

Sen. Cotton Educates the Nation About the China Challenge

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COMMENTARY

“You know we stopped filming a long time ago,” host Stephen Colbert said with a nervous smile to guest Jon Stewart. It was late June 2021, only a week or so after “The Late Show” had returned from its pandemic-induced remote broadcasts to film before a studio audience. The former host of “The Daily Show” had flustered his voluble protégé by espousing in the form of an extended comic rant the forbidden opinion that COVID-19 had originated in a lab. Polite society, government, and major social media platforms had done their best to vilify and suppress it.

Stewart’s rant revolved around the Wuhan Institute of Virology, home to China’s only lab that specializes in gain-of-function research on coronaviruses. This fact alone, Stewart contended with growing manic intensity and to Colbert’s increasing dismay, led to an obvious and inescapable conclusion. The novel, highly contagious, and unusually deadly coronavirus – which first appeared in Wuhan in late 2019 and by the spring of 2020 brought nations around the world to their knees – was created in and escaped from the Wuhan Institute of Virology.

Colbert did his best to downplay his friend’s flamboyant breach of progressive etiquette, but the damage had been done. Jon Stewart gave permission to the left to think a thought and express a view about China proscribed by progressive authorities.

The American public’s understanding of the elements of the China challenge remains poor. One major reason is that American elites have cooperated with the Chinese Communist Party, a ruthless dictatorship, to curtail speech in the United States that criticizes China, and which illuminates the formidable threat to American freedom posed by the CCP.

Sen. Tom Cotton understands as well as anyone the many ways that Americans collaborate with the CCP to stifle the reporting of facts and the expression of judgments that the party does not want heard. In early 2020, he was the first prominent national officeholder to offer the common-sense opinion that the novel coronavirus, which had begun to attract attention in the West, might have been produced in a Chinese lab. Bastions of progressivism such as the New York Times and the Washington Post and eminent scientists pilloried him for peddling despicable conspiracy theories. Recently, Andrew Noymer – associate professor in population health and disease prevention at the University of California, Irvine, and editor-in-chief of the Journal of the Academy of Public Health – confirmed that the evidence overwhelmingly favors a lab leak.

Sen. Cotton also understands as well as anyone the severity and several dimensions of the China challenge. In his New York Times #1 bestselling book, "Seven Things You Can't Say About China," Arkansas' junior senator "lays out the real and pressing threat from Chinese Communists based on established facts and the inherent logic of events." His new book (he generously mentions me in the acknowledgments) is "not partisan or a 'yellow peril' screed." And he is careful to "stress that Chinese communism is the threat, not the ancient Chinese civilization or the Chinese people, the first and worst victims of Chinese communism.

Cotton's short book accomplishes two interrelated tasks. It exposes the thoughtlessness as well as the dishonorable motives behind the coverup of the China challenge by American government officials, major corporations, the media, and university administrations. And it clarifies the CCP's ambitions – which drive its depredations in China and its predatory conduct directed at the United States and at nations around the world – to impose an authoritarian cast on world order and position Beijing at its center.

Cotton devotes a chapter to each of seven truths that America's elites have ignored, obscured, or denied.

First, "China is an evil empire." At home, the CCP "has built a dystopian police state to monitor, manipulate, and master its people," writes Cotton. The party especially targets Christians, Tibetans, the Falun Gong (a Chinese spiritual movement), and ethnic Mongolians. It is committing genocide against the Uyghur population in Xinjiang in northwest China. And it has enfeebled freedom and democracy in Hong Kong.

Second, "China is preparing for war." The CCP "has undertaken the largest peacetime military buildup in history, amassing the biggest and second most advanced armed forces in the world," according to Cotton. In addition, it "has claimed hundreds of thousands of square miles of ocean, built and militarized artificial islands, and expanded its overseas military presence." And it "openly threatens war against Taiwan."

