



## Real Change In China?

(Published in *The Washington Post*, April 26, 2007)

George F. Will

Colaboraciones n° 1690

May 11, 2007

The phrase "regime change" is associated with the doctrine of preventive war as applied to Iraq. But another sort of regime change has been the crux of U.S. policy toward China through most of the 35 years since President Richard Nixon's opening to that nation in 1972.

Since the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989, the objective of U.S. policy has been -- and often has been proclaimed to be -- the steady subversion of China's repressive regime. The cure for communism is supposed to be commerce with the capitalist world: Trade can turn China's potentially aggressive energies into constructive, pacific channels.

This faith in the power of trade to tame humanity's animal spirits has a

19th-century pedigree. Think of William Gladstone and others who thought wars would become too costly to contemplate because they would disrupt trade. In the 21st century, economic determinism (e.g., Marxism, a 19th-century dogma) is being focused on the last important regime founded by Marxists -- China.

The 19th century turned history into a proper noun -- History, a living thing with its own unfolding inevitability. Today, many see China through (perhaps rose-tinted) lenses of historicism:

Chinese leaders who oppose democracy are "on the wrong side of history" and "just as eventually the Berlin Wall fell, I just think it's inevitable" (Bill Clinton). "The case for tra-

de is not just monetary, but moral. Economic freedom creates habits of liberty. And habits of liberty create expectations of democracy. . . . Trade freely with China, and time is on our side" (George W. Bush). In China "there is an unstoppable momentum" toward democracy (Tony Blair).

The theory, which is more than wishful thinking, is that capitalism ineluctably brings about an ever-broader dispersal of information and decision-making, and requires an ethic of trust and a legal regime of promise-keeping (contracts). Those who subscribe to this theory can take some comfort from China's recent strengthening of protections of private property, which gives a sphere of sovereignty to individuals whose appetite for sovereignty, once whetted, might become a demand for a politics of popular sovereignty.

But suppose this is not so. Suppose James Mann is right to dismiss all this as the Soothing Scenario.

In his new book, "The China Fantasy: How Our Leaders Explain Away Chinese Repression," Mann is of the Moynihan School: The late Pat Moynihan spoke acerbically of Western visitors who returned from China more impressed by the absence of flies than by the absence of freedom. Mann considers the Soothing Scenario's implication -- that American investment bankers doing business in China are *necessarily* freedom fighters -- a tad too convenient.

He also distrusts the Upheaval Scenario, which is that China's regime will not succumb to a peaceful, incremental glide from Leninism to democracy but rather will perish in a spasm of economic dysfunction and political discontent. His Third Scenario is that decades from now, modernization will have made China immeasurably wealthier, and hence more geopolitically imposing, but not significantly less authoritarian.

Big business and other advocates of the Soothing Scenario use what Mann calls "the lexicon of dismissal" to refute skeptics like him: Skeptics are being "provocative" when they engage in "China bashing" that reflects a "Cold War mentality." But although the theory is that "engagement" with China will change China, Mann wonders: Who is changing whom?

The Soothing Scenario says: Tyranny requires intellectual autarky and the conscription of the public's consciousness, which is impossible now that nations are porous to cell-phones and the Internet. But Mann says companies such as Microsoft, Google and Yahoo are cooperating with the government's censorship and security monitoring.

Mann warns against "McDonald's triumphalism," the belief that because the Chinese increasingly eat like us, they are becoming like us. That is related to "the Starbucks fallacy" -- the hope that as the Chinese become accustomed to many choices of coffee, they will demand more political choices.

His most disturbing thesis is that "the newly enriched, Starbucks-sipping, apartment-buying, car-driving denizens" of the large cities that American visitors to China see will be not the vanguard of democracy but the opposition to it. There may be 300 million such denizens, but there are 1 billion mostly rural and very poor Chinese. Will the minority prospering economically under a Leninist regime think majority rule is in their interest?

Mann is rightly disdainful of many meretricious and economically motivated arguments that American elites offer for the Soothing Scenario. In his polemical mood, however, he probably underestimates the autonomous and transformative power of today's commercial culture. Still, read his book as a guide for monitoring media coverage of the 2008 Beijing Olympics, the most portentous Games since those in 1936, in Berlin.

© 2007 The Washington Post Company