

# Opinion

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## MISADVENTURES IN REGIME CHANGE

American covert efforts to promote democracy in Cuba have been counterproductive.

In 1996, spurred by an appetite for revenge, American lawmakers passed a bill spelling out a strategy to overthrow the government in Havana and “assist the Cuban people in regaining their freedom.” The Helms-Burton Act, signed into law by President Bill Clinton shortly after Cuba shot down two small civilian American planes, has served as the foundation for the \$264 million the United States spent over the last 18 years trying to instigate democratic reforms on the island.

Far from accomplishing that goal, the initiatives have been largely counterproductive. The funds have been a magnet for charlatans, swindlers and good intentions gone awry. The stealthy programs have increased hostility between the two nations, provided Cuba with a trove of propaganda fodder and stymied opportunities to cooperate in areas of mutual interest.

During the final years of the Clinton administration, the United States spent relatively little on programs in Cuba under Helms-Burton. That changed when George W. Bush came to power in 2001 with an ambitious aim to bring freedom to oppressed people around the world. The United States Agency for International Development, better known for its humanitarian work than cloak-and-dagger missions, became the primary vehicle for pro-democracy work in Cuba, where it is illegal.

In the early years of the Bush administration, spending on initiatives to oust the government surged from a few million a year to more than \$20 million in 2004. Most contracts were awarded to newly formed Cuban-American groups. One used funds on a legally questionable global lobbying effort to persuade foreign governments to support America’s embargo. The money was also used to buy food and clothes, but there was no way to track how much reached relatives of political prisoners, the intended recipients.

According to a November 2006 report by the Government Accountability Office, one contractor used the pro-democracy money to buy “a gas chain saw, computer gaming equipment and software (including Nintendo Game Boys and Sony PlayStations), a mountain bike, leather coats, cashmere sweaters, crab meat and Godiva chocolates,” purchases he was unable to justify to auditors.

The G.A.O. probe led the aid agency to start awarding more funds to established development organizations. In 2008, Congress appropriated \$45 million for the programs, a record amount. One major undertaking that started during the Bush years to expand Internet access in Cuba had disastrous repercussions for the Obama administration.

In September 2009, the State Department sent a relatively senior official to Havana in an attempt to restore mail service and to cooperate on migration policy, marking the highest level contact in years. That December, Cuban authorities arrested an American subcontractor who traveled to the island five times on U.S.A.I.D. business, posing as a tourist to smuggle communication equipment. At the time, many senior State Department officials were not fully aware of the scope and nature of the covert programs, but the Cubans, incensed at what they saw as a two-track policy, took a hard line with the American prisoner, Alan Gross, sentencing him to 15 years in prison.

After Mr. Gross’s arrest, the aid agency stopped sending American contractors into Cuba, but it allowed its contractors to recruit Latin Americans for secret missions that were sometimes detected by the Cuban intelligence services. An investigation by The Associated Press published in April revealed a controversial program carried out during the Obama administration. Between 2009 and 2012, Creative Associates International, a Washington firm, built a rudimentary text-messaging system similar to Twitter, known as ZunZuneo, Cuban slang for a hummingbird’s tweet. It was supposed to provide Cubans with a platform to share messages with a mass audience, and ultimately be used to assemble “smart mobs.” The program was scrapped in 2012.

The American money has provided food and comfort to relatives of political prisoners, and has been used to build limited access to satellite-based Internet connections. But it has done more to stigmatize than to help dissidents. Instead of stealth efforts to overthrow the government, American policy makers should find ways to empower ordinary Cubans by expanding study-abroad programs, professional exchanges and investment in new small businesses. They should continue to promote Internet connectivity, but realize that accomplishing that goal on a large scale will require coordination with the Cuban government.

Washington must recognize that the most it can hope to accomplish is to influence Cuba’s evolution toward a more open society. That is more likely to come about through stronger diplomatic relations than subterfuge.

# Slavery’s shadow on Switzerland

Tony Wild

Two months ago, I discovered that my grandmother, Ida, had been a verdingkinder, or “contract child,” in Switzerland in the 1890s.

