afterwards of General Chaffee. Towards the end of July the movement began. A severe conflict followed at Tien-tsin. The city was stormed and partly destroyed. Its capture afforded the base of operations from which to make the final advance, which began in the first days of August, the expedition being made up of Japanese, Russian,

British, and American troops at the outset. Another battle was fought and won at Yang-tsun. Thereafter the disheartened Chinese troops offered little show of resistance. A few days later the important position of Ho-si-woo was taken. A rapid march brought the united forces to the populous city of Tung Chow, which capitulated without a contest. 1 the capital On the 14th August the capital was reached. After a brief conflict beneath the walls the relief column entered and the Legations were saved. The United States soldiers, sailors, and marines, officers and men alike, in those distant climes and unusual surroundings, showed the same valor, discipline, and good conduct, and gave proof of the same high degree of intelligence and efficiency, which have distinguished them in every emergency. The Imperial family and the government had fled a few days before. The city was without visible control. The remaining Imperial soldiery had made, on the night of the 13th, a last attempt to exterminate the besieged, which was gallantly repelled. The policy of the United States through all this trying period was clearly announced and scrupulously carried out. A circular note to the powers, dated the 3d July, proclaimed our attitude.

Our declared aims involved no war against the Chinese nation. We adhered to the legitimate office of rescuing the imperiled Legation, obtaining redress for wrongs already suffered, securing wherever possible the safety of American life and property in China, and preventing a spread of the disorders or their recurrence. As was then said, "The policy of the government of the United States is to seek a solution which may bring about permanent safety and peace to China, preserve Chinese territorial and administrative entity, protect all rights guaranteed to friendly powers by treaty and international law, and safeguard for the world the principle of equal and impartial trade with all parts of the Chinese Empire."

Source James Harvey Robinson, Charles Austin Beard, (eds.). *Readings in Modern European History: A Collection of Extracts from the Sources Chosen with the Purpose of Illustrating some of the Chief Phases of the Development of Europe during the Last Two Hundred Years, Vol II* (Boston: Ginn & Company, 1909). pp. 436-440.