

About the September 13, 1941, Memorandum

by Olive L. Schuler

By September, the situation in [the Department of] F[ar] E[astern Affairs] had reached a critical stage as the left wing of the second floor of the Department of State, adjacent to the White House and now the Eisenhower Building, continued to sound more and more like a mental institution as panic reigned.

It was obvious that Max Hamilton, who seemed to have a Jekyll and Hyde personality, was under intense pressure, not only of his own making but, because he feared his immediate superior, Stanley Hornbeck, also a despot, who was highly opinionated and arrogant, and who could and did give him heavy doses of his own medicine. Hamilton found these difficult to take. It was a tragedy for the United States that at such a critical time, our country was so ill-served by men who were alleged to be knowledgeable on Japan and were not, and had to deal with Grew's coup d'état of January 27, a very serious offense on Grew's part they all had to sink or swim together.

Though there were able Japanese specialists in the Foreign Service at the time other than Frank [Schuler], not only were Hornbeck and Hamilton not convinced that they should look to these people – far be it from them to confess to their own inadequacies – but they were too self-righteous in character to listen to anyone else. It was a case of – if you are around long enough and don't get into trouble with higher-ups, you are bound to rise to the top without credentials.

After the attack on Pearl Harbor, there was talk of requesting Hornbeck's resignation. He had written a memorandum to the Secretary of State on November 22, fifteen days before the attack, that "Japan would never attack the United States." (Several years after, February of 1944, a group of career specialists on the Far East struck, upon discovering that, under a new reorganization plan, that they were going to be working under Hornbeck. Hornbeck put up a fight but was eventually sacked "upstairs" with the title of advisor on the Far East, a job in name only.)

Early in September of 1941, Frank was becoming more and more concerned that the talks weren't getting anywhere; that these

“conversations,” were taking on an air of reality they didn’t deserve. There was also the issue that though the U.S. might be trying to bluff the Japanese in order to gain additional time to arm., the Japanese were becoming more successful at their game of bluffing by making us believe they were sincere in their alleged desire for peace.

Frank discussed these points with Cabot Coville, his senior in FE. Cabot finally came up with the idea of writing a memo through Hamilton to Hull apprising him of the fact that there was a difference of opinion in FE, an opinion opposed to the continuing appeasement policy. The thrust of the memo was to the effect that if the U.S. continued its policy toward Japan which amounted to appeasement, China, of extreme importance to the U.S. and the west for economic, political and cultural reasons, would be lost.

The memo was written and the concurring officers were named in a short covering memo.

Arriving at his desk that Monday morning, Hamilton, spotting the memo on the top of other papers reporting on the weekend’s activities, read it and went berserk. All hell broke loose, someone said later.

Hamilton pressed his buzzer impatiently. His secretary rushed in knowing she was facing another crisis. “Get them all here, immediately!” She didn’t have to ask who. She knew.

As the “culprits” filed into his office Hamilton didn’t say a word, prolonging a pause, keeping everyone on edge. Hamilton was a handsome man, prematurely grey and always dressed impeccably. As he walked the wide hallways of the Department of State one would never have guessed he madman he could become when dealing with his responsibilities inside his office. The fact that he knew nothing about Japan was a factor none would dare suggest.

Starting out with the statement that he’d read the memorandum, he then went into a tirade about the memo. They didn’t have the information he had had, therefore, could not judge the situation as he could, adding that they had no right to interfere. As he continued his shouting and ranting he had lost sight of the fact that he could, at that moment have “killed” the memo since the officers had not by-passed him. Their motives were sincere. They

merely wanted to present another point of view which they hoped would come to the attention of Secretary Hull.

But, Hamilton was too caught up in his own dilemma and obviously beyond his depth in dealing with the Japanese in such complicated negotiations. He couldn't even rely on Joe Ballantine, a Japan expert but not a "leader," more a toady who carried out the orders of his superiors. "Bally," as he was referred to, would eventually become extremely useful in the cover-up activity. Bally was the work-horse and could be depended upon to do any job he was asked to do.

Suddenly, Hamilton changed his tactics. He told the group of officers that they could either withdraw their memo or apologize. This was followed by a deafening silence and broken by Cabot Coville's precipitate decision to resign from the Foreign Service. This struck the group like a bolt of lightning. Hamilton seemed to be completely taken aback. Caught in his own petard, he hadn't expected the situation to go that far. Cabot, who was pompous and deliberative to a fault, could generally be counted on to stay "in line."

Cabot's resignation completely changed the mood of the group. With the exception of one officer who was not there, all apologized except Frank, as an indication that he was not prepared to apologize and compromise his beliefs.

Arriving in front of the Department of State on Pennsylvania Avenue at five to pick Frank up, I spotted Frank and Cabot coming down the long stretch of steps leading to the sidewalk. As they neared the car, I noticed a mischievous grin on Cabot's face.

Moving over to the passenger side of the front seat, I greeted Cabot as Frank came up behind him. Frank said, "Cabot has something to tell you."

"Really! I hope it's good, if not important!" I had no idea of the gravity of what he was going to tell me.

"I've resigned from the Service."

"No! Whatever for?"

“I’ll let Frank tell you all about it. I see Lil coming to pick me up. See you.”
and he went off.

After Frank got in the car I quickly said, “Frank, what in the world happened?”

“It was over the memo. I couldn’t believe it when he did it.”

“Tell me what happened? I find it hard to believe.”

As we drove up Connecticut Avenue to our apartment, Frank went over what had transpired, closing with, “I suppose it was naïve of us to think that Hamilton would or could understand. Well, we tried, I tried. There’s really nothing we can do.”

The next day, Tuesday, Cabot reverted to type and withdrew his resignation.

It would be thirty years before Frank would see the September 13 memo again. He found it in the National Archives. The memo revealed that Hamilton, the same day, had penned a note in the upper right-hand margin –

Substance communicated
orally to the
Secretary. Sept. 15, 1941.

MMH

There is no way of knowing, in light of the revisionism that went on in FE after the attack, whether or not this notation was put there on that date or in the course of revising the files after the attack.

It was in the mid-forties, while Frank was working for the Office of War Information, an assignment FE had tried to block, that Wilfrid Fleisher, an old friend of Frank’s from his Japan days, told Frank about Max Hamilton. Wilfrid, then Washington correspondent for the New World Herald Tribune, said that often, in his rounds in State to gather information for his column, he would run into Max who, by that time was a pathetic figure, bent over, and looking many years older than his age, would approach him in the hallways and tell him how he “had tried to warn of the impending disaster with Japan, but that no one would listen.”

When Wilfrid told Frank this, Frank said. “I wouldn’t want to see Max if your description is accurate. It would be too painful for me to see him like that.”

Eight days after the attack, Drew Pearson, in his Washington Merry-Go-Round column in the Times Herald, carried the story of the September 13 memo. Frank and I were in Antigua in the Carribean at the time. Frank received a number of letters from friends congratulating him. Little did they know that Frank would pay a heavy price for the role he’d played in trying to warn of Japan’s hostile intentions.