A transcript from the archives in Teuffenthal, a small village south of Bern, the capital, confirmed that Ida, an orphan, had been contracted as an unpaid domestic servant to a woman in a neighboring village. The Swiss authorities used the nine-year-old’s meager inheritance to pay the woman 120 Swiss francs a year; Ida’s seven-year-old brother, Fritz, was made to pay 70 Swiss francs to fund his hardscrabble life as a farmhand. They both “had the appearance of being very hungry,” the document chillingly noted. They were kept under contract for about eight years.

Though disturbing, my grandmother’s story is hardly unique. In Switzerland, hundreds of thousands of children were victims of a state-sanctioned system of forced labor dating from the 19th century.

Under this so-called welfare policy, orphans, sons and daughters of poor, single mothers, or illegitimate children — those in situations deemed precarious, or whom the state feared would be a financial burden — were brought to the local town hall and auctioned to farmers seeking free labor; the win-

ning bidder was whoever demanded the least annual compensation from the commune.

The verdingkinder system largely faded out in the 1970s; many Swiss have only recently learned of the program’s existence. But this and other policies of administrative internment did not officially become illegal in the country until 1981. At least 10,000 former verdingkinder are still alive.

This spring, a committee of government advisers, sociologists, historians and jurists proposed a reparations initiative that would establish a fund of 500 million Swiss francs (about \$520 million), to be disbursed to living victims of the verdingkinder system via an independent commission.

Two weeks ago, supporters of the initiative collected the last of the 100,000 signatures necessary to force a national vote; Parliament must now decide whether to back the proposal.

That it will do so is hardly a forgone conclusion, as members of many powerful interests, including the Free Democratic Party and the Farmer’s Union, have opposed contributing to such a fund. But Parliament must. Agreeing to compensate the victims would mean that their suffering has been finally and properly acknowledged by its ultimate perpetrator: the state itself.

While it is impossible to determine the exact number of verdingkinder, some historians estimate that as many as 5 percent of all Swiss children were

forced into farm labor from the 19th to mid-20th century. According to one account from 1826, “Who asked the least got the child despite its screaming and protests. ... The cheaper they had contracted the children, the better for the community.” While public auctions were phased out in some cantons beginning in the mid-19th century, a similar lowest-bid system is thought to have persisted until the 1930s in some rural districts, behind closed doors.

**The state must compensate the surviving victims of a system of forced labor that dates from the 19th century.**

verdingkinder have described waking at six, working in the fields, going to school and being sent out to work again until late at night. Weekends were often spent in the fields as well.

But hard unpaid labor wasn’t the only problem. By placing vulnerable children at the mercy of poor farmers, the Swiss authorities created a situation ripe for abuse. The verdingkinder faced beatings, starvation and sexual abuse. Shunned by their schoolmates, they became socially isolated; suicide rates were high.

Well into the 20th century, other administrative internment policies operated concurrently with the verdingkinder system (the living victims of which are also eligible for compensation under the proposed initiative). Thousands of children were unwillingly placed in foster homes where they were abused or forced into unpaid labor. Adolescents and young adults deemed morally degenerate, including juvenile delinquents and unmarried mothers, were sent to detention centers or even prisons; young mothers were made to put their children up for adoption. The authorities were also responsible for forced abortions and the forced sterilization or chemical castration of hundreds of patients in Swiss clinics.

The seeping out of accounts by verdingkinder and other internees over the past decade has triggered a wave of soul-searching in this otherwise phlegmatic nation. But thus far, Switzerland’s formal position on reparation has been incoherent.

