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The Thirty Tyrants

The deal that the American elite chose to make with China has a precedent in the history of Athens and Sparta

BY LEE SMITH

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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 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."
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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.

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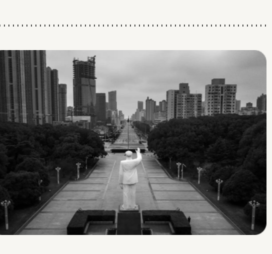

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China's Global Lockdown Propaganda Campaign

Inside the CCP's use of social media bots and other disinformation tactics to promote its own response to the coronavirus pandemic and attack its critics

BY MICHAEL P. SENGER

As late as the summer of 2019, Trump looked like he was headed for a second term in the White House. Not only was the economy soaring and unemployment at record lows, he was rallying on the very field on which he'd chosen to confront his opponents. Trump's trade war with Beijing showed he was serious about forcing American companies to move their supply chains. In July, top American tech firms like Dell and HP announced they were going to shift a large portion of their production outside of China. Amazon, Microsoft, and Alphabet said they were also planning to move some of their manufacturing elsewhere.

It was at exactly this same moment, in late June and early July of 2019 that the residents of Wuhan began to fill the streets, angry that officials responsible for the health and prosperity of the city's 11 million people had betrayed them. They were sick, and feared getting sicker. The elderly gasped for breath. Marchers held up banners saying, "we don't want to be poisoned, we just need a breath of fresh air." Parents worried for their children's lives. There was fear that the ill had suffered permanent damage to their immune and nervous systems.

Authorities censored social media accounts, photos and videos of the protests, and undercover policemen watched for troublemakers and detained the most vocal. With businesses forced shut, there was nowhere for protesters to hide. Some were carted off in vans. They'd been warned by the authorities: "Public security organizations will resolutely crack down on illegal criminal acts such as malicious incitement and provocation."

What sent the residents of Wuhan to the streets at the time wasn't COVID-19—which wouldn't begin its spread until the winter. In the early summer of 2019, what threatened public health in Wuhan was the plague of air pollution. This is a hitherto untold part of the story of America's ghastly last year.

To deal with the mounds of garbage poisoning the atmosphere, authorities planned to build a waste incineration plant—a plan that rightly alarmed the people who lived there. (In 2013, five incineration plants in Wuhan were found to emit dangerous pollutants.) Other cities had similarly taken to the streets to protest against air pollution—Xiamen in 2007, Shanghai in 2015, Chengdu in 2016, Qingyuan in 2017—each time sending waves of panic through CCP leadership, which was fearful of the slightest echo of the 1989 pro-democracy protests in Tiananmen Square and of the prospect of unruly democracy protests in Hong Kong making their way to the mainland and igniting a popular brushfire. What if unrest spread from one city to the next, with the entire country, 1.4 billion people, eventually spinning out of control?

The way to keep unrest from going viral, the CCP had learned, was to quarantine it. The party has shown itself especially adept at neutralizing the country's minority populations, first the Tibetans, and most recently the Turkic ethnic Muslim minority Uyghurs, through mass quarantines and incarcerations, managed through networks of electronic surveillance that paved the way to prisons and slave labor camps. By 2019, the grim fate of China's Uyghurs had become a matter of concern—whether heartfelt or simply public relations-oriented—even among many who profited hugely from their forced labor.

The country's 13.5 million Uyghurs are concentrated in Xinjiang, or East Turkestan, a region in northwestern China roughly the size of Iran, rich in coal, oil, and natural gas. Bordering Pakistan, Xinjiang is a terminus point for critical supply routes of the Belt and Road Initiative, Xi's $1 trillion project to create a global Chinese sphere of interest. Any potential disruptions of the BRI constitute a threat to vital Chinese interests. Xi saw an April 2014 attack in which Uyghur fighters stabbed more than 150 people at a train station as an opportunity to crack down.

