Rejoinder to David M. Lampton

James Mann

At the heart of my profound disagreement with David Lampton is his repeated invocation of the phrase "more humane governance." This is, he believes, where the world should hope China is heading. In his argument, a policy of engagement and the logic of change inside China will produce not necessarily liberalization, a free press or a multiparty system, but more humane governance.

This careful wording avoids questions about the nature of China's political system: whether there will ever be any organized political opposition or freedom of the press. It seems to imply that what matters is not whether China's political system will change in any significant way, but rather whether its leadership will become more benevolent. By putting things in this fashion, Lampton suggests that he takes as a given, or wishes to ignore, the current one-party state itself. But that system, with its lack of accountability, lies at the very heart of many of China's political problems today. (Will "humane governance" solve the problem of corruption, for example?)

The reader should also note the contradiction between, on the one hand, this limited goal of "more humane governance," and, on the other, the idea put forward elsewhere in Lampton's review that China needs a period of time to develop political institutions. One can certainly accept the latter, as a theoretical proposition, but it raises the basic question: is China building new political institutions at all? Granted, the process of institutional change may take time, but the Chinese regime has been unwilling to start the process. Ever since the 1980s, whenever the idea of political reform has come up in China, its Communist Party leadership has decided against embarking down this road.

Lampton argues that we should view the prospects for political change in China against the backdrop of what has happened elsewhere in the world. I think some of his comparisons are, unintentionally, a bit insulting to China: Should we really think of China in the same developmental terms as, say, Haiti or Somalia? He admonishes us to recognize that "the scale of China, its dramatic internal income and other disparities, and the diversity of cultural levels throughout the country" may affect its political development. Yet this sentence overlooks the emerging realities in China today. Internal income disparities may well be not merely an obstacle to changing the political system, but one of the underlying motivations for preserving the current system.

Lampton accuses me of giving the back of my hand to the "positive examples" of South Korea and Taiwan, which demonstrate, in his words, that "middle classes that gain economic security and material assets eventually demand political participation and governance constrained by law." (Please note here again Lampton's curious phraseology: "governance," when in fact in both South Korea and Taiwan, the issues at hand were authoritarianism, democracy and the

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right to political opposition.) One would not know from his review that *The China Fantasy* specifically addresses the question of whether China will proceed along the path of South Korea and Taiwan and makes several arguments on this subject. For example, at the time they opened up to democracy in the 1980s, both South Korea and Taiwan were dependent upon the United States for military protection, and at key junctures in the 1980s, American pressure played a significant role in the decisions to open up Taiwan's and South Korea's political system. Since China has no such military dependence on the United States, we cannot expect its political system to follow along the same path. Lampton may not wish to discuss these arguments, but it is inaccurate to suggest that I have given short shrift to the examples of South Korea and Taiwan.

One would obtain the impression from reading Lampton's review that *The China Fantasy* is a book specifically about China scholars. It is not. The book examines the assumptions put forward in public debates about China by American elites, including political leaders, business executives and scholars. The introduction speaks of "political, financial and intellectual elites," in that order. The focus is on the assertions of political leaders such as Bill Clinton, who told China's President Jiang Zemin he was "on the wrong side of history;"[1] George W. Bush, who said that "trade freely with China, and time is on our side;"[2] and Tony Blair, who declared that there is an "unstoppable momentum" towards democracy in China.[3] The debate engendered by the book demonstrates, however, that some China scholars (not all, but some) are vastly more sensitive to criticism than are political leaders or business executives.

Contrary to the review, the book does not speak of "Rasputin-like China experts." That phrase comes from Lampton, not me, and seems intended to inflame China specialists and persuade them to rally around. In fact, since *The China Fantasy* describes how American companies now hire some China experts and help finance think tanks that reflect their corporate views, I think it would be a fair and correct inference that I believe commerce, not academia, is the driving force behind American policy.

However, what academics do and say about China, particularly in public debates, is also a subject worthy of scrutiny, just as are the attitudes of CEOs or politicians. I first became interested in the subject of how money influences American policy towards China in the late 1980s, while I was working as a journalist in Washington. At the time, I wrote about the influence of money from Taiwan sources, such as the funding of US think tanks by Taiwan interests. Some of America's leading China scholars saw the articles and encouraged me to write further, as I did.[4]

1 Transcript of President Clinton's press conference with Jiang Zemin, 28 January 1997.
2 Gov. George W. Bush, "A Distinctly American Internationalism," Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, Simi Valley, Ca., 19 November 1999.
3 "UK's Blair Says Democracy in China Is Unstoppable," Bloomberg News Service, 6 September 2005.
4 James Mann, "Congress and Taiwan: Understanding the Bond," in Ramon H. Myers, Michel C. Oksenberg and David Shambaugh (eds.), *Making China Policy: Lessons from the Bush and Clinton Administrations* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), pp. 201–219.

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Times have changed. Two decades later, the influence of Taiwan money in Washington is dwarfed by the sums being spent by multinational companies that are doing business in or with the People's Republic of China. These increasing financial interests occasionally extend to academia; at least a few Sinologists have begun to work for companies doing business in China. I think that whenever the fees involved exceed a certain level (let's arbitrarily say US$5,000), then a China scholar should disclose this financial interest when he or she offers opinions about China in public settings, such as op-ed articles or congressional testimony.

It has been argued that such financial relationships don't matter, so long as a China scholar has not altered his or her overall views. Yet we don't apply such a lax standard – whether the individual has changed his views – when a China expert offers his opinions on US policy after accepting money from Taiwan (or, for that matter, when a doctor recommends a particular kind of treatment after accepting significant sums of money from pharmaceutical companies or medical-device manufacturers). Rather, we consider those payments to be necessary information in allowing us to judge whether the expert might have a financial stake that could influence his views.

