

The Thirty Tyrants: The deal that the American Elite Chose to Make with China

Description

by [LEE SMITH](#)

In Chapter 5 of *The Prince*, Niccolo Machiavelli describes three options for how a conquering power might best treat those it has defeated in war. The first is to ruin them; the second is to rule directly; the third is to create “therein a state of the few which might keep it friendly to you.”

The example Machiavelli gives of the last is the friendly government Sparta established in Athens upon defeating it after 27 years of war in 404 BCE. For the upper caste of an Athenian elite already contemptuous of democracy, the city’s defeat in the Peloponnesian War confirmed that Sparta’s system was preferable. It was a high-spirited military aristocracy ruling over a permanent servant class, the helots, who were periodically slaughtered to condition them to accept their subhuman status. Athenian democracy by contrast gave too much power to the low-born. The pro-Sparta oligarchy used their patrons’ victory to undo the rights of citizens, and settle scores with their domestic rivals, exiling and executing them and confiscating their wealth.

The Athenian government disloyal to Athens’ laws and contemptuous of its traditions was known as the Thirty Tyrants, and understanding its role and function helps explain what is happening in America today.

For my last column I spoke with The New York Times’ Thomas Friedman about an [article](#) he wrote more than a decade ago, during the first year of Barack Obama’s presidency. His important piece documents the exact moment when the American elite decided that democracy wasn’t working for them. Blaming the Republican Party for preventing them from running roughshod over the American public, they migrated to the Democratic Party in the hopes of strengthening the relationships that were making them rich.

A trade consultant told Friedman: “The need to compete in a globalized world has forced the meritocracy, the multinational corporate manager, the Eastern financier and the technology entrepreneur to reconsider what the Republican Party has to offer. In principle, they have left the party, leaving behind not a pragmatic coalition but a group of ideological naysayers.”

In the more than 10 years since Friedman’s column was published, the disenchanted elite that the Times columnist identified has further impoverished American workers while enriching themselves. The one-word motto they came to live by was globalism—that is, the freedom to structure commercial relationships and social enterprises without reference to the well-being of the particular society in which they happened to make their livings and raise their children.

Undergirding the globalist enterprise was China’s accession to the World Trade Organization in 2001. For decades, American policymakers and the corporate class said they saw China as a rival, but the elite that Friedman described saw enlightened Chinese autocracy as a friend and even as a model—which was not surprising, given that the Chinese Communist Party became their source of

power, wealth, and prestige. Why did they trade with an authoritarian regime and by sending millions of American manufacturing jobs off to China thereby impoverish working Americans? Because it made them rich. They salved their consciences by telling themselves they had no choice but to deal with China: It was big, productive, and efficient and its rise was inevitable. And besides, the American workers hurt by the deal deserved to be punished—who could defend a class of reactionary and racist ideological naysayers standing in the way of what was best for progress?

Returning those jobs to America, along with ending foreign wars and illegal immigration, was the core policy promise of Donald Trump's presidency, and the source of his surprise victory in 2016. Trump was hardly the first to make the case that the corporate and political establishment's trade relationship with China had sold out ordinary Americans. Former Democratic congressman and 1988 presidential candidate Richard Gephardt was the leading voice in an important but finally not very influential [group](#) of elected Democratic Party officials and policy experts who warned that trading with a state that employed slave labor would cost American jobs and sacrifice American honor. The only people who took Trump seriously were the more than 60 million American voters who believed him when he said he'd fight the elites to get those jobs back.

What he called "The Swamp" appeared at first just to be a random assortment of industries, institutions, and personalities that seemed to have nothing in common, outside of the fact they were excoriated by the newly elected president. But Trump's incessant attacks on that elite gave them collective self-awareness as well as a powerful motive for solidarity. Together, they saw that they represented a nexus of public and private sector interests that shared not only the same prejudices and hatreds, cultural tastes and consumer habits but also the same center of gravity—the U.S.-China relationship. And so, the China Class was born.

Connections that might have once seemed tenuous or nonexistent now became lucid under the light of Trump's scorn, and the reciprocal scorn of the elite that loathed him.

