

## When Clinton Lost China

By Rep. Chris Smith

**T**hirty years ago Sunday, Bill Clinton lost China. On May 26, 1994, Mr. Clinton delinked human rights from China's most-favored-nation trade status.



President Bill Clinton speaking about China's trade status at the White House press room in Washington, May 26, 1994

In 1992 Gov. Clinton promised "an America that will not coddle tyrants, from Baghdad to Beijing." After taking office in 1993, he issued an executive order that demanded human-rights improvements as a condition for continued MFN status. It called for "releasing and providing an acceptable accounting for Chinese citizens imprisoned or detained for the non-violent expression of their political and religious beliefs, including such expression of beliefs in connection with the Democracy Wall and Tiananmen Square movements." None of that happened.

In January 1994, midway through the executive order's

review period, I went to China armed with a letter signed by more than 100 members of Congress pledging to stand with Mr. Clinton. Virtually every Chinese official told me that the fix was in. Trade would be delinked from human rights. I didn't believe them. On returning, I told Secretary of State Warren Christopher: "They think you're bluffing!"

They were right. Mr. Clinton abandoned the executive order, signaling to China that the U.S. cared only for trade and profit. I argued that Mr. Clinton was turning his back on the oppressed in China and that the Communist Party couldn't be trusted. The party got rich and militarily powerful. The Chinese people, Americans and the world are paying the price.

It is time to right past wrongs and rebalance the trade relationship. The first step must be to repeal permanent normal trade relations, as MFN is now known. In January Rep. Tom Tiffany (R., Wis.) and I introduced the China Trade Relations Act, which would withdraw PNTR and allow China to regain favorable tariff status only through an annual presidential review dependent on "significant progress" on human rights.

Withdrawing PNTR would alert business leaders that relying on China-based supply chains is no longer in their interests. The Uyghur Forced

Labor Prevention Act of 2022 has already spurred some movement of supply chains out of Xinjiang. Withdrawing PNTR would prompt businesses to look for alternative sources of goods and materials, either in the U.S. or from more reliable friends and allies. It would also restore a level playing field for American workers. China has engaged in unfair trade practices for decades, cratering parts of America's manufacturing base and often making American consumers complicit in buying goods made with slave labor.

---

In 1992, he vowed to link trade to human rights.

On May 26, 1994, he betrayed that promise.

---

Congress rightfully withdrew Russia's PNTR status last year. The world's democracies are starting to reconsider the national-security implications of economic interdependence with dictatorships. Revoking PNTR for China would give the U.S. more leverage to protect its economic and security interests. And it would be good for the Chinese people, even if it comes more than 30 years late.

*Mr. Smith, a Republican, represents New Jersey's Fourth Congressional District.*