Lampton's review seeks to dismiss the ideas in my book by linking them with the "Who Lost China?" debates that following the end of the Chinese civil war. In particular, he makes an analogy to the campaigns against China specialists like John Service, John Paton Davies and Owen Lattimore. This historical comparison is absurd. Those China hands of the 1950s were subjected to congressional investigations, accused of disloyalty or treason, and in some instances driven out of their jobs. Nothing remotely comparable is happening today. The debates and the political dynamics concerning China were not fixed for all time in the 1950s. Lampton's review does not seem to countenance the possibility that one might be outraged about the abuses of the McCarthy era, and also believe just as strongly, a half-century later, that Americans should be dismayed by the Chinese leadership's continuing repression of all organized political opposition.

Lampton asserts that no experts (other than Bruce Gilley and Henry Rowan) have made optimistic predictions about the PRC moving towards democracy. I think he may be forgetting the climate of the 1990s, when it was more commonplace in American discussions about China to suggest that the existing political system might not last, and that, perhaps after President Jiang Zemin, a new generation of Chinese leaders would open the way for significant political change, liberalization or democracy.

For example, at a conference at Stanford University called "China and World Affairs in 2010" on 25 and 26 April 1996, Michel Oksenberg, one of America's most prominent and most experienced experts on China, argued that the Chinese Communist Party could well choose to hold onto power by adopting the trappings of an electoral system it could then dominate. "I am tempted to suggest that China's paramount leader will (by 2010) have either been directly

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elected or selected via an elected, multi-party national parliament," Oksenberg told the conference. He argued that China would follow the path taken by Japan, Taiwan and South Korea from market economy to political openings to democracy. "…The outside world and the porousness of China's borders will make it difficult for China's leaders to resist those trends."[5] The point here is not to single out the late Mr. Oksenberg, whom I admired greatly, but to point out that he was reflecting the spirit of the times, one that extended well beyond China scholars. Indeed, ten or fifteen years ago, in the decade immediately following the end of the Cold War, intellectuals in many fields suggested that once a society crossed a certain point (a particular income level, for example), then the movement towards democratization would become powerful, if not irresistible.

Lampton depicts the political situation in China as fitting into the general framework of a country making steady progress, though with remaining deficiencies. What this optimistic characterization misses is another, darker reality: that over the past couple of decades, the Chinese leadership has not merely delayed the goal of political reform or liberalization, but has become increasingly resistant to it. "One might well argue that the prospects for fundamental political transformation look less promising today than they did in the 1980s, when leaders like Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang spearheaded serious, if short-lived, efforts at political reform," wrote Elizabeth Perry earlier this year.[6]

I find baffling Lampton's comments about the lack of China expertise in the current administration. As an initial matter, I don't find the contrast with prior administrations so clear as he does. (For example, the position held by Susan Shirk in the Clinton administration, deputy assistant secretary of state for China, is currently held by an academic, Thomas J. Christensen; another China specialist, Evan A. Feigenbaum, has been working as deputy assistant secretary of state for Central Asia.)

But more fundamentally: what is his complaint here? One of the few points on which Lampton and I agree is that there has been substantial continuity in China policy over time – at least since the early 1990s, I would say, and in some ways since the 1970s. Throughout the period, American leaders, in the interests of geopolitics and then commerce, have come up with various rationalizations to minimize the significance of China's continuing repression of dissent. As Lampton notes correctly elsewhere in the review, *The China Fantasy* is intended as a critique of American policy over the years, not specifically of the Bush administration.

Mr. Lampton's efforts to find two factual errors amount to an animus in search of a nit. They do not succeed. Congress's vote in 2000 was frequently

5 Jon Stewart, "Worldview: A Democratic China by 2010?", *San Francisco Chronicle*, 26 May 1996, p. SC-8.

6 Elizabeth J. Perry, "Studying Chinese Politics: Farewell to Revolution," *China Journal*, No. 57 (January 2007), p. 1.

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characterized, in publications such as the *New York Times* and the *Financial Times*, as clearing or opening the way for WTO membership; this was common shorthand for the situation.[7] On the World Bank, the George H. W. Bush administration announced on 20 June 1989 that the United States, the bank's leading donor, would postpone ("freeze") support for international lending to China for an indefinite period (not for a specific length of nine months); it then eased its policy to permit loans for humanitarian projects in early 1990. Of course a freeze signifies new loans; when a bank says it is freezing, say, mortgage lending, I don't think we assume this means that existing loans are being called in. I do not understand the relevance of these factual disputes to the points I am making, or for that matter to the points Lampton is making.

In the end, Lampton mischaracterizes and, I think, fundamentally misunderstands *The China Fantasy*. He makes it sound as though the book is aimed at changing China. But more accurately, the principal and repeated argument of the book is that political change in China is not inevitable, and that China's one-party system may last for a long time – despite the repeated suggestions by American leaders over the years that trade and investment will help transform the Chinese political system. In short, it is not me who is arguing that US policies have the power to change China. Rather, that's the false promise that various proponents of engagement have been making all along.

7 See, for example: Elizabeth Rosenthal, "Beijing Gets a Scolding for Official Corruption, and Applauds," *New York Times*, 6 March 2000, p. A-10; Marc Lacey, "Clinton Stumps for China Pact," *New York Times*, 4 April 2000, p. A-3; Gerald Baker, "Clinton Pushes Congress on China in WTO," *Financial Times*, 11 January 2000, p. 11.

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