A decade ago, no one would've put NBA superstar LeBron James and Apple CEO Tim Cook in the same family album, but here they are now, linked by their fantastic wealth owing to cheap Chinese manufacturing (Nike sneakers, iPhones, etc.) and a growing Chinese consumer market. The NBA's \$1.5 billion [contract](#) with digital service provider Tencent made the Chinese firm the league's biggest partner outside America. In gratitude, these two-way ambassadors shared the wisdom of the Chinese Communist Party with their ignorant countrymen. After an NBA executive tweeted in defense of Hong Kong dissidents, social justice activist King LeBron told Americans to watch their tongues. "Even though yes, we do have freedom of speech," said James, "it can be a lot of negative that comes with it."

Because of Trump's pressure on the Americans who benefited extravagantly from the U.S.-China relationship, these strange bedfellows acquired what Marxists call class consciousness—and joined together to fight back, further cementing their relationships with their Chinese patrons. United now, these disparate American institutions lost any sense of circumspection or shame about cashing checks from the Chinese Communist Party, no matter what horrors the CCP visited on the prisoners of its slave labor camps and no matter what threat China's spy services and the People's Liberation Army might pose to national security. Think tanks and research institutions like the Atlantic Council, the Center for American Progress, the EastWest Institute, the Carter Center, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, and others [gorged themselves](#) on Chinese money. The world-famous Brookings Institution had no scruples about [publishing a report](#)

funded by Chinese telecom company Huawei that praised Huawei technology.

The billions that China gave to major American research universities, like \$58 million to [Stanford](#), alarmed U.S. law enforcement, which [warned](#) of Chinese counterintelligence efforts to steal sensitive research. But the schools and their name faculty were in fact in the business of selling that research, much of it paid for directly by the U.S. government—which is why Harvard and Yale among other big-name schools appear to have [systematically underreported](#) the large amounts that China had gifted them.

Indeed, many of academia's pay-for-play deals with the CCP were not particularly subtle. In June 2020, a Harvard professor who received a research grant of \$15 million in taxpayer money was [indicted](#) for lying about his \$50,000 per month work on behalf of a CCP institution to "recruit, and cultivate high-level scientific talent in furtherance of China's scientific development, economic prosperity and national security."

But if Donald Trump saw decoupling the United States from China as a way to dismantle the oligarchy that hated him and sent American jobs abroad, he couldn't follow through on the vision. After correctly identifying the sources of corruption in our elite, the reasons for the impoverishment of the middle classes, and the threats foreign and domestic to our peace, he failed to staff and prepare to win the war he asked Americans to elect him to fight.

And because it was true that China was the source of the China Class' power, the novel coronavirus coming out of Wuhan became the platform for its coup de grace. So Americans became prey to an anti-democratic elite that used the coronavirus to demoralize them; lay waste to small businesses; leave them vulnerable to rioters who are free to steal, burn, and kill; keep their children from school and the dying from the last embrace of their loved ones; and desecrate American history, culture, and society; and defame the country as systemically racist in order to furnish the predicate for why ordinary Americans in fact deserved the hell that the elite's private and public sector proxies had already prepared for them.

For nearly a year, American officials have purposefully laid waste to our economy and society for the sole purpose of arrogating more power to themselves while the Chinese economy has [gained on America's](#). China's lockdowns had nothing to do with the difference in outcomes. Lockdowns are not public health measures to reduce the spread of a virus. They are political instruments, which is why Democratic Party officials who put their constituents under repeated lengthy lockdowns, like New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo and Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot, are signaling publicly that it is imperative they be allowed to reopen immediately now that Trump is safely gone.

That Democratic officials intentionally destroyed lives and ended thousands of them by sending the ill to infect the elderly in nursing homes is irrelevant to America's version of the Thirty Tyrants. The job was to boost coronavirus casualties in order to defeat Trump and they succeeded. As with Athens' anti-democratic faction, America's best and brightest long ago lost its way. At the head of the Thirty Tyrants was Critias, one of Socrates' best students, a poet and dramatist. He may have helped save Socrates from the regime's wrath, and yet the philosopher appears to have regretted that his method, to question everything, fed Critias' sweeping disdain for tradition. Once in power, Critias turned his nihilism on Athens and destroyed the city.