Prepare for a "smashing, obliterating offensive," Xi told police officers and troops. His deputies issued sweeping orders: "Round up everyone who should be rounded up." Officials who showed mercy were themselves detained, humiliated and held up as an example for disobeying "the party central leadership's strategy for Xinjiang."

According to a November 2019, *New York Times report*, Chinese authorities were most worried about Uyghur students returning home from school outside the province. The students had "widespread social ties across the entire country" and used social media whose "impact," officials feared, was "widespread and difficult to eradicate." The task was to quarantine news of what was really happening inside the detention camps. When the students asked where their loved ones were and what happened to them, officials were advised to tell "students that their relatives had been 'infected' by the 'virus' of Islamic radicalism and must be quarantined and cured."

But it wasn't just those most likely to carry out terrorist attacks—young men—who were subject to China's lockdown policy. According to the documents, officials were told that "even grandparents and family members who seemed too old to carry out violence could not be spared."

When a real virus hit in the fall of 2019, Chinese authorities followed the same protocol, quarantining not just prospective troublemakers but everyone in Wuhan in the hope of avoiding an even larger public outcry than the one they'd quelled in the same city just months before.

There is a good reason why lockdowns—quarantining those who are not sick—had never been previously employed as a public health measure. The leading members of a city, state, or nation do not imprison its own unless they mean to signal that they are imposing collective punishment on the population at large. It had never been used before as a public health measure because it is a widely recognized instrument of political repression.

At the end of December 2019, Chinese authorities began locking down social media accounts mentioning the new virus, doctors who warned of it or spoke about it with their colleagues were reprimanded and another, allegedly infected by COVID-19, died. All domestic travel in and out of Wuhan was stopped. If the purpose of the lockdowns was really to prevent spread of the contagion, it's worth noting that international flights continued. Rather, it appears that the domestic travel ban, like the social media censorship, was to keep news of the government's blunder from spreading throughout China and leading to massive, perhaps uncontrollable, unrest.

If Wuhan's streets had filled in June and July to protest the authorities' deadly incompetence when they concealed plans for an incinerator that would sicken the population of one city, how would the Chinese public respond upon discovering that the source for a respiratory illness destined to plague all of the country

that the source for a respiratory illness destined to plague all of the country wasn't a freak accident of nature that occurred in a wet market, as officials claimed, but the CCP's own Wuhan Institute of Virology?

In January, the Trump administration's former Deputy National Security Adviser Matt Pottinger told British officials that the latest American intelligence shows that the likeliest source of COVID-19 is the Wuhan Institute of Virology. Pottinger, according to *The Daily Mail*—a British publication was one of the few Western press outlets that reported Pottinger's statements—claimed the pathogen may have escaped through a leak or an accident.

According to a State Department fact sheet published in January, the United States "has reason to believe that several researchers inside the Wuhan lab became sick in autumn 2019, before the first identified case of the outbreak." The fact sheet further explains that the Chinese government lab has conducted research on a bat coronavirus most similar to COVID-19 since 2016. Since at least 2017, the WIV has conducted classified research on behalf of the Chinese military. "For many years the United States has publicly raised concerns about China's past biological weapons work, which Beijing has neither documented nor demonstrably eliminated, despite its clear obligations under the Biological Weapons Convention."

Evidence the pandemic didn't start in a Wuhan wet market was published as early as January 2020, days after Beijing implemented the lockdown on Jan. 23. According to the British medical journal *The Lancet*, 13 of the first 41 cases, including the first one, had no links to the market. In May the head of China's center for disease control and prevention confirmed that there was nothing to link COVID-19 and the wet market. "The novel coronavirus had existed long before" it was found at the market, said the Chinese official.

