

A National Humiliation

The profound national humiliation that President Bush has brought upon the United States may be forgotten temporarily when the American aircrew, held captive in China as this magazine goes to press, return home. But when we finish celebrating, it will be time to assess the damage done, and the dangers invited, by the administration's behavior.

To begin such an assessment, we need to review what has happened.

On April 1, a Chinese fighter intercepted an American surveillance aircraft flying a routine mission over international waters in the South China Sea. There was a collision. The exact circumstances are as yet unknown. Did the American plane "bank" into the Chinese jet? Or did the Chinese jet bump into the American plane's nose cone? It doesn't matter. What caused the accident were the unusually aggressive and extremely dangerous maneuvers of the Chinese pilot, who was flying so close to the American aircraft as to increase substantially the chances for a collision. There are common sense rules of the road for how the game is played. The Chinese pilot was recklessly violating those rules, like the guy who tailgates two inches off your bumper going 75 miles an hour. In circumstances such as these, it doesn't matter who bumps whom. Blame for the accident falls on the one who deliberately created such a dangerous situation.

Much attention has been paid to the particular Chinese pilot, who it seems had a history of just such reckless flying. But this misses the larger point. The decision to fly Chinese fighters dangerously close to American surveillance planes was made by the Chinese government in Beijing, not by any maverick Chinese aviator. In recent months, Chinese fighters had grown increasingly bold in their interception tactics, all part of a broader effort by the Chinese government to flex its muscles in the South China Sea. The Chinese want the United States to get out of the South China Sea. Why? Because it would be a key sea lane in the event of a conflict with Taiwan. Step one in this

campaign is forcing American surveillance planes to stay out of the area. So the Chinese government consciously increased the risk to U.S. planes, and to its own pilots, in order to improve its strategic position. The accident, in short, was the direct consequence of a deliberate Chinese policy.

The accident also occurred despite repeated warnings by the United States that the new Chinese policy was dangerous. In December and January, after a number of close calls, top Pentagon officials formally protested the new Chinese tactics. The United States, they made clear, did not intend to renounce its right to fly in international airspace, but Chinese policy was vastly increasing the risk to everyone. The Chinese government ignored the protests. Then last week the inevitable happened and a Chinese pilot lost his life. It is a miracle, and a tribute to one American pilot's skill, that 24 Americans did not go down with him.

Instead, they made an emergency landing in China, whereupon they were taken hostage by the Chinese government. It is hardly surprising that the Chinese government boarded the plane and searched it for information about American intelligence-gathering capabilities, despite American insistence that the plane remained, even in China, the sovereign territory of the United States according to international law. What was a good deal more surprising was the Chinese government's announcement of the conditions for the crew's release: The American government would have to make a formal apology.

There has been no end of speculation by America's revered China experts as to why the Chinese would make such a baffling demand. The Chinese government is getting ready for President Jiang Zemin's "retirement" in 2002, and during such moments of succession, would-be Chinese leaders need to woo the powerful and virulently anti-American Chinese military and intelligence services. In addition, there has been a surge of nationalist fervor in China, especially since the accidental bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade two years ago. True, the Chinese



The damaged U.S. Navy EP-3

AP/Wide World Photos

government has helped stir up these nationalist passions in an attempt to compensate for the bankruptcy of Communist ideology. But now the government, we are told, is the victim of its own device. No Chinese leader can afford to look “soft” in a confrontation with the United States. Then there is the matter of Chinese culture, which places an unusually high premium on honor and “face.” To admit Chinese error, or even to accept mutual responsibility for this kind of accident, would cause the Chinese leadership to lose face and suffer humiliation before its own people.

One or all of these explanations for Chinese behavior may be valid. But even if every one of them contributed to the Chinese decision to hold the American crew hostage until the United States apologized, it is abundantly clear—from the known facts and the public record—that the Chinese government’s demand had two additional purposes.