Riding the media tsunami of Trump hatred, the China Class cemented its power within state institutions

and security bureaucracies that have long been Democratic preserves.

The poisoned embrace between American elites and China began nearly 50 years ago when Henry Kissinger saw that opening relations between the two then-enemies would expose the growing rift between China and the more threatening Soviet Union. At the heart of the fallout between the two communist giants was the Soviet leadership's rejection of Stalin, which the Chinese would see as the beginning of the end of the Soviet communist system—and thus it was a mistake they wouldn't make.

Meanwhile, Kissinger's geopolitical maneuver became the cornerstone of his historical legacy. It also made him a wealthy man selling access to Chinese officials. In turn, Kissinger pioneered the way for other former high-ranking policymakers to [engage](#) in their own foreign influence-peddling operations, like [William Cohen](#), defense secretary in the administration of Bill Clinton, who greased the way for China to gain permanent most favored nation trade status in 2000 and become a cornerstone of the World Trade Organization. The Cohen Group has two of its four overseas offices in China, and includes a number of former top officials, including Trump's former Defense Secretary James Mattis, who recently [failed to disclose](#) his work for the Cohen Group when he [criticized](#) the Trump administration's "with us or against us" approach to China in an editorial. "The economic prosperity of U.S. allies and partners hinges on strong trade and investment relationships with Beijing," wrote Mattis, who was literally being paid by China for taking exactly that position.

Yet it's unlikely that Kissinger foresaw China as a cash cow for former American officials when he and President Richard M. Nixon traveled to the Chinese capital that Westerners then called Peking in 1972. "The Chinese felt that Mao had to die before they could open up," says a former Trump administration official. "Mao was still alive when Nixon and Kissinger were there, so it's unlikely they could've envisioned the sorts of reforms that began in 1979 under Deng Xiaoping's leadership. But even in the 1980s China wasn't competitive with the United States. It was only in the 1990s with the debates every year about granting China most favored nation status in trade that China became a commercial rival"—and a lucrative partner.

The chief publicist of the post-Cold War order was Francis Fukuyama, who in his 1992 book *The End of History* argued that with the fall of the Berlin Wall Western liberal democracy represented the final form of government. What Fukuyama got wrong after the fall of the Berlin Wall wasn't his assessment of the strength of political forms; rather it was the depth of his philosophical model. He believed that with the end of the nearly half-century-long superpower standoff, the historical dialectic pitting conflicting political models against each other had been resolved. In fact, the dialectic just took another turn.

Just after defeating communism in the Soviet Union, America breathed new life into the communist party that survived. And instead of Western democratic principles transforming the CCP, the American establishment acquired a taste for Eastern techno-autocracy. Tech became the anchor of the U.S.-China relationship, with CCP funding [driving Silicon Valley startups](#), thanks largely to the efforts of [Dianne Feinstein](#), who, after Kissinger, became the second-most influential official driving the U.S.-CCP relationship for the next 20 years.

In 1978, as the newly elected mayor of San Francisco, Feinstein befriended Jiang Zemin, then the mayor of Shanghai and eventually president of China. As mayor of America's tech epicenter, her ties to China helped the growing sector attract Chinese investment and made the state the world's third-largest economy. Her alliance with Jiang also helped make her investor husband, Richard Blum, a

wealthy man. As senator, she pushed for permanent MFN trade status for China by rationalizing China's human rights violations, while her friend Jiang consolidated his power and became the Communist Party's general secretary by sending tanks into Tiananmen Square. Feinstein defended him. "China had no local police," Feinstein said that Jiang had told her. "Hence the tanks," the senator from California reassuringly explained. "But that's the past. One learns from the past. You don't repeat it. I think China has learned a lesson."

Yet the past actually should have told Feinstein's audience in Washington a different story. The United States didn't trade with Moscow or allow Russians to make large campaign donations or enter into business partnerships with their spouses. Cold War American leadership understood that such practices would have opened the door to Moscow and allowed it to directly influence American politics and society in dangerous ways. Manufacturing our goods in their factories or allowing them to buy ours and ship them overseas would've made technology and intellectual property vulnerable.

