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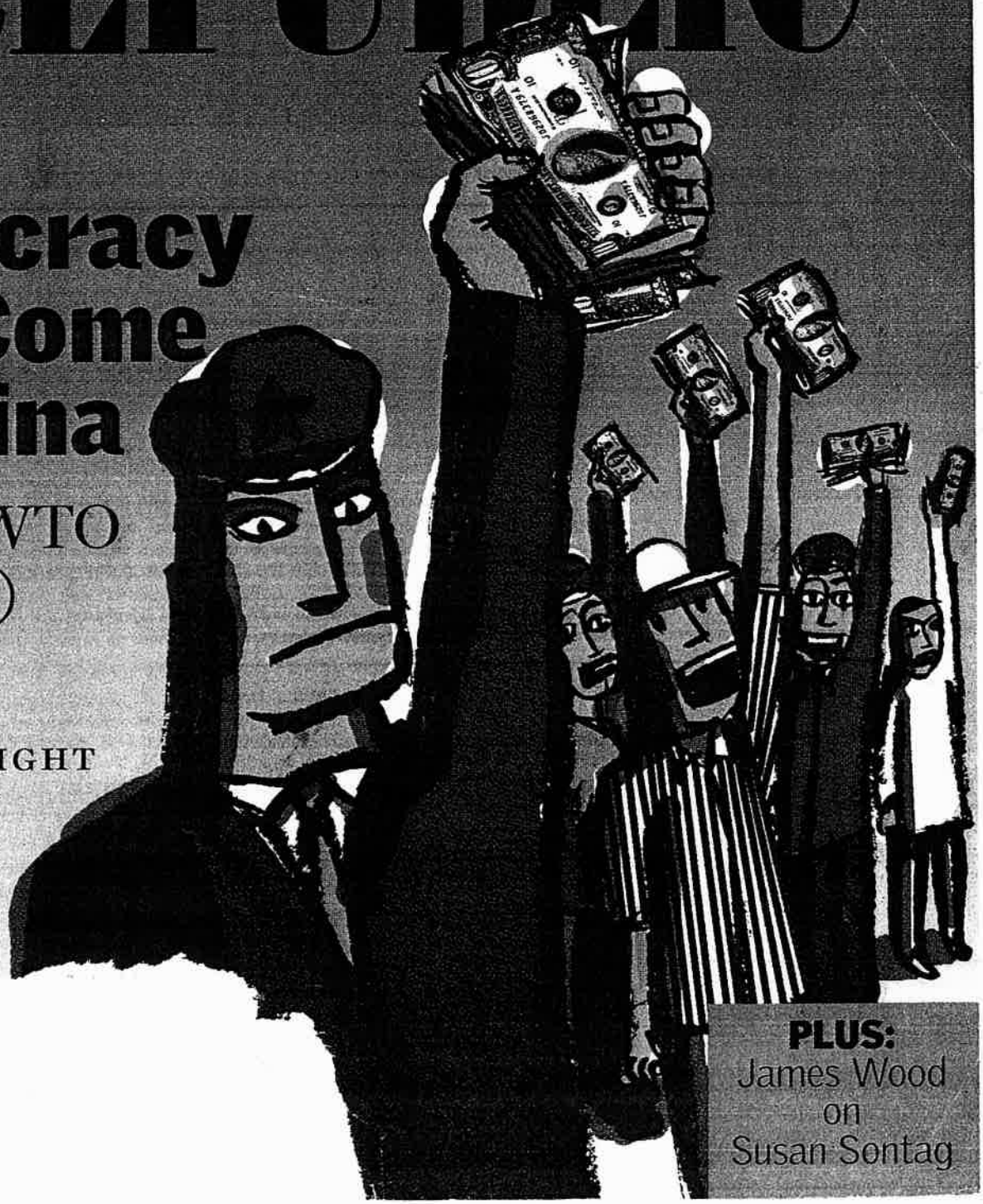
Why Democracy Will Come to China

(And the WTO Will Help)

By

ROBERT WRIGHT



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priced lobbyists. Even the elite media, trapped in an increasingly desperate battle for market share and advertising dollars, has abandoned its traditional sense of civic responsibility and turned more and more of its attention to scandal, popular culture, and lifestyle.