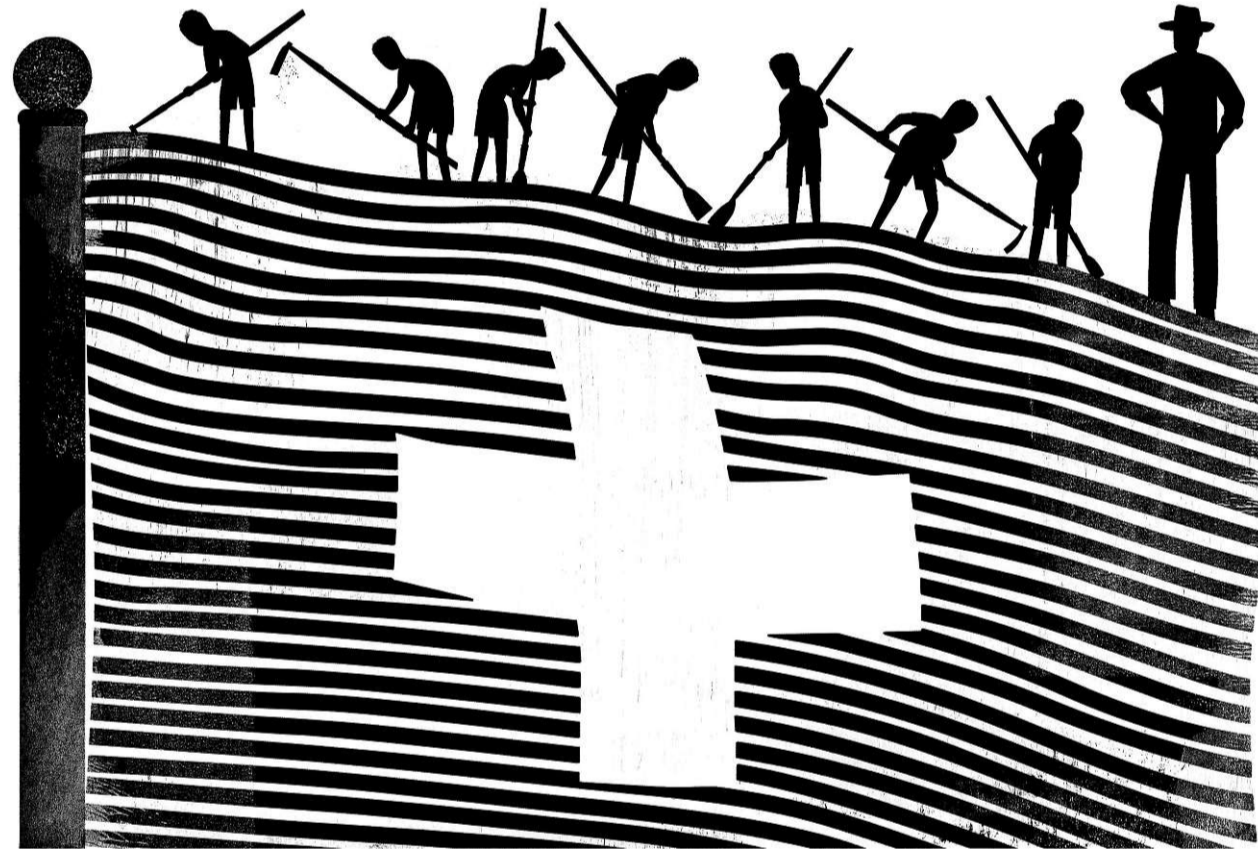
An attempt to compensate the victims of forced sterilization was rejected by Parliament in 2004, though it finally succeeded in bringing these government policies to national attention. Parliament mustered a grudging official apology in 2013, but when it adopted legislation this March on the need for “rehabilitation” for administrative internees, compensation was not on the agenda.

Little by little, though, resistance is becoming more difficult. This year, an official committee again stressed the importance of compensation. In April, in what was essentially a stopgap measure, it established an emergency relief fund of 7 million to 8 million Swiss francs (at least \$7.3 million) for victims in serious financial difficulty, available through June 2015. Just two months after opening to the public, the fund had received over 350 requests for assistance.

For many, the proposed reparation initiative is too little, too late. Even if it sails through unopposed, the aging verdingkinder and former internees — many of whom emerged from their stolen childhoods barely literate, unable to find jobs or establish relationships, chronically depressed or suicidal — would not begin to see compensation until at least 2017.

For this reason, the initiative also calls for a “scientific study of this dark episode in Swiss history.” But an independent Truth and Reconciliation commission would be more appropriate. The Swiss need to openly acknowledge that, until the late 20th century, their government effectively condoned a system of slavery within its borders. The text of the proposed compensation initiative never uses that word. But until the Swiss are finally able to see this system for what it was, the verdingkinder and others affected by administrative internment will not get the justice they deserve.

TONY WILD is the author of several history books, and, most recently, the novel “The Moonstone Legacy.”



MITCH BLUNT

# Resetting U.S.-China relations

Wang Dong  
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President Obama arrived in Beijing on Monday for a meeting of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum. He will meet with China’s president, Xi Jinping, at the Great Hall of the People on Wednesday. The occasion is a vital opportunity for the two presidents to reset the relationship between the nations.