First, it was a continuation of the policy that caused the accident in the first place. The Chinese government has for some time been asserting that the South China Sea and the skies above it are Chinese territory. Last week President Jiang declared, “The United States must stop these types of flights in the airspace of China’s coastal areas. Only this will avoid a repeat of this type of incident.” An American apology would acknowledge not merely that the American pilot was to blame for the accident. More important, it would acknowledge that the American government was to blame because it had “violated international law” by carrying out surveillance flights “in the airspace of China’s coastal waters.”

The broader purpose of the Chinese demand was to inflict upon the United States a public international humiliation. This, of course, is the flipside of China’s face-conscious culture. In such a culture, to lose face is not only embarrassing. It is dangerous. It is a sign of weakness that invites repeated exploitation by those who have witnessed it. To be deprived of face by someone is in some sense to be vanquished and reduced to subservience. He who makes another lose face is essentially declaring himself superior and the other inferior, not worthy of respect. By demanding a public apology from the United States, therefore, the Chinese government was not only saving its own face, it was consciously and deliberately forcing the United States to lose face, and thereby to admit its weakness.

One gets a sense that for a brief moment President Bush instinctively understood all this. On Monday, April 2, a visibly angry Bush demanded the “prompt and safe” return of the crew and the plane. Only 24 hours after the accident, Bush said, “I am troubled by the lack of a timely Chinese response to our request” for access to the crew, and he demanded that the Chinese return the plane “without further damaging or tampering.” China’s delay was “inconsistent with standard diplomatic practice and

with the expressed desire of both our countries for better relations.”

On Tuesday, Bush seemed to be holding firm. Senior officials told reporters he was increasingly angry at the Chinese failure to respond. One adviser, after talking to Bush, told the *Washington Post*, “We’ve been patient and we’ve been very reasonable, but at some point, patience wears thin.” Meeting the Chinese demand for an apology was out of the question: “There’s nothing to apologize for,” said one official. Another also rejected any statement of “regret.” That was “not even in question.” And Bush officials explained why even a statement of regret would be a mistake. The Chinese, they said, were measuring Bush and looking for “signs of weakness.” Even expressing “regret” would make Bush look like he was afraid and caving to Chinese pressure.

There were signs even on Tuesday, however, that the administration’s resolve was weakening, and the Chinese no doubt saw them. The *Post* article was aptly titled “U.S. Seeks to Avoid Test of Wills,” which must have struck the Chinese as both amusing and revealing, since what they had set up was very much a test of wills, a test moreover in which there would be a winner and a loser. And, indeed, while some officials were talking tough, others were also suggesting that the Chinese needed to be mollified somehow. “All the decisions are being driven by what is most likely to be effective with the Chinese government,” one official said. “One of the things you want to do is give them time to come to the right decision and not lock them into a position opposed to you.”

The next day the Bush administration started to cave. It was Secretary of State Colin Powell who delivered the statement that the whole world understood as a partial capitulation to the Chinese demands for an apology. Powell expressed his “regret” that the Chinese pilot had gone down. He used the word “regret” twice. And by calling the collision a “tragic accident,” Powell removed the issue of blame. He then called for a dialogue in which “both sides” could “present explanations.” That evening Powell sent a letter to the Chinese outlining a mechanism for discussing the incident, including the creation of a bi-national commission to study what had happened and ways to prevent such events in the future.

Powell’s statement and letter were intended to address both of China’s main objectives in this whole affair. The statement of “regret” was meant to address China’s demand for a broad American apology and acceptance of responsibility for the entire incident. In Europe, the headlines read: “U.S. Regrets Plane Incident,” leaving readers with the impression that the United States was indeed accepting blame. And the Chinese made clear that they took Powell’s statements to be at least a partial apology. “The regret expressed by the U.S. side,” a Chinese spokesman declared, was “a step in the right direction.” Thus one purpose of the Chinese demand, the public

humiliation of the United States, was partially accomplished.