Most important, the decline of the disinterested elite has affected government's work. As late as the '80s, Congress and the White House could still safely resort to those esteemed creatures of the Progressive era: government-appointed commissions of business leaders, former officials, and policy experts that would tackle problems on which politicians couldn't reach agreement. But such commissions cannot work if representatives of business act simply to protect the interests of their corporations. When Congress and the White House could not agree in 1998 on whether or how to tax sales made over the Internet, congressional leaders and the White House appointed the private Advisory Commission on Electronic Commerce to suggest a proposal. Republican leaders in Congress stacked the commission with lobbyists like Grover Norquist of Americans for Tax Reform and Stan Sokul of the Direct Marketing Association. Together, Norquist, Sokul, and several business representatives, relying on a requirement that the commission reach a two-thirds majority, have so far kept it from seriously considering a proposal to tax purchases made over the Internet, even though a majority on the commission favor it.

The new K Street elite has also created gridlock in Congress itself, turning most progressive proposals into battles between business and labor and making enlightened compromise—on issues ranging from health care to campaign finance—rare. In 1946, liberal Democrats proposed an overly ambitious bill for full employment. Republicans and Southern Democrats blocked it in Congress, but CED engineered a constructive compromise, the Employment Act of 1946, which created, among other things, the Council of Economic Advisors. By contrast, in 1994, when Clinton's equally ambitious health care plan came under withering attack from Republicans in Congress and the health-insurance lobby, no similar elite organization was able to advance a compromise. The bill died, and along with it the opportunity for comprehensive reform.

Will things change? Probably—the question is how. The lesson of the McCain surge, like the Ross Perot, Pat Buchanan, and even Gingrich boomlets before it, is that in America today there exists a deep popular antagonism toward Washington special interests, and that sentiment can be mobilized for various agendas—from the nativist right to the libertarian center to the protectionist left. In times of prosperity, like today, this antagonism is relatively benign. In times of recession, like the early '90s, it is a vehicle for uglier resentments. We are today in a moment not unlike that of the early twentieth century. Mass anger at special interests continues to well up, creating the potential for demagoguery but also for genuine reform. With John McCain returning to Washington after his national crusade against its corrupt and arrogant ways, the moment for a new public-spirited establishment is ripe. For all our sakes, business and labor, liberal and conservative, Democrat and Republican, let's hope it doesn't go to waste. ■

Why China will get democracy too.

Same Difference

By ROBERT WRIGHT

> "By joining the WTO, China is not simply agreeing to import more of our products; it is agreeing to import one of democracy's most cherished values—economic freedom.... We know how much the Internet has changed America, and we are already an open society. Imagine how much it could change China."
>
> —Bill Clinton

> "Perhaps some day we can drop the idealistic blather and admit that trade with China is not about democracy; it's about trade."
>
> —Robert Kagan

LET'S GRANT ROBERT KAGAN—a conservative columnist who opposes President Clinton's policy of engagement—his wish. Let's stipulate that much of the political muscle behind the drive to normalize trade relations with China comes from those who profit from trade, such as the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. And, while we're at it, let's stipulate that much of the political muscle *against* normalized trade relations also comes from those with a financial stake in the issue: labor unions. Just as the first group disingenuously claims that normalized trade would help democracy and human rights in China, the second group disingenuously claims that normalized trade would hurt democracy and human rights in China.

Now we can get on to the big question: Which side's "idealistic blather" is right? Will granting China permanent most-favored-nation status and letting it into the World Trade Organization aid or impede human rights and democracy?

Lurking beneath this question is a deeper one—usually unspoken—about whether the Chinese are, well, *different*. Some Chinese officials themselves say "Western values" are alien to Asian society; they act as if they could import economic freedom without importing its Western corollary, political freedom. And some opponents of engagement seem to believe them. They think China can remain authoritarian indefinitely while opening its economy to information

technology—like the Internet—that has had sharply pluralizing effects in the West.