After the *Lancet* report, Republican officials close to the Trump administration disputed Beijing's official account. "We don't know where it originated, and we have to get to the bottom of that," Sen. Tom Cotton said in February. "We also know that just a few miles away from that food market is China's only biosafety level 4 super laboratory that researches human infectious diseases." Cotton said the Chinese had been duplicitous and dishonest. "We need to at least ask the question to see what the evidence says," Cotton said. "And China right now is not giving any evidence on that question at all."

The corporate American press disparaged Cotton's search for answers. Jeff Bezos' *Washington Post* claimed that Cotton was "fanning the embers of a conspiracy theory that has been repeatedly debunked by experts." Trump was derided for contradicting American spy services when the president said he had a high degree of confidence that the coronavirus originated in a Wuhan lab. Sen. Ted Cruz said that in dismissing obvious questions about the origins of the pandemic the press was "abandoning all pretenses of journalism to produce CCP propaganda."

The January publication of a *New York Magazine* article by Nicholson Baker arguing the same case that Trump and GOP officials had been making since last winter raises useful questions. Why did journalists automatically seek to discredit the Trump administration's skepticism regarding Beijing's origin story of the coronavirus? Why wait until after the election to allow the publication of evidence that the CCP's story was spurious? Sure, the media preferred Biden and wanted Trump gone at any cost—but how would it affect the Democrat's electoral chances to tell Americans the truth about China and COVID-19?

China had cultivated many friends in the American press, which is why the media relays Chinese government statistics with a straight face—for instance that China, four times the size of the United States, has suffered 1/100th the number of COVID-19 fatalities. But the key fact is this: In legitimizing CCP narratives, the media covers not primarily for China but for the American class that draws its power, wealth, and prestige from China. *No, Beijing isn't the bad guy here—it's a responsible international stakeholder. In fact, we should follow China's lead.* And by March, with Trump's initial acquiescence, American officials imposed the same repressive measures on Americans used by dictatorial powers throughout history to silence their own people.

Eventually, the pro-China oligarchy would come to see the full range of benefits the lockdowns afforded. Lockdowns made leading oligarchs richer—$85 billion richer in the case of Bezos alone—while impoverishing Trump's small-business base. In imposing unconstitutional regulations by fiat, city and state authorities normalized autocracy. And not least, lockdowns gave the American establishment a plausible reason to give its chosen candidate the nomination after barely one-third of the delegates had chosen, and then keep him stashed away in his basement for the duration of the Presidential campaign. And yet in a sense, Joe Biden really did represent a return to *normalcy* in the decadeslong course of U.S.-China relations.

> "The new American oligarchy believes that democracy's failures are proof of their own exclusive right to power."
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After Biden's election, China's foreign minister called for a reset of U.S.-China relations but Chinese activists says Biden policy toward China is already set. "I'm very skeptical of a Biden administration because I am worried he will allow China to go back to normal, which is a 21st-century genocide of the Uyghurs," one human rights activist told *The New York Times* after the election. With Biden as president, said another "it's like having Xi Jinping sitting in the White House."

In November a video circulated on social media purporting to document a public speech given by the head of a Chinese think tank close to the Beijing government. "Trump waged a trade war against us," he told a Chinese audience. "Why couldn't we handle him? Why is that between 1992 and 2016, we always resolved issues with the U.S.? Because we had people up there. In America's core circle of power, we have some old friends." The appreciative crowd laughed along with him. "During the last three to four decades," he continued, "we took advantage of America's core circle. As I said, Wall Street has a very profound influence … We used to rely heavily on them. Problem is they have been declining since 2008. Most importantly after 2016 Wall Street couldn't control Trump … In the U.S.-China trade war they tried to help. My friends in the U.S. told me that they tried to help, but they couldn't. Now with Biden winning the election, the traditional elites, political elites, the establishment, they have a very close relationship with Wall Street."

