What has happened in China is shameful, but our leaders' own shame is far greater. In the face of spreading repression, leaders in government and business have crawled on their hands and knees to Beijing begging for trade favors. This proud nation, which stood up to Nazi aggression and Soviet might, which rebuilt Europe and spread its wealth to the far corners of the globe, has turned its back on the Chinese government's human rights abuses just to sell more Buicks, Boeing jets, and Big Macs.

Now, I recognize that there are many in the business community who sincerely believe that trading with China is the best way to open up that closed society. But we have followed that advice for a long time -- and history does not support that hope. Consider the experience of the last five years.

In 1992, Bill Clinton campaigned for the White House loudly complaining that President Bush was "coddling dictators" in his treatment of China. His running mate, Al Gore, denounced Bush for toasting the "butchers of Tiananmen Square." In 1993, the newly elected Bill Clinton even issued an Executive Order linking the expansion of U.S. trade with communist China to their progress on human rights.

The brave Chinese dissident community in the U.S. and around the world cheered. But their hopes were quickly dashed.

With appalling suddenness, President Clinton reversed course and "delinked" trade policy and human rights. He announced that he would extend Most-Favored-Nation (MFN) trade privileges (which we never gave to the Soviet Union) to China, without making any pretense that the renewal was conditioned on improved performance on human rights. Congress, spurred by certain U.S. business groups anxious for profits, gave in and overwhelmingly voted for MFN.

China's hard-line rulers assessed our government's weakness on this issue and acted swiftly. Premier Li Peng almost immediately ordered a new crackdown on religious liberty. Repression of China's 12 million Catholics, 30 million Protestants, and Buddhist and Muslim minorities quickly intensified. Slave labor camps soon filled with believers who were caught worshipping or preaching outside the regime's state-controlled church system. Beatings and torture of these courageous souls became common.

If these incidents, grotesque as they are, seem far away, consider what our appeasement of China has meant for America's security in recent years. Each passing week brings new evidence of Beijing's massive military modernization. Already that buildup is being used to intimidate our allies and outmaneuver us.

Last year, in acts of unprovoked aggression, China fired missiles into the Straits of Taiwan to intimidate that emerging democracy as it held its first national presidential elections. Extending that intimidation to our shores, a senior Chinese military official casually remarked to a visiting U.S. diplomat that America would not keep its defense commitments to Taiwan if it meant the nuclear destruction of Los Angeles.

But China has not confined itself to mere words. Allegations of illegal interference in our 1996 elections continue to mount. Indictments have been issued in California against the Poly Group, a Chinese state-run business conglomerate headed by He Ding, son-in-law of the late President Deng Xiaoping. The Poly Group is charged with smuggling 2,000 high-powered AK-47 rifles to Los Angeles street gangs. Salesmen for the Poly Group, prosecutors allege, also offered to sell mortars, grenades and shoulder-fired missiles "capable of taking out a 747."

Incredibly, the AK-47s came ashore on a ship owned by COSCO, another Beijing-controlled enterprise. COSCO is the same company that the Clinton administration has helped lease ideal port facilities in Long Beach, California, that once belonged to the U.S. Navy. The Long Beach facility is one of a handful on our West Coast capable of servicing aircraft carriers.

In another unpublicized concession to communist China, the Clinton administration has given COSCO and other Chinese shippers special access to U.S. ports long designated as militarily and strategically "sensitive." China's government-run enterprises will now be able to enter these areas with a single day's notice to our already harried Customs and Coast Guard authorities.

Moreover, China has recently purchased formerly American-controlled port facilities at either end of the Panama Canal. The Canal Zone reverts to Panamanian control in 1998. Clearly, China is thinking strategically -- while our leaders don't appear to be thinking at all!

I have not even mentioned Hong Kong. It is a sad day for democracy when any part of the globe reverts from a condition of freedom to the grasp of a totalitarian power. On July 1 of this year, that is exactly what will happen to Hong Kong, which has enjoyed a prosperous period of growth and political liberty as a British enclave. In 1984, Britain agreed to return Hong Kong to Chinese control, with Beijing's guarantee that political and civil liberties there would be protected.

Now that guarantee is in tatters. China's puppet legislature for Hong Kong has already repealed or amended its Bill of Rights Ordinance as well as other ordinances protecting freedom of association and assembly. New policies promulgated in April sharply limit peaceful political protests and the activity of existing political parties -- with the exception, of course, of the Communist Party.

New York Times columnist A.M. Rosenthal sums up our current posture exactly: "Dictatorships," he writes, "do have a human rights policy: Act against any variety of our aggressions and we will punish you with loss of trade. The West answers forthrightly: Yes, master."

I believe that the time has come for us to give a different answer. Enclosed you will find a copy of the advertisement Family Research Council spearheaded that sends a different message to China's ruling elite and to our own leaders who abjectly court them. Our government can no longer turn its back on the sufferings and aspirations of our Chinese brethren. Economic freedom must go hand in hand with political and religious liberty.