And the "China is different" school can point to what looks like compelling historical evidence. China has, for most of two millennia, preserved vast, centralized rule. It seemed to sleep through Europe's Enlightenment and industrial revolution. Its core spiritual tradition, Confucianism, has long emphasized authority and social order. And so on. Such themes have in recent years been marshaled—by the political scientist Samuel Huntington, the historian David Landes, and others—to paint a picture of Chinese culture as deeply distinctive.

In the current context, one oft-cited historical difference seems particularly ominous. The printing press, an early analogue of the Internet, greatly dispersed power in Europe, yet it had no such dramatic effect in China. But a closer look shows that this difference is not rooted in anything special about "the Chinese" and for the most part isn't rooted in "Chinese culture" per se. Understanding what it is rooted in helps explain why, this time around, the information technology revolution that is liberalizing the West will, at least in the long run, liberalize China as well.

THE UPSHOT OF Gutenberg's movable-type printing press is fairly well-known. By making mass communication cheap, the press empowered splinter groups. One noted splinter group was led by Martin Luther. In 1517, the press circulated his *95 Theses*. The rest is history.

The press was a challenge not just for big religions but for big empires. It helped Calvinists in the Netherlands rebel against Hapsburg rule and Protestants in various German states agitate against the Holy Roman Emperor. As the centuries rolled by, life grew only more perilous for multinational empires, and one big reason was the printing press.

The press helped crystallize and fortify nationalism in several ways. First, it tamped down the dialectical differences of the Middle Ages. By standardizing language across broad swaths of land, it created, in the words of political scientist Benedict Anderson, "unified fields of exchange and communication." Second, the press let news travel so fast within those fields that national groups came to be collectively self-conscious—"imagined communities," in Anderson's phrase. Third, it allowed those communities to rapidly mobilize.

The Internet is in some ways the printing press in spades. It does what the press did—lower the cost of processing information, thus easing the organization of interest groups—only more so. It can work silently and suddenly. When members of the Falun Gong spiritual sect magically materialized in Beijing to protest oppression, they were there courtesy of the Net. In theory, as the Internet penetrates more and more of Chinese society, it should spawn more and more pluralism.

But, if China is indeed susceptible to such shake-ups, why didn't the printing press shake up the country in the first place? Moveable type was invented in China centuries before it appeared in Europe. But there was no great rift within Confucianism like the rift within Christianity. There was no upheaval comparable to Europe's nationalist revolts. The monolithic rule of a vast land—which the age of print made impractical in Europe—continued in China. Why?

One reason was a vestige of an earlier technological threshold—the evolution of writing. To a large extent, the Chinese script is ideographic: characters typically stand for concepts, not sounds. So in China's "age of print"—a millennium ago, during the Sung dynasty—printers had to compose a page of text from a menu of thousands of characters, as opposed to the hundred or so that European printers would later use. This was so cumbersome that many printers preferred to use woodblocks, getting one freshly carved for each page of text.

In other words, the economics of printing in China weren't fully Gutenbergian; it took a large printing to justify the high fixed cost of a print run. It is debatable whether the first phase of Luther's rebellion—when printers in several cities took it upon themselves to do small printings of his *95 Theses*—would have made economic sense if German script were ideographic. Of course, you would still expect the widespread use of the printing press in Sung China to have pluralistic tendencies—but not *as* pluralistic as in Europe centuries later.

China's ideographic script had another key consequence. Because its symbols referred to concepts, it transcended linguistic differences. No matter how distant two Chinese, no matter how different their dialects, they could read each other's contracts, shipping bills, and correspondence, not to mention the same books and periodicals. So the press helped foster a "unified field of exchange and communication" *across* linguistic boundaries, not within them. But for this fact, linguistic differences in the age of print might have fomented nationalist sentiment, as in Europe. (The common claim that Europe's relative linguistic diversity is due to its having more geographic barriers than China loses force if you actually examine a map of China and see that it is full of mountain ranges.)

CHINA'S GOVERNMENT, FOR its part, had long worked to reinforce the naturally unifying effect of an ideographic script. It kept the script standardized across dialects even as phonetic elements crept in. It had also, back in the seventh century, built the Grand Canal, which linked the Yellow and Yangtze Rivers, keeping China economically cohesive. But perhaps the main reason the printing press didn't prove more disruptive is that, in two senses, the government responded deftly to the challenge it posed.

