

COMMENT & ANALYSIS

Suiting up for a trade war

If the free market is to work, the U.S. must deal with Beijing's belligerence

The United States and China are drifting into a trade war, and it's worrying almost everybody. It's a peculiar war, compared to such struggles of previous centuries. Its importance is sometimes minimized in importance because of the blind spots both countries have for one another. Neither country seems to have an adequate appreciation of the other's very different environment.

Such blindness has been seen before. The United States and its allies won the Cold War, all right, but it was despite an often vast ignorance of Soviet decision-making and how its leadership worked. It's ironic, as well as a little bit more than outrageous, that China is girded for combat with the United States while enjoying a \$360-billion trade surplus with the United States, extorting technology from American companies and successfully seducing high-tech giants Apple and Google.

It is not only insulting but damaging. The Chinese even cultivate the effrontery to ask environmental relief from the most advanced countries for their pollution of the environment, and China is the world's greatest polluter.

When Apple reported that China's slowing economy contributed to its own late-year sales slump, the news rattled the stocks of other major U.S. companies with extensive operations in the world's second-largest economy. Now, as U.S. companies report their quarterly earnings, China's impact will be revealed. The extent of the damage will depend on such factors as who the company's customers are and how much competition it faces in China.

On one hand, the Trump administration has been pretty clear about its view of China. A 2017 national security strategy document called China a "revisionist" power, attempting to reorder international politics to suit its interests. That's a pretty succinct way of describing Beijing's military buildup, its attempts to undermine American influence and power, its retaliations against American allies

such as Canada, and other economic factors.

The U.S. economy and national security have been threatened by China's strategy since President Xi Jinping took office in 2012, adopting what translates as "civil-military fusion." Chinese and foreign "civilian" companies serve as de facto suppliers for the Chinese military's technological-industrial base. Residents and visitors are subject to constant surveillance, reflected in credit scores affecting everything from their home purchases to job opportunities. These forms of social control often use technology developed by Western companies.

But even if American exports to China fall by half, it would be the equivalent of less than one-half of 1 percent of U.S. gross domestic product. There are other countries that can substitute for China-based production, none of them strategic rivals and trade predators. Previous efforts to assert America's influence against China, such as the discarded Trans-Pacific Partnership, did not push back effectively on Chinese economic aggression. Working with allies to directly address China's malfeasance would do that.

All this means putting China at the top of American international economic priorities and keeping it there for years, without overstating or overreacting to trade disputes with allies. The administration must not be distracted by the next round of China's false promises.

Protecting innovation from Chinese attack makes the United States stronger. Hindering the Chinese security apparatus makes external aggression and internal repression more costly for the greedy in Beijing. China is America's only major trading partner that is also a strategic rival, and it should be treated differently than friendly countries with whom the United States have disputes. If the United States wants the global free market to work the way it should, it must deal with Beijing's belligerence.



"I'M WORRIED ABOUT THE PAIN THE GOVERNMENT SHUTDOWN IS CAUSING FEDERAL WORKERS."

BOOK REVIEW

Fraught lives and an animate piano

THE WEIGHT OF A PIANO

By Chris Conder

Alfred A. Knopf, \$26.95, 336 pages

By Claire Hopley

The piano in Chris Conder's novel is made from spruce, selected from a snowy Romanian forest by Joseph Bluthner, who only ever chose the very best trees: Old ones with at least seven annular rings per centimeter. From these he made the pianos that bear his name. Famed for their warmth of tone they "were beloved of the likes of Schumann and Liszt."

And also of Katya. As a little girl in post-World War II Russia she inherited her Bluthner from a gruff neighbor who immediately spotted the "music beating in her heart." After studying at the conservatory in Leningrad, Katya has a brilliant career ahead of her. But she falls for young engineer Mikhail. Married with a baby, their lives are fraught because his Jewishness limits his job opportunities. If they emigrate to America, all will be well he thinks. Katya can't bear the thought. She doesn't want to leave Russia and most definitely not the piano, but there is no way it can go with them.

In America they are miserable. Mikhail finds English hard, so his work opportunities are no better than in Russia, and he becomes a vodka-swilling brute. And while Katya raises her son Grisha in an apartment nicer than any in Russia, she is utterly miserable until 13 years later the piano is miraculously returned to her. Eventually it belongs to Clara, who gets it as a birthday present from her father just before their house burns down, killing her parents and incinerating everything the family owned. The piano escapes because her mother had insisted it be moved from the house. Clara was on a sleepover, so she escaped too. By the time she is 28, Clara has nothing except the piano and a modest income from her job at an automotive repair shop. She loves the piano — the only relic of her family — but it's a bear to move and expensive to keep in tune. And for what? Clara has no talent for playing it. Though she loves it, on a rational whim she decides to sell it, only to have instant second thoughts when a buyer immediately presents himself. He's a photographer and wants to take pictures of the piano set amidst the landscapes of Death Valley. They compromise on a rental agreement that lets him take it for a couple of

weeks. But when he turns up with two movers who cart it off, she freaks out and follows them, setting off a cascade of events and revelations.

