2-20-2009

Time Machine: Dear US Presidential Candidates …

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February 20, 2009 in In Case You Missed It by The China Beat | No comments

By Robert A. Kapp

February, 2009: we are in the early days of a new Administration, and the Internet and print media bulge with messages of advice to the new President and the new Secretary of State about how to deal with China. Some of the missives are Olympian. Others are avuncular. They serve multiple purposes, and seek to reach multiple audiences.

Reading them, I was reminded of one of my own exercises of a similar nature, in the fall of the year 2000. Eight long years; so much has happened. Then, we were only a couple of months beyond the huge political battle over extending Permanent Normal Trade Relations to China – a Hill struggle brought the most strident arguments over China to the forefront of American attention.

Before that, in reverse chronological order, lay the Lee Wen Ho case; the Cox Commission and its allegations of Chinese nuclear theft; the Hughes-Loral furor over alleged transfer of military rocketry knowledge to China; Johnny Chung, John Huang, Charlie Trie and the scandal over "campaign finance." Amid all that had come the Belgrade Embassy bombing and the siege of the Sasser embassy. Only a couple of years earlier had occurred the PRC missile tests off northern Taiwan and the sending of the Seventh Fleet to waters off Taiwan. Among the colorful Congressional comments along the way, in 1999, came the denunciation of the PRC leadership as a bunch of "child molesters." One very well known Member of Congress, in a speech to members of his own party the same year, referred to the "big wet kissup" of the Clinton regime to Beijing as nothing short of "the full Lewinsky."

Thus the immediate background to my open-letter message to our presidential candidates at the time, George W. Bush and Al Gore. China Beat readers can form their own judgments, eight-plus long years later, as to where the U.S. and China have been and where we have come, and whether this particular "advice" from a receding moment in time still burns, or whether it merely flickers feebly in the cooling embers of another era.

This piece was originally published in the September-October 2000 issue of China Business Review.

Dear US Presidential Candidates...

Congratulations on securing your parties’ nominations for the presidency. You have embarked on a deeply personal journey in which hundreds of millions have a vital stake. We wish you health and fulfillment in the campaign and, to the winner, we wish success in a tough job with unequalled potential for enhancing the well-being of all Americans...

...As you conduct your campaigns and prepare to serve the nation, I hope you don't mind my offering a few personal thoughts on America’s future with China and the critical role of the president in shaping that future.

1. The United States and China must work at building a world system in which China is, for the first time in our 225-year history, a force to be reckoned with. Even if we wanted to, it is now impossible to shunt China back into its nineteenth- and twentieth-century identity: impoverished, self-isolated, riven by civil war, assaulted by more powerful states, or imprisoned in Marxist-Leninist doctrinarism. Those days are over. There is no going back. The United States and China must either find the means to maintain a civil and respectful bilateral relationship in a shrinking and perilous world, or face the consequences of their failure.

2. China must not be an American afterthought. Maintaining a productive relationship with China should rank high on the American agenda. Leaving US-China relations far down on the totem pole of US concerns will not serve our national interest well.

3. The greatest danger we face in our relations with China is the danger of unfamiliarity and of its partners, fear of the unknown and unwarranted casualness. Engagement with China is demanding, but
it’s not extraterrestrial. We must grapple with a deeply ingrained habit of relegating China to the periphery of our national consciousness, except in moments of crisis; of assuming that China (or for that matter Asia as a whole) is somehow so exotic (or, as one Cabinet member once put it to me, “so darned far away”) that we need not place a priority on engaging with it day in and day out. Paying attention to relations with China only when something bad happens, or only when a domestic political storm breaks out, is a recipe for unnecessary tensions.

4. The president must frame American relations with China. There is simply no substitute for presidential energy on this. If he does not lead, others will fill the void: elected figures of more limited constituency, for whom China sometimes represents opportunity without responsibility; members of the media, who provide Americans with a fraction of one minute’s worth of information about China on any given day and who thrive on pungent momentary “news”; interest groups—business, labor, the non-governmental community—all of which have a role to play, but none of which can substitute fully for presidential leadership in the making of sensitive and far-reaching American policy decisions.