First, the government showed religious tolerance. In the Sung era, some preachers did circulate printed tracts advancing upstart theologies. Chinese authorities could have viewed this as a threat to Confucianism, the official state philosophy. But, as the historian Peter C. Perdue has noted, they proved more liberal than the Christian authorities of 1517, allowing people to worship their own deities so long as their religious practice didn't upset the social order.

The second government adjustment to the pluralizing tendencies of print was what you might call institutionalized pluralism. When literacy spreads across a nation, power usually does, too. (That's why, during the U.S. Civil War, it was illegal in some Southern states to teach blacks to read.) China's Sung government, facing a growing—and increasingly affluent—literate class, reformed itself in ways that at

once acknowledged this diffusion of power and controlled it. The government catered to the new literati by making entry to the civil service more meritocratic. This diminished nepotism and, along with a widening market-based prosperity, eroded the power of China's hereditary elite. As the historian Charles O. Hucker has said of this period, "The role of printing in the social leveling process can hardly be overemphasized."

In a sense, the government was just co-opting the literate class. In studying for civil-service exams, young men had to master Confucian doctrines that would make them obedient servants of social stability. Still, in exchange for this service, the government granted real influence; during Sung times the civil service, now more broadly representative of the population, acquired unprecedented power. As the historian Jacques Gernet noted, "The emperors themselves played only a secondary role, leaving the limelight to their ministers." The government also ventilated itself. Three separate agencies were charged with assessing citizens' complaints, a process elaborately insulated from the emperor's interference.

Broadly speaking, then, China responded to its print revolution in the same way that President Clinton hopes it will respond to the Internet revolution. First, it used information technology to prosper; the press helped spread technical knowledge, and growing literacy lubricated commerce and entrepreneurship. (Sung China was way ahead of the West technologically and economically.) Second, the resulting diffusion of power across the society had a pluralizing effect, forcing the central government to become more broadly responsive to citizens. To be sure, the Sung era didn't give rise to a modern representative democracy. Then again, Europe's printing press—unveiled around 1450—didn't accomplish that overnight, either.

ON THE OTHER hand, Western Europe did *eventually* get modern representative democracy and extensive political liberties. What happened to China? Among other things, the Ming dynasty.

In thumbnail histories, the Ming era, which stretched from 1368 to 1644, is depicted as a time of technological stagnation, authoritarianism, and a kind of solipsism, famously symbolized in 1433, when China ended oceanic exploration and started shunning foreign contact. In truth, these themes are a bit overdrawn. Still, skeptics of Clinton's engagement policy might well ask why, if China is now expected to follow the logic of Western economic and political development, it didn't do so earlier. Why did it spend much of a millennium failing to achieve what the West achieved: an industrial revolution and liberal democracy? Can we, as Landes argued in *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations*, attribute this stunted growth to something deep within China's cultural character?

My own answer—no—is laid out in a chapter of my book *Nonzero: The Logic of Human Destiny*. (That part of the book is available at *www.nonzero.org/asia.htm*.) The Cliffs Notes version of my argument can be seen in a simple dynamic that many historians (even Landes, oddly) accept but whose full import is rarely drawn out. That dynamic is competitive development. Because Europe fragmented into many distinct but interactive polities, stagnation was not a luxury rulers could afford. The neighborhood was too crowded; if you didn't advance technologically and economically and grant the freedoms required for such advancement, you would get squashed. Though Ming China did face foreign threats—including annoyingly persistent barbarians—it didn't have nearly the incentive for "defensive modernization" that European states did.

Besides, even if China *had* felt more motivated, it wouldn't have had many neighbors to draw ideas from. Europe, by contrast, was a hotbed of competitive laboratories for inventing new technologies, new economic theories, new political ideas—all of which tended to spread across national bounds, once proven effective.

In fact, England, which beat continental Europe to the industrial revolution, did so partly with tools taken from the Continent. Britain's pioneering steam engine drew on a Frenchman's earlier demonstration that steam could move a piston. And its intellectual-property laws weren't homegrown, either. Patent law had sprung up in Venice in 1474 and then spread across Europe, encouraging invention.