The melancholy stories of Clara and Katya intertwine as Chris Conder moves from Clara's journey to Death Valley to the back story of Katya and her love for the piano. Both women are undermined by the emotional neediness that comes from the lack of immediate family, and both have hitched the piano onto their lives but in different ways.

Katya is seriously talented and well trained. Intellectually and emotionally wedded to music, she's a composer as well as a pianist. When she loses the piano a second time, she has nothing to live for. Clara has less self-knowledge. As a car mechanic she can do a tough-cookie act, but she is less assured than she appears, and certainly less so than Katya. Indeed, they have little in common except ownership of the charismatic piano, so it exerts a different influence in their lives.

As the most important character in this novel, the piano prompts most of the action. Its effects are dramatic and generally far from benign so though it is the instrument of great art and the object of great love, it looms rather scarily. Everybody "remarked on it: how old, how solid, how moody. ... Whenever anybody played it, even an upbeat piece, it sounded melancholy." The reader never forgets the piano, and has no trouble imagining its melancholy sound.

Among the human characters, Katya is a heart-wrenching portrait of a woman who knows exactly what she wants, has it almost in her grasp, but never actually gets it. Mikhail is another portrait of disappointment. And in a different key, Greg the photographer is also warped by the experience of loss. In contrast, Clara is less complex and less interesting because the piano, which dominates the novel and is so central to the lives of Katya and others, is really no more than a memento to her.

Readers stay gripped by the questions this novel raises: Questions about art, about the power of fetishized possessions, about the effects of family members on each other, about the difficulties of finding love and of recognizing it. The settings are gripping too. It moves from Brezhnev's Russia to late-20th century California, cold Romanian forests to torrid Death Valley. It's well worth reading and pondering.

Claire Hopley is a writer and editor in Amherst, Mass.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Sweep out bogus patents

A recent op-ed spoke to the need for bipartisan solutions to lower drug prices ("Double jeopardy on patents discourages drug innovation," Web, Jan. 2). But under the banner of "protecting drug innovation," it conflates two distinct processes: the role of drug patents under the Hatch-Waxman Act and a newer process created by Congress to clear the system of flimsy, improperly issued patents (known as IPR, or inter partes reviews). This patent obfuscation and defense of every single drug patent — even weak ones — at all costs is one big reason American consumers pay the highest drug prices on the planet.

The most effective way to reduce drug prices is by spurring more competition. Sadly, big pharma invests heavily in blocking competition and abusing the patent system to continue charging any price they want. In fact, drug makers are ringing in 2019 by raising the price of hundreds of drugs already on the market. That's not innovation. That's price gouging.

The IPR process — which applies to all industries, not just pharma — provides an efficient and effective pathway to challenge and clear away patents that should never have been granted. One of the drugs subject to IPR generated \$4 million a day in

sales. Clearing away an illegitimate patent to allow for legitimate generic competitors will mean huge savings for consumers.

We all want and need real drug innovation. Big pharma needs to innovate by developing more effective therapies at a lower cost and focusing less energy on building patent fortresses to protect their monopolies. That's the real innovation Americans need.

MATT EYLES
President and CEO
America's Health Insurance Plans (AHIP)
Washington

Rap the elephant in the room

The Gillette company is getting well-deserved blowback this week over their "toxic masculinity" shaving cream ad, which has many viewers signaling for a time out. Masculinity is not toxic, but in fact life-protecting and life-nurturing, just as much as femininity is.

When a ship goes down, men declare "Women and children first!" See the monument the women survivors of the Titanic put up in Washington to honor the men who lived and died by the code of the gentleman. Sadly that monument is mostly ignored today. Modern feminists ignore it completely because it suggests to the visitor that there might be some differences between men and women.

What Gillette and others who use the term "toxic masculinity" mean is

clear enough from the ad, but really there needs to be a better shorthand term for "men acting badly."

Also, Gillette decided to ignore a large elephant in the room. Like the rest of the civic, cultural, political and artistic elite of our country, it refuses to call out our country's most flagrant and vile promoters of a barbaric template for masculinity: the rap music industry. Everyone knows the reason rap gets a free pass (although none dares say it out loud) and the news media can't or won't actually publish the sickening and savagely misogynistic lyrics that are at the core of what sells.

I'm fine with Gillette raising the issue of "toxic masculinity," but I bet it would never directly criticize rap's

sewer of abuse against women, abuse that is a disgrace to both our civilization and the music industry that actually hands out awards to these so-called 'recording artists.' Anyone who buys the argument that "It's just words" has no idea of how young boys and men are saturated in their formative years with the profoundly poisonous "lessons" rap teaches: Girls and women exist for your pleasure only, so abuse them, humiliate them and throw them away.