Is it true? The small fortune that Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen has earned for simply speaking in front of Wall Street audiences is matter of public record. But she had hard words for Beijing at her confirmation hearing last month, even criticizing the CCP for "horrendous human rights abuses" against the Uyghurs. But the resumes of Biden's picks for top national security posts tell a different story. Incoming Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines and Secretary of State Antony Blinken worked at a Beltway firm called WestExec, which scrubbed its work on behalf of the CCP from its website shortly before the election.

Longtime Biden security aide Colin Kahl, tapped for the No. 3 spot at the Pentagon, worked at an institute at Stanford University that is twinned with Peking University, a school run by a former CCP spy chief and long seen as a security risk by Western intelligence services.

As head of the Center for American Progress think tank, Biden's pick for director of the Office of Management and Budget, Neera Tanden, teamed up with a U.S.-China exchange organization created as a front "to co-opt and neutralize sources of potential opposition to the policies and authority" of the CCP and "influence overseas Chinese communities, foreign governments, and other actors to take actions or adopt positions supportive of Beijing."

Biden's special assistant for presidential personnel, Thomas Zimmerman, was a fellow at the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, flagged by Western intelligence agencies for its ties to China's Ministry of State Security.

U.N. Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield gave a 2019 speech at a Chinese-government-funded Confucius Institute in Savannah, Georgia, where she praised China's role in promoting good governance, gender equity, and the rule of law in Africa. "I see no reason why China cannot share in those values," she said. "In fact, China is in a unique position to spread these ideals given its strong footprint on the continent."

The family of the incoming commander-in-chief was reportedly given an interest-free loan of $5 million by businessmen with ties to the Chinese military, while Biden's son Hunter called his Chinese business partner the "spy chief of China." The reason that the press and social media censored preelection reports of Hunter Biden's alleged ties to the CCP was not to protect him—$5 million is less than what Bezos has made every hour during the course of the pandemic. No, for the pro-China oligarchy, the point of getting Joe Biden elected was to protect themselves.

Reports claiming that the Biden administration will continue the Trump administration's aggressive efforts to roll back China's technology industry are misdirection. The new administration is loaded with lobbyists for the American tech industry, who are determined to get the U.S.-China relationship back on track. Biden's Chief of Staff Ron Klain was formerly on the executive council of TechNet, the trade group that lobbies on behalf of Silicon Valley in Washington. Biden's White House counsel is Steve Ricchetti whose brother Jeff was hired to lobby for Amazon shortly after the election.

Yellen says that "China is clearly our most important strategic competitor." But the pro-China oligarchy is not competing with the country from which it draws its wealth, power, and prestige. Chinese autocracy is their model. Consider the deployment of more than 20,000 U.S. armed forces members throughout Washington, D.C., to provide security for an inauguration of a president who is rarely seen in public in the wake of a sporadically violent protest march that was cast as an *insurrection* and a *coup*; the removal of opposition voices from social media, along with the removal of competing social media platforms themselves; the nascent effort to keep the Trump-supporting half of America from access to health care, credit, legal representation, education, and employment, with the ultimate goal of redefining protest against the policies of the current administration as "domestic terrorism."

What seems clear is that Biden's inauguration marks the hegemony of an American oligarchy that sees its relationship with China as a shield and sword against their own countrymen. Like Athens' Thirty Tyrants, they are not simply contemptuous of a political system that recognizes the natural rights of all its citizens that are endowed by our creator; they despise in particular the notion that those they rule have the same rights they do. Witness their newfound respect for the idea that speech should only be free for the enlightened few who know how to use it properly. Like Critias and the pro-Sparta faction, the new American oligarchy believes that democracy's failures are proof of their own exclusive right to power—and they are happy to rule in partnership with a foreign power that will help them destroy their own countrymen.

What does history teach us about this moment? The bad news is that the Thirty Tyrants exiled notable Athenian democrats and confiscated their property while murdering an estimated 5% of the Athenian population. The good news is that their rule lasted less than a year.

Lee Smith is the author of the newly-published book *The Permanent Coup: How Enemies Foreign and Domestic Targeted the American President.*

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