But it wasn't just about jeopardizing national security; it was also about exposing America to a system contradictory to American values. Throughout the period, America defined itself in opposition to how we conceived of the Soviets. Ronald Reagan was thought crass for referring to the Soviet Union as the "Evil Empire," but trade and foreign policy from the end of WWII to 1990 reflected that this was a consensus position—Cold War American leadership didn't want the country coupled to a one-party authoritarian state.

The industrialist Armand Hammer was famous because he was the American doing business with Moscow. His perspective was useful not because of his unique insights into Soviet society, politics, and business culture that he often shared with the American media, but because it was understood that he was presenting the views that the politburo wanted disseminated to an American audience. Today, America has thousands of Armand Hammers, all making the case for the source of their wealth, prestige, and power.

It started with Bill Clinton's 1994 decision to decouple human rights from trade status. He'd entered the White House promising to focus on human rights, in contrast to the George H.W. Bush administration, and after two years in office [made an about face](#). "We need to place our relationship into a larger and more productive framework," Clinton said. American human rights groups and labor unions were appalled. Clinton's decision sent a clear message, said then AFL-CIO President Lane Kirkland, "no matter what America says about democracy and human rights, in the final analysis profits, not people, matter most." Some Democrats, like then Senate Majority Leader George Mitchell, were opposed, while Republicans like John McCain supported Clinton's move. The head of Clinton's National Economic Council, Robert E. Rubin, predicted that China "will become an ever larger and more important trading partner."

More than two decades later, the number of American industries and companies that [lobbied](#) against Trump administration measures attempting to decouple Chinese technology from its American counterparts is a staggering measure of how closely two rival systems that claim to stand for opposing sets of values and practices have been integrated. Companies like [Ford](#), FedEx, and Honeywell, as well as [Qualcomm](#) and other semiconductor manufacturers that fought to continue selling chips to Huawei, all exist with one leg in America and the other leg planted firmly in America's chief geopolitical rival. To protect both halves of their business, they soft-sell the issue by calling China a competitor in order to obscure their role in boosting a dangerous rival.

Nearly every major American industry has a stake in China. From Wall Street—[Citigroup](#), [Goldman Sachs](#), and [Morgan Stanley](#)—to hospitality. A Marriott Hotel employee was [fired](#) when Chinese officials objected to his liking a tweet about Tibet. They all learned to play by CCP rules.

"It's so pervasive, it's better to ask who's not tied into China," says former Trump administration official Gen. (Ret.) Robert Spalding.

Unsurprisingly, the once-reliably Republican U.S. Chamber of Commerce was in the forefront of opposition to Trump's China policies—against not only proposed tariffs but also [his call](#) for American companies to start moving critical supply chains elsewhere, even in the wake of a pandemic. The National Defense Industrial Association recently complained of a law forbidding defense contractors from using certain Chinese technologies. "Just about all contractors doing work with the federal government," said a spokesman for the trade group, "would have to stop."

Even the Trump administration was split between hawks and accommodationists, caustically referred to by the former as "Panda Huggers." The majority of Trump officials were in the latter camp, most notably Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin, a former Hollywood producer. While the film industry was the first and loudest to complain that China was stealing its intellectual property, it eventually came to partner with, and appease, Beijing. Studios are not able to tap into China's enormous market without observing CCP redlines. For example, in the upcoming sequel to Top Gun, Paramount offered to blur the Taiwan and Japan patches on Tom Cruise's "Maverick" jacket for the Chinese release of the film, but CCP censors insisted the patches not be shown in any version anywhere in the world.

In the Trump administration, says former Trump adviser Spalding, "there was a very large push to continue unquestioned cooperation with China. On the other side was a smaller number of those who wanted to push back."