Third, "China is waging economic world war." Cotton dates the onset of the CCP's global economic warfare to 2000, when "the United States granted China permanent most-favored-nation status. This "provided China with generous trading terms" and "enabled China to join the World Trade Organization the next year." Since then, the CCP "has stolen trillions of dollars of wealth, crippled entire industries, seized control of developing technologies, destroyed millions of American jobs, and extorted entire countries with its newfound economic power." The CCP also has devoted massive resources to the Belt and Road Initiative, "a web of roads, railroads, pipelines, power plants, ports, and other infrastructure projects." With the BRI, the CCP aims "to spread its military, economic, and political influence across Asia and Europe, gain leverage over borrowing nations, employ its workers, and enrich its companies."

Fourth, “China has infiltrated our society.” By restricting or barring access to its enormous consumer markets – even by threatening to do so – the CCP strong-arms Hollywood, professional athletes, media, higher education, corporate America, and Wall Street to eliminate references to CCP oppression and Taiwanese freedom and democracy.

Fifth, “China has infiltrated our government.” The CCP, Cotton reports, has “spied on our military, stolen our weapons technology, courted state and local politicians, and cultivated a powerful New China Lobby in Washington to pressure your elected representatives.”

Sixth, “China is coming for our kids.” Directed by its parent company ByteDance, which is headquartered in China and operates under CCP supervision, TikTok harms young Americans: It invades their privacy by collecting reams of personal data about them; it inundates them with pornography and other content that encourages self-destructive behavior; and it bombards them with pro-China and anti-American propaganda. Furthermore, by funding Confucious Classrooms at American schools and Confucious Institutes at American universities, the CCP buys from principals and university presidents cooperation in ensuring that their faculty and administrators speak only well of China. And the CCP fuels America’s fentanyl crisis, either producing, or supplying Mexico with the ingredients to manufacture, the deadly drug, “which is fifty times stronger than heroin.”

Seventh, “China could win.” Cotton cautions that the CCP may acquire the ability to overturn the American-led, post-World War II international system. Whereas American global dominance favors freedom and democracy, a world order dominated by Beijing would empower authoritarian nations and license abuse of human rights in the name of collective values. Taiwan, Cotton argues, is the key. It “manufactures around 60 percent of the world’s semiconductors and 90 percent of the world’s most advanced semiconductors.” For this reason alone, if CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping fulfills his promise to conquer the island located some 100 miles from mainland China, he would trigger a severe worldwide depression. The fall of Taiwan would also, Cotton warns, embolden America’s enemies and dispirit America’s friends, spark the proliferation of nuclear weapons, erode American influence in the international economy, and, quite possibly, precipitate the subjugation of Washington to Beijing.

Cotton supplements these seven truths about the CCP’s nefarious conduct and intentions with seven steps American citizens must take to meet the China challenge. Citizens should stay informed about the myriad ways that the CCP imperils American freedom. We should inform friends and family about the dangers. We should vote for candidates who make a priority of prevailing against China. We should refuse to use, and keep our families off, Chinese apps. We should reduce purchases of products made in China. We should increase purchases of products made in America. And, counsels the hard-headed statesman and Army combat veteran, we should “pray for the Chinese people, the first and worst victims of the Chinese Communist Party.”

The Trump administration and Congress must also rise to the moment. President Trump needs to address his fellow citizens about the China challenge, laying out the threat and rallying the nation. Prominent among the president's proposals should be a reduction of American reliance on the Chinese economy through targeted economic measures that strengthen America's – and its friends' and partners' – manufacturing capabilities in select areas starting, say, with biopharmaceuticals, rare minerals, and semiconductors. The president should also explain how his administration will ensure American military superiority. And, with a view to the long term, the president should encourage Congress to create programs to promote advanced study among scholars, diplomats, and military analysts of Chinese language, culture, history, political institutions, and forms of empire.

To meet the China challenge, we must understand its several dimensions, not least the CCP's efforts to thwart such understanding.

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