Since Mr. Obama and Mr. Xi last met, at the Sunnylands estate in Rancho Mirage, Calif., in June 2013, many analysts have been pessimistic about that relationship. China’s announcement of an “air defense identification zone” in the East China Sea last November, and ongoing disagreements in areas like computer crime, climate change and trade, have contributed to a climate of mistrust.

The two presidents should use their meeting on Wednesday to reassure each other about their nations’ strategic intentions and to ease suspicions that each government harbors toward the other. This will require candor on the part of both leaders.

Mr. Obama should reiterate that America welcomes the continuing, peaceful emergence of China as a world power and that its strategy is not — as many Chinese analysts claim — to “contain” it. Mr. Xi should reassure Mr. Obama that China is not interested in (much less capable of) pursuing, in Asia, a Chinese version of the Monroe Doctrine, and that it recognizes the constructive role that the American presence can continue to play in East

Asia. Above all, they should articulate a vision of global affairs in which cooperation between the United States and China is indispensable to the pursuit of peace and stability.

The two presidents will have the opportunity to cover many areas in the United States-China relationship. They should renew their commitments to reducing greenhouse-gas emissions and cooperating on energy-efficiency technologies. They should discuss ways to align their responses to the Ebola crisis in West Africa.

Both countries have an interest in promoting reconciliation and reconstruction in Afghanistan, and in collaborating on a vision for peace, stability and prosperity there.

The rise of the self-proclaimed Islamic State poses serious threats to the stability of the Middle East and, potentially, the global community.

China and the United States, which are both victims of terrorist threats and declared enemies of the Islamic State, should spare no effort in bolstering their cooperation in combating this, including possible cooperation on intelligence sharing, through the United Nations and other multilateral forums.

On North Korea, the two presidents should reaffirm their commitment to denuclearization. They should leave no doubts in the minds of North Korean leaders that a nuclear North Korea will never be accepted by the international community. The only way for North Korea to achieve the goals it holds dear, including security, economic develop-

ment and normalization of relations with the United States, is for Pyongyang to return to the denuclearization process. The two presidents should work together to revive the stalled six-party talks.

Economic ties — long considered the ballast of the United States-China relations — have become less cordial in recent years, in spite of the massive expansion of bilateral trade and investment since China entered the World Trade Organization in 2001. Last month, 51 top American business leaders, led by the U.S.-China Business Council, urged Mr. Obama to make the conclusion of a bilateral investment treaty by 2016 a priority in his meetings with Mr. Xi. Such a treaty would have tremendous benefits for both countries.

Military-to-military relations, long regarded as the weakest spot in United States-China relations, have in fact grown considerably in recent years. There are now regular visits and exchanges involving military officers of both nations, from all levels. The two militaries have cooperated in counter-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden, and in joint exercises of humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. Recently, the Chinese Navy participated for the first time in the biennial international maritime exercise led by the United States Pacific Fleet.

Broadly put, the two presidents must act to arrest and reverse the emergence and deepening of a dynamic in which efforts by either nation to bolster its own security causes the other to feel less secure. The relationship between the United States and China must not become a strategic rivalry, spiraling downward. The two militaries should continue to build mutual understanding and trust, and promote pragmatic co-

operation in areas such as United Nations peacekeeping operations and counterterrorism.

As China’s economic and military strength continues to grow, and its weight in the Asia-Pacific region increases, Beijing and Washington will have to not only negotiate and renegotiate the boundaries of their power and influence, but also develop a shared understanding of their global roles and responsibilities.

Chinese leaders have put forward a new model of “major-country relationship” between China and the United States, an intellectual framework for resolving one of the greatest puzzles in international history — how to avoid falling into the so-called Thucydides trap, the often-cited cycle of struggle between rising and established powers.

To build such a new model, the two presidents will need to not only demonstrate to the public in both countries their ability to rise above pessimism and cynicism and to deliver tangible benefits, but also to chart a trajectory for a relationship that benefits both nations and that is positive-sum, not zero-sum. This week, they should renew and sustain the momentum from their meeting last year, and lay the foundation for a mature, cooperative and robust United States-China relationship in the years and decades to come.

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