China lacked such neighborly inspiration. What's more, its relative isolation spared it from a dilemma that precisely foreshadows its current one: in Europe during the industrial revolution, information technology tightened the link between economic and political liberty. As the industrial revolution unfolded, the printing press not only hastened technical advance by publicizing new ideas; it also smoothed day-to-day commerce by spreading business news, shipping schedules, and the like. Keeping presses free enough to perform these services well while restricting the political use of the press was difficult at best. Indeed, England's especially free presses, and its greater respect for political rights, may well explain why it led Europe into the industrial revolution. In any event, England's combination of political and economic liberty became the paradigm for prosperity. Slowly and fitfully, this paradigm would spread across Europe. China, off in its own sparse neighborhood, could ignore the paradigm without getting clobbered by some neighbor that had embraced it.

But, as technology shrank the world, China's solitude couldn't last—a point made forcefully by Western gunships in the nineteenth century and made just as inescapably by commercial vessels today. China now feels competitive heat across continents and oceans. It must face the same logic the rest of the world faces: In the age of the Internet, even more than in the age of industry and print, granting enough economic liberty for cutting-edge prosperity while denying political liberty is a tall order.

And that's not all that has changed. Though China's ideographic script remains a burden—ever try to use a Chinese keyboard?—it doesn't multiply the costs of communication nearly the way it did during the Sung era. Besides, voice-recognition software, which is now approaching practicality, will soon let the Chinese publish Web pages and send e-mail with Western ease.

In short, two things that help explain China's distinctive past—its ideographic script and its geographic isolation from the modern world—are of vanishing relevance. And that is

why Clinton is not crazy to expect a culture with a technological, economic, and political history so different from the West's to move toward the Western way.

Still, Europe's age of print offers one big caution: When an information technology strengthens the link between liberty and prosperity, rulers can spend a long time in denial, trying to have their cake and eat it, too. Even after England's liberal formula for economic success had proven itself, Napoleon was doing things like seizing the newspaper *Journal des débats* and renaming it *Le Journal de l'empire*. And, more recently, the Soviet Union showed that, for a while at least, you can stifle freedom and keep industry humming. That no such attempts to have it both ways have ultimately succeeded is reassuring, but that they've succeeded for years is not. Even assuming that membership in the WTO sends more information technology into China, its leaders could spend a long time trying to evade the moral of the story.

In fact, they probably will. After all, the free use of the Internet would not only threaten the Communist Party's preeminence but also stoke separatist sentiment in, for example, the Muslim province of Xinjiang. Unless you view the Chinese regime as much more selfless than the average authoritarian regime, you would expect it to react to the Internet as it's been reacting lately—in skittish and reactionary fashion.

This points to an odd feature of the rhetoric of hawkish opponents of engagement. Kagan and others have mocked pleas from Secretary of State Madeleine Albright that we be patient—that we see change in China as "a movie, not a snapshot," that we not allow temporary backsliding on human rights to discourage us. Apparently, Kagan sarcastically writes, "it's one of those movies in which nothing happens for a very, very long time." Yet his own view of the Chinese leadership—as ruthlessly bent on self-preservation—implies that the movie *will* unfold, slowly. There may be something paradoxical about Clinton's suggesting, as he did last week, that China's recent oppression shows engagement is working, but he is, in a sense, right.

The core concern of Kagan—and of many other opponents of engagement these days—is international security. Kagan says that by "rewarding" China with permanent most-

Red and the Blue

FOR YEARS NOW, congressional trade wars have had a particular structure: isolationist Republicans and protectionist Democrats on one side, the free-trade establishments of both parties on the other. And, last year, the fight over granting China "permanent normal trading relations" (PNTR) status seemed to be following the familiar pattern. Anti-globalization Democrats were energized by the shutdown of the World Trade Organization meeting in Seattle. Republican opposition to the war in Kosovo seemed to confirm the GOP's isolationist drift. Free traders feared the wings might be growing, but at least they thought they knew the terms of the fight. In fact, in recent months those terms have shifted dramatically. The crucial anti-PNTR argument is no longer about protectionism or isolationism; it's about national security. Last year, most observers thought the threat to free trade with China would come from rising nationalism. Today it comes from rising internationalism.