5. Presidential leadership on China requires hard work. The president must communicate to the American people about our relations with China, even when there is no crisis and no triumph. He must also communicate successfully with the Chinese, a very different audience. But before he communicates, the president must “know himself and know the other side,” as an old Chinese saying goes. It is not impossible, but it takes time and care. It takes meeting the Chinese. It takes seeing China. It takes consensus-building. It requires allocation of precious talent and time within an administration inevitably beset by limitless demands for both.

6. Far-reaching affinity will not come easily to nations as different as the United States and China. Happily, the world has created a number of structures and systems, including the World Trade Organization, to maintain predictable and stable relations among vastly different nations. China in the past 20 years has committed itself increasingly to participation in the world’s principal economic and political regimes. Wherever possible, the president should position the United States to encourage China’s growing commitment to multilateral regimes and norms. He should both ensure that the United States accords China the respect that full participation in international regimes entails, and do his utmost to ensure that China reciprocally displays the same respect and lives up to its own responsibilities.

7. At home, the president must not allow himself to be drawn politically on China. This is perhaps the hardest domestic challenge of all. For reasons too long to describe here—including real events in China—China sound bites sometimes have special pungency in the American public consciousness. Some will paint a simplistic picture of China—a single memorable phrase, a brilliant moral call to arms, a single riveting photo—and demand that the president “take sides.” They will present China as a morality play, a test of the president’s fidelity to elemental values pure and simple. They will suggest that a nuanced and carefully balanced US posture with regard to China is nothing short of “appeasement” or “kowtowing to Beijing.” China’s political radioactivity in the United States feeds on itself. If the president is to lead on China, he must stay out of the China trap at home. But presidential leadership is itself the best way out of the China trap.

8. In guiding American relations with China, the president should understand and draw upon the skills and insights of people of Chinese descent in the United States. People have come to the United States from China for a century and a half—first as exploited coolie labor, later as refugees from war and political convulsion, more recently as students and businessmen. Some are now tenth-generation Americans. Others are new citizens. Some know their ancestral homeland well; others are total strangers to it. Some are brilliant, others are dull. Some vote one way, others vote another. But they are Americans of Chinese heritage, and even as they contribute to America’s strength, many cherish their roots and their relationships in China. Their position on the cusp of China-US cultural contact is an underutilized American asset. There is a misguided suggestion afoot in the land that Americans of Chinese origin are somehow vulnerable to the influence of a malevolent oriental despotism. The president should leave no doubt about where the nation stands on this, and should enhance our nation’s ability to manage its relations with China by drawing upon our country’s Chinese-American resources.
9. The president needs to lead the nation in recognizing that China, more than most countries, is a work in progress. China is in constant motion. Unchanging first principles are few, apart from an abiding sense of historical identity and a deep-seated determination to be respected by others. It is not easy, but the president must anticipate the certainty of uncertainty, the permanence of impermanence, the constancy of inconstancy, in US relations with China. That does not require suspension of ethical standards or of plain common sense. It does demand both strategic long-term vision and short-term flexibility.

10. The president must understand both the power of American example and the limits of American influence. “Sending China a Message” has proven rhetorically popular but substantively unproductive. Telling China to do as we say, on pain of economic punishment, is a fond fantasy. The American president should not take on the impossible burden of remaking China in America’s image, whether from the pulpit or the cockpit. He can, though, strengthen America’s influence with China. Many in China study the United States. They look for the sources of this nation’s vitality and productivity. Their search has century-old roots. China’s willingness to learn from American experience, and the desire to assimilate in some way America’s (and other countries’) strengths into China’s difficult environment, is genuine. It is both a reflection and a source of American strength.

No matter which of you attains the presidency this winter, we wish you well, and we hope that the lessons American business has learned over nearly three decades of work with China may be of service to you and your nation al leadership.

Tags: Barack Obama