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**Michael E. Chapman. "Fidgeting Over Foreign Policy: Henry L. Stimson and the Shenyang Incident, 1931." *Diplomatic History* 37:4 (2013): 727-748. DOI: 10.1093/dh/dht029. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/dh/dht029>**

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### Evaluating Honor

In our contemporary world, we have the tendency to dismiss concepts such as honor when discussing politics or diplomacy. While scholars hunt busily for information from which to build complex arguments, journalists, politicians, and other public characters typically oversimplify and lead people to draw conclusions based on data that we can assess as tangible. But is it fair to question whether our leaders influence policy because of deep-seated sentiments, biases, or other notions such as honor? Michael Chapman does exactly that in his recent piece dealing with Henry Stimson's "fidgets" over how to deal with Japanese expansion in Manchuria during his tenure as President Herbert Hoover's Secretary of State (729). He argues that rather than work within realpolitik designs, Stimson "acted to satisfy a string of personal affronts to his honor" as he constantly meddled over the Japanese military action at Shenyang in 1931 (729). In this episode, Japanese military units had branched out from their railway station posts in a supposed effort to preserve order. They ultimately created a Japanese vassal state in northern China that launched what scholars, including David M. Kennedy, interpret as the striking of the match that began the "fuse that would detonate the attack on Pearl Harbor" almost a decade later (729).

Dramatic changes following World War I ushered in a new global era where European domination remained but stood on a severely weakened foundation, especially from intellectual and military-political perspectives. Yet the early 1930s stood out as an acutely intense period. Global depression, European instability, Bolshevism, and a host of other problems caused complete upheaval in the international system; in its wake, American leaders—Stimson included—had every reason to doubt what America's role should or even could be. Chapman's task of showing how honor affected policy rather

than economics, for example, is daunting for obvious reasons. His resulting article does a laudable job of bringing in some of Stimson's personal history in a way that persuasively argues the relevance of personality in this history. Coming from an elite family, and having an equally exclusive set of friends, Stimson, who was born shortly after the Civil War ended, grew up surrounded by a sense of accomplishment and power that characterized the policymakers of the era's New Imperialism. Stimson's time as Governor of the Philippines (1927–9), in particular, functioned as a center point, at least for this reviewer, in how and why Stimson viewed Asia (America's backyard) with a particular interest. Chapman argues that Stimson saw the Japanese as intelligent and enterprising people who imitated the West and therefore used rationale and logic as beacons for governance. No other Asian people took so passionately to Western values as the Japanese; therefore, Japanese successes reinforced the view among elites such as Stimson that other Asians, including Filipinos and Chinese, required further civilizing, educating, and uplifting. Finally, the Japanese worked to fight against any further spread of Soviet Communism in Asia and historically acted to help maintain order in accordance with Great Power norms.

Despite a generally positive impression of the Japanese people's adoption of so-called Western values, Chapman also works out a fine line to show how much contempt Stimson had for Japan, at least after Shenyang. Stimson's attempt to broker stability including his use of diplomatic notes brought disdain and contempt from Japanese statesmen. In these cases, the Japanese were acting in accordance to their so-called Asian values that went squarely against the Western sensibilities of respect and authority. Stimson never seemed to realize, though, that his diplomacy was less than first-rate and his calls for peace lacked the sort of flexibility required to tackle a truly difficult situation. This becomes clear as Chapman takes us down the path of how emotions handicapped policymaking for Stimson. Additionally, harkening back to late nineteenth-century trends in American foreign policy, we can understand how Stimson shaped his opinions of the Japanese once they asserted their prowess in Asia in disregard of American interests. While convenient bulwarks against Soviet Bolshevism, in Stimson's opinion Japanese soldiers had no business policing China because that would be an insult to America's charge and moral duty to maintain a completely open door to international trade. Finally, Chapman discusses how, despite the fact that (or perhaps because) China (especially Manchuria) was a low priority matter, Stimson's fidgeting remained unconstrained by President Hoover and yet had profound ramifications that no one foresaw in the depths of Depression.

Chapman's well-written work tackles a complex topic in as straightforward (and concise) a manner as this reviewer can imagine. This topic is important partly because the Tanaka Memorial, the alleged planning document that outlined Japanese expansion in mid-1927, still holds some credibility and because the entire episode of Japanese aggression in Asia squarely wrestles with arguments of American responsibility for World War II. Of course, Stimson left office along with Hoover and only returned much later in 1940 as Secretary of War; therefore, Franklin Roosevelt's administration should

otherwise endure the most blame for a flawed American foreign policy. Yet, did Stimson's meddling alienate the liberal Japanese government at a particularly acute time and help give impetus to militaristic military commanders in this critical early stage? If true then it is not hard to see how this break in authority would have allowed jingoists in Tokyo to sway Japanese public opinion in favor of the military. Chapman shows how Stimson's decision-making process was flawed and elaborates that "a neutral stance" together with a bringing Chinese and Japanese negotiators together, seems more likely to have "retained Japan as an ally" (746). An "angry" and "moralizing" Stimson took offense to supposed Japanese insults to his honor, and instead of being cool-headed and unemotional, he interfered and aggravated an already tense situation (746). Sun Tzu would agree with Chapman, I imagine, for he argued that "a misplaced sense of honour brings only shame," or, in this case, a restless and emotive foreign policy.<sup>1</sup>

Overall, Chapman's article stands as a great foundation for further exploration into American foreign policy of the 1930s. His look at what influenced Stimson's choices from a character perspective is convincing, and I could envision an obvious expansion of this article into a larger monograph. Moreover, rather than simply look at what drove Stimson, we should ask ourselves whether Stimson's behavior was typical of other elites at the time or since. If so, it is time that we explore more carefully some of the other key actors in recent history because we might be surprised by how much character matters.

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<sup>1</sup> Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*. Trans. James Trapp. (New York: Chartwell Book, Inc., 2012), 51.