You can see the trend in both parties, but it's most significant in the GOP, because Republicans traditionally provide the largest bloc of free-trade votes. After the Gingrich takeover, Dick Armey-, Cato Institute-, *Wall Street Journal*-style libertarianism held many congressional Republicans in thrall. Spreading the magic of the market, at home and abroad, was the GOP watchword. Some worried that this market internationalism might lose ground to Buchanan-style isolationism. But instead it is losing ground to a "neo-Reaganism" that casts China in the role of the Soviet Union and says America needs to subordinate crass economic concerns and devote itself to keeping Beijing at bay. The intellectual and political leaders of this school—columnist and *Weekly Standard* contributor Robert Kagan, former Senate Foreign Relations Committee staffer William Triplett, and former congressional aide Edward Timperlake—sometimes call themselves the "Blue Team," a term borrowed from the Chinese military. And they've succeeded—with some help from the authorities in Beijing—in making PNTR a debate less about America's trade deficit or even China's human rights abuses than about the growing regional power of the People's Republic.

Although he's officially undecided on PNTR, one of the Blue Team's strongest congressional allies is Christopher Cox, chairman of the House Policy Committee. Cox advocates abandoning America's long-held commitment to "strategic ambiguity," the policy by which the United States refuses to state specifically how it would respond to a Chinese attack on Taiwan. His Policy Committee, which is supposed to represent the official position of House Republicans, regularly rolls out briefs painting China as a danger to international stability and blasting the "Clinton-Gore appeasement policy." The committee even has its own think tank—the Congressional Policy Advisory Board—filled with aging luminaries from the Reagan and Bush administrations. The board's most recent policy statement on China recommends further military ties to Taiwan. But even though it is supposed to be an arm of the GOP leadership—and House GOP leaders Dennis Hastert, Dick Armey, and Tom DeLay back PNTR—the board has conspicuously failed to endorse permanent free trade with China. "The Beijing government is testing to see how far they can push before someone pushes back," warns Cox.

It's not just the Republicans who want to push back. Pennsylvania Democratic Representative John Murtha voted for GATT in 1994 and has consistently supported most-favored-nation (MFN) trading status for China. But he's a Vietnam veteran, the ranking Democrat on the National Security Subcommittee, and a foreign policy hawk. And last week he came out against PNTR strictly on national-security grounds, emphasizing his anger about China's chemical-weapon and missile proliferation and its "grossly irresponsible conduct" toward Taiwan. Now Murtha has joined with another Democrat, Taiwanese-born David Wu, to form a bipartisan group of representatives who may have previously supported MFN but are against PNTR partly because of China's actions abroad. They are gathering signatures for an anti-PNTR letter,

favored-nation status after its recent threats to Taiwan, we'll get more belligerence. This concern, by itself, would be easy to address. Congress, while passing Clinton's normal-trade-relations legislation, could pass another bill saying that if China attacks Taiwan, tariffs on Chinese goods will automatically rise to 100 percent, and the United States will stoically bear any sanctions the WTO might authorize in response. Assuming the passage of such a law weren't deemed legally incompatible with U.S. membership in the WTO, it would be a more effective deterrent than anything Kagan is proposing. (Authorizing the sale of a missile defense system to Taiwan would encourage China to strike preemptively, during the lengthy period before deployment.)

But engagement poses another, dicier international-security problem. It is one Kagan and other hawks can't acknowledge, because acknowledging it would involve admitting that the core logic behind engagement is sound. The problem is that the spread of information technology, by fanning dissidence and thus destabilizing China, could empower reactionary factions inclined to lash out at Taiwan—or inclined to drum up some other enemy in an attempt to congeal a China that the Internet was breaking apart.

I think it's a risk worth taking. China, barring a complete about-face, is headed for modernization, with or without full American involvement. The danger of moving so fast as to empower reactionaries is real, but the degree of danger is too murky and fluid for us to fine-tune. And should things go bad—should China be tempted to turn inward and lash outward—its greater involvement in the global economy will make it less likely to succumb to the temptation.