Powell's suggestion of a bi-national commission was also a step in the right direction for the Chinese, because it would allow them to press home their second objective: an agreement by the United States to pull back or at least take greater care in its surveillance activities in the South China Sea. After all, a bi-national commission cannot limit itself to the technical details of which pilot turned in the wrong direction. The Chinese side is not simply going to express hope that everyone's pilots be more careful in the future. They are going to insist on discussing the root cause of the accident. And for them, the root cause is that the United States is doing surveillance in the South China Sea. Three months ago, the United States told the Chinese to stuff it and stop harassing American planes engaged in legitimate surveillance in international airspace. Now, if Powell's plan is agreed to, the Chinese will have a forum in which to discuss with the Americans exactly who can fly where.

In the safe and friendly confines of the United States, most observers figured Powell's statements of regret were harmless—what could be wrong with expressing “regret” over the death of a pilot? But in the real world, and in Beijing's world, Powell's statements represented a partial capitulation, with real-world consequences.

Having brought the United States to one knee, the Chinese government kept up the pressure. Now it was time for the United States to go all the way, to “adopt a cooperative attitude, admit its mistakes and make a formal apology.” As Lenin used to say, when your spear hits iron withdraw it, when it hits flesh press forward.

In the face of continued Chinese pressure, President Bush showed signs of cracking. Speaking to the American Society of Newspaper Editors on Thursday, Bush amplified Powell's statements of regret. He not only regretted that the Chinese pilot had gone down, saying “our prayers go out to the pilot, his family.” Bush also regretted that “one of their airplanes has been lost.” He declared himself an “advocate of China's entering the WTO.” And then the groveling began in earnest. “China is a strategic partner,” Bush declared to the stunned audience, “I mean, a strategic competitor. . . . But that doesn't mean we can't find areas in which we can partner. And the economy is a place where we can partner.”

Perhaps most significant was Bush's answer when asked if he might consider apologizing to China. Instead of simply saying “no,” President Bush said, “I have no further comments on the subject.” Bush's refusal to rule

out an apology surely encouraged the Chinese to believe that someday the formal apology they have been demanding may be delivered. At this writing, the Chinese are sticking to their demand for a full and formal apology from the United States.

Now, it is possible that the American government will be able to negotiate the release of the crew with something short of a full and formal apology. Whatever the public and private terms of the deal, we will obviously be happy for the crew and their families. But no one should ignore the enormous price that will have been paid to secure their freedom. The United States is on the path to humiliation, and for a great power—not to mention the world's “sole superpower”—humiliation is not a matter to be taken lightly. It is not just a petty issue of “face.”

As the Chinese understand better than American leaders, President Bush has revealed weakness. And he has revealed fear: fear of the political, strategic, and economic consequences of meeting a Chinese challenge. Having exposed this weakness and fear, the Chinese will try to exploit it again and again, most likely in a future confrontation over Taiwan. The American capitulation will also embolden others around the world who have watched this crisis carefully to see the new administration's mettle tested.

This defeat and humiliation, as another president once said, must not stand. Whether or not the American hostages are released, President Bush and members of Congress must begin immediately taking steps to repair the damage already done. It is essential that the Chinese be made to pay a price for their actions. Angry words and congressional resolutions of disapproval are now worse than useless. Unless backed by deeds, they will only confirm Beijing's perception of American weakness.

The United States must respond in ways that directly affect China's interests. Congress can do its part easily: by rejecting China's most-favored-nation trade status when it comes up for renewal later this spring. The Chinese believe, with good reason, that the American business community has a hammerlock on American policy toward China, and that Congress will never dare cut off American business's access to the Chinese market. Congress has a chance to prove that when matters of fundamental national security are at stake, the United States can break this addiction.

The Bush administration can do its part by augmenting America's strategic relationship with Taiwan and, above all, by selling Taiwan the weapons it needs to maintain the cross-straits military balance. At its core, after all,

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this entire crisis has really been about Taiwan—certainly from the Chinese perspective. The Chinese now need to know that their efforts to force the United States away from the defense of Taiwan cannot succeed. An internal Pentagon review has made it clear that the balance is swiftly tilting against Taiwan and that among the many things Taiwan needs is the Aegis battle-management system. Later this month, the Bush administration will have to decide whether or not the Taiwanese can purchase Aegis. Now, more than ever, the answer must be yes. Not only is the sale of Aegis the only appropriate response to Chinese behavior. But to decline to sell Aegis now, after all that has happened, would only reconfirm the Chinese impression that the United States is weak and afraid of confrontation.

