

## The Open Door Policy and the Boxer Rebellion

BY THE END OF THE 19TH CENTURY the United States had gained an overseas empire and become a world power. The young empire soon flexed its diplomatic muscles on the international scene by proposing what became known as an Open Door Policy toward China. Starting in the 1840s, European nations had taken advantage of China's weak imperial government to demand special trading rights and commercial privileges. Soon several nations had carved out "spheres of influence" on the Chinese mainland. This put other nations, including the United States, at a disadvantage in the profitable China trade. In 1899 U.S. Secretary of State John Hay issued a "circular note" to the governments of nations with commercial interests in China. The note proposed, essentially, that China be treated as a "free-trade zone" with equal

trading access for all nations. Dubbed the "Open Door Policy," Hay's proposal was generally accepted by March 1900. Hay issued a second, more detailed note in July 1900 in the midst of a major crisis in China. This was the so-called Boxer Rebellion—an uprising by Chinese angered by what they saw as foreign domination of their country. The Open Door Policy lasted barely three decades. The United States and other nations recognized Japan's "special interests" in China in 1917, largely as a reward for Japan's joining the Allies in World War I. In 1932 Japan invaded the northern Chinese region of Manchuria. International protest was not backed up by military force, and when Japan extended its conquests in China in 1937 the Open Door era was over for good.



U.S. Marines fight Chinese Boxers outside Peking, 1900.

### Fact Box—The Boxer Rebellion

**The Rebels:** Crudely armed members of the I-Hoch'uan ("Righteous and Harmonious Fists," mistranslated as "Boxers" by Westerners) and other revolutionary groups seeking to overthrow the ruling Manchu Dynasty and expel foreigners from China.

**The Allies:** A multinational force of 18,000 troops from the United States (1,500 men, mostly from units in the Philippines), Japan, Britain, France, Russia, Germany, Italy, and Austria-Hungary.

**The Fighting:** Landing at Taku, the allies advanced along a railroad line from Tientsin to Peking. Skirmishing with Boxer fighters, they reached the gates of Peking on August 14 and freed the legations on August 16.

**The Casualties:** The Allied forces lost about 80 dead, including eight Americans. The number of Boxers, Chinese Christians, etc., killed is unknown but probably several thousand.

**The Cost:** The "Boxer Protocol" of 1901 led to the execution of 10 Chinese officials who had cooperated with the Boxers, expanded the rights of foreign nations in China, and called for payment of about \$340 million (in 1900 dollars) to the Allied nations as punishment. (Little was actually paid, and the United States donated its share to educational efforts in China.)

**The President and the Boxers:** Among the Americans trapped in the besieged legations was future president Herbert Hoover (then a mining engineer) and his wife Lou Henry Hoover.

### Timeline

**1785** First American trading voyage to China. Only one Chinese port, Canton, is open to foreign trade.

**1840–1843** Following its defeat in the Opium Wars, China opens four more ports to British vessels.

**1899** U.S. Secretary of State John Hay issues the first "Open-Door Note."

**1900 May** Boxer rebels in northern China kill more than 200 Europeans, Americans, and Chinese Christians.

**June 17** Boxer forces begin their siege of the legations (the area in which foreign citizens live) in Peking (now Beijing).

**July** Hay issues a second Circular Note to "powers cooperating in China."

**August** A multinational relief force fights its way into Beijing and ends the siege.

**1901** U.S. representatives at the international Peking Congress oppose moves to limit China's independence in revenge for the rebellion.

**1911** The Manchu Dynasty falls and China becomes a republic.

**1917** The Lansing-Ishii Agreement between the United States and Japan recognizes Japan's "special interest" in China.

**1931** Japanese forces invade the Chinese province of Manchuria.

**1938** The Open Door Policy ends when Japanese troops move into China's heartland.

### The Open Door Policy—Key Points

- Equal trading access in each nation's "spheres of interest of influence" in China
- Preservation of China's independence and territorial integrity
- Protection of rights granted to "friendly powers" by China
- International cooperation to bring "permanent safety and peace" to China