In the long run, history exhibits patterns. In the short run, it is unpredictable. Sometimes all you can do is bet on the long-run patterns and hope for the best. One pattern that stretches over the past millennium is that when China has state-of-the-art information technology and is engaged in the world, its people are better off, economically and politically, than when it is not. And, in the modern world, so are the countries to which China is inextricably linked, such as the United States. ■

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and PNTR opponents say there are 30 former MFN supporters who might sign on. "The people who are undecided cite [Taiwan] as a prime reason for having misgivings about PNTR," says one top union lobbyist. "There are people who don't want to vote for PNTR and then have China attack Taiwan—that would look pretty bad."

China's recent actions have played right into those national-security fears. Just days after one of the highest-ranking U.S. delegations ever to visit China returned to the United States in late February, Beijing issued its now-infamous white paper on Taiwan. The 11,000-word document, which was opposed by China's trade ministry, threatened Taiwan with force and "drastic measures" if negotiations over reunification continued to stall—a break with China's previous position, which was that it would use force only if Taiwan sought independence or was occupied by a foreign power. The report also bashed the United States for selling arms and developing other military links to Taiwan. And China's rhetoric hasn't improved since then. The military's official newspaper recently editorialized that Beijing would "spare no effort in a blood-soaked battle" to win back Taiwan and announced a 13 percent increase in military spending. Having raised tensions with Taiwan and jeopardized PNTR in Congress, China then blamed the United States. "The United States bears unshakable responsibility for the tensions in the Taiwan Strait," the Chinese foreign minister said last week.

The threats to Taiwan are, of course, meant to influence the presidential elections there on March 18. The Chinese are terrified that the most independence-minded candidate, Chen Shui-Bian, could win. But, while the rhetoric may keep some Taiwanese from voting for Chen, it has also pushed some U.S. congressmen into the "no" column on PNTR. Lobbyists on both sides of the issue are targeting 130 members of Congress with mixed voting records on previous trade deals and on MFN—folks like Murtha. In a break with past strategy, union officials are this year playing down labor, environmental, and human rights violations and stressing that China's recent aggressiveness shouldn't be rewarded. Persecuted Christians and trade deficits are out; cold war language is in. "I think this is a total reversal of George Kennan's philosophy about communism and his policy of containment," says Bill Klinefelter, legislative and political director for the United Steelworkers, a man you'd think would be more concerned about job losses than foreign policy threats. "What we seem to be doing here is placating and appeasing the Communist hierarchy with these agreements to little or no effect."

Part of the reason for the shift is necessity. America's booming economy and record-low unemployment make the lost-jobs case much harder to argue for than it was in the early '90s, when the country was in recession, or even the mid-'90s, when downsizing was the rage. What's more, letting China into the WTO will almost certainly help the U.S. economy. How can a lobbyist for the United Auto Workers argue that reducing Chinese tariffs on American automobiles from 80 percent to 25 percent—as the Clinton deal stipulates—will kill U.S. jobs? And China's human rights and environmental situation, while as bad as ever, is not bad enough to change minds. "People already knew about the workers' rights, the environmental concerns," says one union official. "The new twist is this national-security issue."

For now, pro-labor Democrats seem happy to embrace the anti-Communist arguments of their new allies on the right. But there is a danger for the unions in this alliance. Ultimately, the hawks are concerned not with trade but with security. They could be bought off, for example, by passage of the Taiwan Security Enhancement Act, which would strengthen military ties to Taiwan. The unions, their new containment rhetoric aside, don't even have a position on the act. "We haven't examined that fully," says Klinefelter. Some Republican holdouts say they might support PNTR for China as part of a compromise that addresses their concerns about Taiwan. And, of course, they have little interest in labor's concerns about the effects of PNTR on workers. If the hawks cut a deal on Taiwan that helps pass PNTR, the unions will have fallen prey to a bait and switch. And it will be they, not the neo-Reaganites, who will truly warrant the moniker "Blue Team."

RYAN LIZZA