Needless to say, we do not seek war with China. That

is what advocates of appeasement always say about those who argue for standing up to an international bully. But it is the appeasers who wind up leading us into war. We have been calling for the active containment of China for the past six years precisely because we think it is the only way to keep the peace. Whatever risks may accompany a policy of confrontation and containment, the risks of weakness are infinitely greater. China hands both inside and outside the administration will argue that this crisis needs to be put behind us so that the U.S.-China relationship can return to normal. It is past time for everyone to wake up to the fact that the Chinese behavior we have seen this past week *is* normal. We have glimpsed the future. The only question now is whether we have the wisdom and the strength to meet it.

—Robert Kagan and William Kristol

None Dare Call It Tyranny

Three years ago this month, America's political, foreign policy, and business establishment was rolling its eyes in anticipation of yet another ritualized congressional debate over renewal of China's most-favored-nation trade status. Once again in that debate, small-minded, irresponsible types were expected to harp on minor imperfections in the Sino-U.S. relationship, like the fact that China's trade economy sustains a political regime of hair-curling, systematic barbarity. Elite opinion would no doubt prevail against these quibblers, as usual, in order that the great god Engagement might continue to smile on Wall Street. But elite opinionators were nervous just the same, for they knew that the pending debate itself—all that exaggerated hair-pulling about the footnotes in some do-gooder organization's human rights report—would offend Beijing, Engagement's holy city.

So, uncomfortable about the prospect of such sacrilege, and determined that it not recur in future years, the Clinton administration redoubled its efforts to abolish the MFN debate by securing China's accession to the World Trade Organization. To that end, President Clinton himself planned a trans-Pacific pilgrimage in June. And so, in April 1998, the Commerce Department was already in Beijing, leading a high-level delegation of American corporate

executives through a series of pre-summit meetings with trade policy officials in the Chinese government. One of the Americans on this trip was a fellow named Armand M. Pacher, senior vice president of the Prudential insurance company. A reporter from the Newark *Star-Ledger* caught up with him during an after-hours break.

"The change is breathtaking," Pacher marveled as he looked out his hotel window at the Beijing skyline. "The progress is just outstanding." It's a "terribly exciting" time, a brand-new China, in fact, a completely "different world" from the grey-toned Maoist past. For instance: There are suddenly so many "wonderful restaurants" in the capital, "as nice as you can find anywhere."

So many wonderful restaurants, and yet, at that exact same moment, 750 miles south-southeast of Armand M. Pacher's contented belly, a 30-year-old rural laborer named Zhou Jianxiong hadn't had a bit to eat in several days. And that was the least of it. In January 1998, Zhou and his wife, Jiang Lianhui, had left their 9-year-old son with his grandmother. Jiang had then moved to Guangdong province and Zhou had moved to the city of Changsha in Hunan—both of them in search of work. But by April, state birth-control-policy enforcement officers in the couple's native Hunan township of Chunhua had somehow convinced

themselves that Jiang was pregnant without permission. So they tracked Zhou down, brought him back, and ordered him to produce his wife for a gynecological examination.

Zhou did not know where Jiang was exactly, he told the birth-control police, but his wife couldn't be pregnant in any case: She'd undergone a tubal ligation the previous November. Rejecting this explanation, the officials summarily detained the young man, denied him food, and brutally tortured him for ten straight days. Four days into the ordeal, Zhou's mother and son arrived at the birth-control office to plead on his behalf. They, too, were detained without food. Zhou's mother was forced to stand still for nearly a week, listening to her son's screams from an upstairs room.

