

China syndrome: The incentive for trade

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [July 15, 1998](#) issue

President Clinton gently urged Chinese leaders to try a little tenderness in dealing with dissidents. But apart from that rhetoric on human rights, it was clear that the real purpose of Clinton's trip to China was not to scold Chinese leaders but to start reversing the \$50 billion imbalance in trade between the two powers. Clinton's enthusiastic embrace of the Chinese as trading partners is not unique to him; it is in the grand American tradition of economic and diplomatic selectivity. If trade is our priority, then human rights and moral concerns are pushed into the background. If trade is not important, then American presidents will give priority to justice and moral principles in foreign policy.

This is neither a partisan nor a contemporary stance. It has been, rather, characteristic of American diplomacy from our earlier days. In *Undaunted Courage*, a gripping story of the Lewis and Clark expedition, Stephen E. Ambrose reminds us that economic interests prompted Thomas Jefferson to send Meriwether Lewis and William Clark in search of a water route to the Pacific Ocean.

Jefferson had already planned the expedition that he hoped would discover a link between the Missouri and the Columbia rivers when, through a series of fortuitous events (including Spain's desire not to let the British gain control of the area), he completed the Louisiana Purchase from Spain, through which he acquired most of the present-day U.S. west of the Mississippi.

After Lewis and Clark returned from their heroic journey (marred only by the fact that the water connection did not exist; the travelers undertook a considerable portage through the Rocky Mountains), the U.S. immediately began to develop the new territories. Lewis, appointed by Jefferson as the Louisiana Territory's first governor, proposed to Jefferson that fur traders (a business in which Lewis had already invested as a secret partner) be given priority over settlers in the new lands.

To protect fur traders and establish Americans rather than the British as the primary trading partners with the Indian nations, Lewis called for a system of “army-built-and-defended trading posts” along the Missouri River as far as today’s North Dakota. These posts would provide secure bases for the fur traders and merchandising centers at which Indians would trade for supplies.

Lewis and Clark knew that the Sioux, by far the most powerful tribe in the region, were also the tribe most resistant to a white invasion. But “Lewis had a plan to deal with [the Sioux], based on his view of the Indian character,” writes Ambrose. Lewis wrote to Jefferson that “the love of gain is the Indians’ ruling passion.” Lewis underscored the words, notes Ambrose, “as if this were some new insight and applied only to Indians, not all human beings.” Lewis went on: “The fear of punishment must form the corrective.” No “punishment could assume a more terrific shape to [the Sioux] than that of withholding every description of merchandise from them.”

Then, in words chillingly prescient of current U.S. policies of imposing economic embargoes against nations whose leaders we dislike, Lewis proposed an embargo on the Sioux. Ambrose summarizes the plan:

The United States should build trading posts on the river, but forbid the Sioux the right to trade at them. That would have the advantage of enforcing “a compliance with our will without the necessity of bloodshed.” Soon the Sioux would crumble. “I am confident,” Lewis wrote, that in order to trade “they would sacrifice any individual who may be the object of our displeasure, even should he be their favorite chief, for their thirst for merchandise is paramount to every other consideration.”

By assuming the Sioux would sacrifice even their “favorite chief” because of their “thirst for merchandise,” Lewis was expressing an American mind-set that continues to prevail as we wait for leaders like Fidel Castro and Saddam Hussein to fall because we believe their people will prefer “merchandise” to their “favorite chief” or, as is now the case, their only available leaders. Lewis was projecting onto the Sioux a commercial preoccupation that motivated the mercantile and political leaders of the U.S. Unfortunately, his perceptions, and those of his mentor Jefferson, were too narrow; they ignored any principle of justice for the Native Americans.

Ambrose says Lewis’s boycott of the Sioux “clearly favored the established elite of St. Louis over the onrushing Americans looking for land. Just as clear, it was going to

require expenditures by the government far in excess of anything yet contemplated in Washington.”

Commerce is a legitimate concern for any government in dealing with a foreign power, but a national policy that allows commercial interest to override its moral vision is not only unbecoming to a democracy, it is self-defeating. Economic boycotts have never been effective instruments of foreign policy; they are, rather, a tool of vengeance that serves to benefit a few. Now that the president has gone to China and acknowledged our eagerness to trade with that nation in spite of its poor human rights record, isn't it time we ended our economic boycotts against the people of Iraq and Cuba, nations whose record on human rights is also objectionable?