

# The Tragic Legacy of Bill Clinton's China Doctrine

*At the dawn of the millennium, the promise of China's integration into the international community seemed utterly convincing.*



*President Bill Clinton delivers a speech at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, March 8, 2000. CSPAN screenshot.*

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On March 8, 2000, then-President Bill Clinton delivered his most persuasive pitch to Washington’s foreign policy elite, Congress and the international community on the merits of China’s accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO). With a key vote looming, the case was made [in a speech at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies](#) on Embassy Row.

Clinton, having been impeached over a year earlier, had been clearly casting about for a legacy that did not involve Monica Lewinsky. His headlong attempt to salvage the Middle East Peace Process had not yet imploded at Camp David II.

As he outlined the arguments in favour of the most potentially consequential step toward the integration of China’s economy into the rules-based multilateral system since Jimmy Carter’s normalization of relations with Beijing in 1979, Clinton portrayed the decision, to use a term favoured by the party of the second part, as a “win-win”.

“Membership in the W.T.O., of course, will not create a free society in China overnight or guarantee that China will play by global rules,” Clinton said that day. “But over time, I believe it will move China faster and further in the right direction.”

Two decades later, China has patently not moved faster and further in the right direction, unless you consider exploiting its own membership to [corrupt multilateral institutions from the WTO to the World Health Organization to the United Nations itself](#) the right direction.

Over the past two decades, China has proven that, indeed, the choice between economic security and national security is a false one by conducting a wholesale hacking and sacking operation against U.S. intellectual property that effectively enabled the modernization of China's economy at the expense of U.S. competitiveness, and provided China with the economic leverage to produce an archipelago of debt-trapped suzerainties using the [Belt & Road infrastructure project as a cudgel with which to decimate democracy](#), which Beijing sees as an existential threat. If this sequence of events had not seriously undermined U.S. national security, the current president of the United States would not himself be in the process of [staging a multi-front, anti-democracy coup](#) ahead of an election that would, left uncorrupted, make possible the restoration of America's global power and influence. (Whatever [you may have heard on the street](#), China *does not want Joe Biden to win* this election).

“We have a far greater chance of having a positive influence on China's actions if we welcome China into the world community instead of shutting it out,” Clinton also said.

While hindsight is, [as the great Billy Wilder said, 2020 vision](#), one could argue that the ways in which China was “welcomed into the world community” may have been less than optimal. [As then-Director of National Intelligence Dan Coats said during his testimony](#) before the United States Senate Intelligence Committee in February, 2019, “While we were sleeping in the last decade and a half, China had a remarkable rise in capabilities that are stunning.” Which is sort of like admitting that you snored through a home invasion during which someone hacked your laptop, stole all your money, slept with your wife and poisoned your dog — only you're not Rob Petrie living in an unlocked New Rochelle bungalow in 1964, you're the most well-funded, technologically omniscient, covertly omnipotent intelligence behemoth in history.

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“By lowering the barriers that protect state-owned industries, China is speeding a process that is removing government from vast areas of people’s lives,” Clinton surmised.

Hard to know where to begin with that one, given the massive expansion of China’s surveillance state, the people being herded into concentration camps, the internet firewall, the Orwellian censorship, the police intimidation and the elaborate system of surveillance and humint-informed social engineering designed to reward acquiescence and punish dissent (kind of like cancel culture, but with far less opaque criteria).

But at least the people of Hong Kong were onside.

“The people of Hong Kong agree,” Clinton reassured that day. “I recently received a letter from Martin Lee, the leader of Hong Kong’s Democratic Party, who has spent a lifetime struggling for free elections and free expression for his people,” he reported. “He wrote to me that this agreement, and I want to quote it, ‘This agreement,’ and I quote, ‘represents the best long-term hope for China to become a member of good standing in the international community.’”

Martin Lee, now 82 and [known in Hong Kong as the Father of Democracy](#), was [arrested for the first time in April](#) for protesting the imposition of China’s draconian new security law. [In an op-ed in the \*Washington Post\*](#) following his release, titled *I was arrested in Hong Kong. It’s part of China’s larger plan*, Lee wrote, “Hong Kong people now face

“As Justice Earl Warren once said, liberty is the most contagious force in the world,” he said.

Almost nobody could have foreseen how terribly ironic that would seem, in hindsight.

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