Exceptional Foreign Relations:

The United States and China

International relations between The United States and The People’s Republic of China were formalized in 1972 when President Richard Nixon visited China and its leaders. Since that visit our policies and relations with China have been anything but normal. James Mann illustrates this exceptional relationship in his book About Face. Mann points out the significant players in these relations, and how they made it exceptional. Key figures such as Richard Nixon, Henry Kissinger, George Bush, and Bill Clinton all contributed, along with the domestic policies of their time, to the curious relationship that developed with China. Major events in the history of our international relations with China have also contributed to the strange and exceptional relationship. Specifically, the Tiananmen crackdown drastically altered our nation’s view of China, and impacted our relationship.

In the early 1970’s, when the United States and China formalized their relations, the key figures were President Nixon and his Security Advisor Henry Kissinger. Both were of the United States’ politically elite as well as of international notoriety. For the most part they kept their dealings with the Chinese quiet and secretive, and mainly sought a counter-balance to the Soviet Union and an exit from Vietnam. Since it was of vital necessity to gain the support of China in both of these areas, the United States did not
concern itself with the domestic policies of the Chinese. Our policy was that the domestic issues that China faced were its own affair, not to be interfered with by an outside nation such as us. By the time the key players of more recent times came to power, however, this attitude would change. President’s George Bush and Bill Clinton both approached Chinese domestic issues differently than President Nixon and Henry Kissinger. The one main reason for this switch was that our motives for dealing with China had changed. We no longer needed a counter-balance for the Soviet Union or an exit from Vietnam; instead we have interested ourselves primarily in the Asian market. This switch has allowed our country to be open with its criticisms and harsh with its policies. James Mann describes this difference that developed over the years as the largest “about face” of all, and a main element in our exceptional relations with China.

Critical events in our history with the Chinese have also impacted our peculiar relationship. One of these events occurred on June 4th in Beijing’s Tiananmen Square. The six week long demonstration for political change in China ended in Tiananmen Square as the People’s Liberation Army stormed in and rolled over demonstrators. The atrocity of this event was seen all over the United States on the evening news, and American’s, including the Bush administration, were quick to criticize and react. The administration quickly decided to lobby in the World Bank to postpone all loans to China, and six weeks later the action was formalized. Ultimately, the White House was forced into backing other actions taken toward China. Congress began imposing a series of strict sanctions on China, and also recommended that the United States suspend any high-level contacts with China. These new policies set the United States and China on a new course, and dramatically altered their relations. A relationship that was once
dominated by minimal intervention in the domestic issues confronting China was now based upon admonishing the Tiananmen crackdown.

James Mann states in his conclusion to About Face that he will resist the temptation to speculate on the future of American and Chinese relations. I will not demonstrate the same resistance, but instead give way to the temptation of speculation. It is my belief that relations between the Chinese and Americans will continue to be peculiar for some time. I make this assumption because of two fundamental principles. First, our relationship began in an extremely secretive manner, and has consequently never gained a full sense of legitimacy. Secondly, our relations are hindered because of our diametrically opposed systems of governance. Democratic and Communist states were pitted against each other for the better half of last century, and the good relationship experienced between China and the United States has always seemed to be the exception to the rule. The exception, however, has been far from perfect. If the United States is planning on continuing its good relationship with China, I would speculate that a change in style might be needed. Since both the United States and China understand very well how the other nation negotiates, I feel a firm yet respectful style is required. We must hold true to our democratic principles and not concede too much only to gain a little. However, as our formal relations enter their fourth decade, a mutual respect has developed and should be maintained.

The United States began its relations with the Chinese government in 1972 under Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger. These key players differed in their approach to the Chinese than our more recent negotiators with China. Nixon and Kissinger needed the help of the Chinese with respect to the Soviet Union and Vietnam. Because of these
necessities, they looked away from the domestic problems of the Chinese. President Bush did not take this approach after the Tiananmen Square crackdown, nor did President Clinton during his two terms in office. Since the years of President Nixon and Henry Kissinger, the United States has involved itself more in the domestic issues of China, especially after critical events such as the Tiananmen crackdown. In his book *About Face*, James Mann supports this view of an exceptional relationship between the United States and The People’s Republic of China.