Apple, Nike, and Coca Cola even [lobbied against](#) the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act. On Trump's penultimate day in office, his Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced that the United States has "determined that the People's Republic of China is committing genocide and crimes against humanity in Xinjiang, China, targeting Uyghur Muslims and members of other ethnic and religious minority groups." That makes a number of major American brands that use forced Uyghur labor—including, according to a [2020 Australian study](#), Nike, Adidas, Gap, Tommy Hilfiger, Apple, Google, Microsoft, and General Motors—complicit in genocide.

The idea that countries that scorn basic human and democratic rights should not be directly funded by American industry and given privileged access to the fruits of U.S. government-funded research and technology that properly belongs to the American people is hardly a partisan idea—and has, or should

have, little to do with Donald Trump. But the historical record will show that the melding of the American and Chinese elites reached its apogee during Trump's administration, as the president made himself a focal point for the China Class, which had adopted the Democratic Party as its main political vehicle. That's not to say establishment Republicans are cut out of the pro-China oligarchy—Senate GOP leader Mitch McConnell's shipbuilder billionaire father-in-law James Chao has [benefited greatly](#) from his relationship with the CCP, including college classmate Jiang Zemin. Gifts from the Chao family have catapulted McConnell to only a few slots below Feinstein in the list of wealthiest senators.

Riding the media tsunami of Trump hatred, the China Class cemented its power within state institutions and security bureaucracies that have long been Democratic preserves—and whose salary-class inhabitants were eager not to be labeled as “collaborators” with the president they ostensibly served. Accommodation with even the worst and most threatening aspects of the Chinese communist regime, ongoing since the late 1990s, was put on fast-forward. Talk about how Nike made its sneakers in Chinese slave labor camps was no longer fashionable. News that China was stealing American scientific and military secrets, running large spy rings in Silicon Valley and compromising congressmen like Eric Swalwell, paying large retainers to top Ivy League professors in a well-organized program of intellectual theft, or in any way posed a danger to its own people or to its neighbors, let alone to the American way of life, were muted and dismissed as pro-Trump propaganda.

The Central Intelligence Agency openly protected Chinese efforts to undermine American institutions. CIA management [bullied](#) intelligence analysts to alter their assessment of Chinese influence and interference in our political process so it wouldn't be used to support policies they disagreed with—Trump's policies. It's no wonder that protecting America is not CIA management's most urgent equity—the technology that stores the agency's information is run by Amazon Web Services, owned by China's No. 1 American distributor, Jeff Bezos.

For those who actually understood what the Chinese were doing, partisanship was a distinctly secondary concern. Chinese behavior was authentically alarming—as was the seeming inability of core American security institutions to take it seriously. “Through the 1980s, people who advanced the interests of foreign powers whose ideas were inimical to republican form of government were ostracized,” says a former Obama administration intelligence official. “But with the advent of globalism, they made excuses for China, even bending the intelligence to fit their preferences. During the Bush and Obama years, the standard assessment was that the Chinese have no desire to build a blue-water navy. It was inconvenient to their view. China now has a third aircraft carrier in production.”

Loathing Trump provided their political excuse, but the American security and defense establishment had their own interest in turning a blind eye to China. Twenty years of squandering men, money, and prestige on military engagements that began in George W. Bush's “War on Terror” have proved to be of little strategic value to the United States. However, deploying Americans to provide security in Middle East killing fields has vastly benefited Beijing. Last month Chinese energy giant Zen Hua took advantage of a weak Iraqi economy when it [paid](#) \$2 billion for a five-year oil supply of 130,000 barrels a day. Should prices go up, the deal permits China to resell the oil.

In Afghanistan, the large copper, metal, and minerals mines whose security American troops still ostensibly ensure are owned by Chinese companies. And because Afghanistan borders Xinjiang, Xi Jinping is worried that “after the United States pulls troops out of Afghanistan, terrorist organizations positioned on the frontiers of Afghanistan and Pakistan may quickly infiltrate into Central Asia.” In other

words, American troops are deployed abroad in places like Afghanistan less to protect American interests than to provide security for China's Belt and Road Initiative.

"There's a belief that we are not in the same type of conflict with them as we were with the USSR," says the former Obama official. "But we are." The problem is that virtually all of the American establishment—which is centered in the Democratic Party—is firmly on the other side.