On May 12, the family was released from custody on condition that Zhou Jianxiong and Jiang Lianhui immediately complete paperwork requesting authority to have a second child. Returning the next day, Zhou reported that he remained unable to contact his wife, and therefore couldn't obtain the signature necessary to process the sterile woman's pregnancy application. He was again detained. He was again denied food. He was stripped naked, roped around the ankles, and hung upside down. He was whipped with lashes and beaten with wooden clubs. He was burned with cigarettes and branded with a soldering iron. And after 48 hours of this, in the service of China's national one-child policy, Zhou's interrogators tied electrical wire around his penis and testicles and then tore them from his body. Whereupon, sweet mercy, on May 15, 1998, the poor man finally died.

That same day, here in Washington, Robert A. Kapp, president of the U.S.-China Business Council, published a nifty little essay in his house organ, the *China Business Review*. Kapp lobbies Congress on behalf of American commercial interests in China. He draws a handsome salary, that is to say, for representing a Potemkin-village understanding of Beijing as indisputable verity, while deriding any doubter's concern for the real-life villagers as so much adolescent self-indulgence. It is necessary and proper, Robert A. Kapp wrote on the day Zhou Jianxiong was mutilated and murdered, for right-thinking Americans to "celebrate . . . the extraordinary depth of change and progress that China has achieved." And it is "long past due" for the "hyperventilation and virulent domestic political accusation" the rest of us persist in directing against China to stop. Such criticism is an "anachronistic irritant" to cooperation between our two great peoples.

A few months later, Congress re-upped Beijing's preferential treatment under the U.S. tariff schedule—as if to prove Kapp correct. And in the process, Congress altered the traditional designation from "most favored nation" exporter to the presumably less anachronistic "normal trade relations" partner. As if there were anything "normal" about an America, founded to vindicate the universal truths of human liberty, that nowadays eagerly makes spec-

ulative business investments in, and buys its textiles and tennis shoes from, a 3.7-million-square-mile dictatorship.

As this is written, bipartisan Washington grows increasingly desperate to repair such an abnormal normality—to "move on," in President Bush's words, past this regrettable misunderstanding about China's having downed an unarmed American plane, interrogated its crew like prisoners of war, and held them hostage. We explain in the editorial above why this incident will indelibly alter the geostrategic calculus of Sino-U.S. relations, no matter what its resolution, and how disastrous it will be for the American government to pretend otherwise. But we would like to point out, as well, that the status quo our leaders propose to return to comes quite close to practical and moral disaster in its own right.

It would more than prove this argument, we think, even had the crisis over our surveillance plane never occurred, that the Chinese government has lately adopted the habit of arresting without warning—and committing to its gulag—visiting U.S. residents and citizens. And that our government has inexplicably decided that the best it can say or do on behalf of these people, *our* people, is . . . virtually nothing. Were any other country on Earth involved, deafening alarm bells would be going off in the White House and Congress. But no: The State Department's consular information program continues blandly to advise American travelers that "China is a safe country"—that they should merely observe "normal safety precautions." You know: "Check that fire exits are unlocked and free from obstructions in hotels, restaurants, theaters, and shopping centers." And "remain alert for signs of altitude sickness" in the mountains.

One might think China's internal security service worth mentioning. One might think China's internal security service worth mentioning merely with respect to China's own citizens. And one might think—we do think—that the plight of China's citizens alone should be sufficient to establish the just and proper goal of American policy toward the People's Republic. "Friendship" and "cooperation" are not that goal.

Complaining that the Hainan Island airplane controversy was bad for business, a lobbyist representing such American retailers as Avon and Tupperware told the *Wall Street Journal* on April 4 that "China isn't our enemy." But the Chinese government is surely the enemy of the billion-plus people it commands. The murder of Zhou Jianxiong was not an anomaly. He fell victim to a regime as violent and primitive in its contempt for freedom as any that now exists, a despotism in which summary detention, torture, even death—for arbitrarily identified "crimes"—are normative, occurring thousands of times each year. The United States is *supposed* to cast itself the enemy of such a tyranny. We dishonor ourselves every day that we fail to do so.

—David Tell, for the Editors