If women — and men — won't dare confront the powerful cultural forces behind the problem, how can anyone expect much to change?

DAVID BURNS
Springfield, Va.

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COMMENT & ANALYSIS

A bad idea exiled again

Burning the flag is nasty business, but a law is not needed to punish it

There are eternal debates about issues that, while seeming adjudicated and settled, nonetheless bubble up every few years: Should Pete Rose be in the baseball Hall of Fame? Who killed John F. Kennedy? Should there be a constitutional amendment proscribing the burning of the American flag?

The flag question bubbled up again the other day when President Trump announced that he supports the idea of mayhem for flag-burners. “All in for Sen. Steve Daines as he proposes an Amendment for a strong BAN on burning our American Flag,” the president tweeted. “A no-brainer!” Sen. Daines, a Republican of Montana, introduced legislation on Flag Day to restore “Congress’s constitutional authority to ban the desecration of the United States flag.”

The president has been particularly vehement on the issue for years. “Nobody should be allowed to burn the American flag — if they do, there must be consequences,” he tweeted in 2016, “perhaps loss of citizenship, or a year in jail!”

Flag burning was popular in certain neighborhoods in the ‘60s, that decade when and where so many bad and silly things originated. By 1989, all but two of the states had some kind of law on the books banning flag burning. But then came Texas v. Johnson in the U.S. Supreme Court, and down they all went. The high court, examining the criminal conviction of a man for burning a flag at the Republican National Convention in 1984 in Dallas, found that such laws violated the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which guarantees a right to free speech. Among those voting to eliminate flag-burning laws was the late Antonin Scalia, patron saint of conservative jurists and other devotees of the Constitution.

The decision was clearly the right one. The urge to slap a flag-burner is also clearly understandable; flag-burning is silly, immature and plainly idiotic, and to most Americans downright offensive, like loud rock music. But the point of free speech

protections is to protect precisely that speech that many are offended by. Free speech just for congenial speech is no free speech guarantee at all. Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh has indicated that he backs the 1989 decision. So, too, has John Roberts, the chief justice who was appointed to the court by President George W. Bush.

Calls for bans on flag burning are usually exercises in pandering by cynical politicians who should (and usually do) know better. Hillary Clinton, a lawyer representing her adoptive state of New York in the U.S. Senate, co-sponsored the Flag Protection Act of 2005. The law would have imposed a year in prison and a fine of up to \$100,000 for “destroying or damaging a U.S. flag with the primary purpose and intent to incite or produce imminent violence or a breach of the peace; (2) intentionally threatening or intimidating any person, or group of persons, by burning a U.S. flag; or (3) stealing or knowingly converting the use of a U.S. flag belonging to the United States, or belonging to another person on U.S. lands, and intentionally destroying or damaging that flag.” Mrs. Clinton was looking ahead to the 2008 presidential race and looking for an opportunity to prove her patriotic bona fides. The proposed law was a law, not a constitutional amendment, and she knew — the man she lived with had been a lecturer in constitutional law at the University of Arkansas — that if her bill had become law it would have been invalidated by the Supreme Court.

Sen. Daines’ bill is at least proposed as an amendment, but with a presidential blessing or not, has been exiled to the island of lost luggage and failed legislation (the island is officially called a “committee”). Justice Scalia said it best, as he often did: “If it were up to me, I would put in jail every sandal-wearing, scruffy-bearded weirdo who burns the American flag. But I am not king.” The only king we have is the Constitution, which protects the right of Americans to say what they please, even when their speech reveals them to be idiots, and not even useful idiots at that.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Ownership promotes self-reliance

America was born not by accident. Rather, it was conceived by deliberate design in order to guarantee freedom and liberty and create an environment that nurtures creativity, self-reliance and responsibility and protects individual property rights. It is not by accident that America generated the highest standard of living on the planet.

There is no doubt, however, that change is taking place. Instead of measuring the success of welfare programs by the decrease of participants, we promote, advertise and encourage participation in expanding entitlement programs. This environment nurtures dependency, dissuades self-reliance and personal responsibility, and punishes success by limiting income and affluence. Guaranteed sustenance from a beneficent master creates dependency and a comfort zone with a false sense of security. For the recipients, choosing self-reliance and self-sufficiency is not a priority; they are free from freedom.

Redistribution of wealth sounds like a noble goal. It arises from the political notion that property is social, not individual. If a person does not own what he or she creates and produces, then who does? If everyone owns everything and everyone’s wealth collectively, there will be continual conflicts about who gets what. The uniqueness and value of our Constitution is that it limits the power of government, whoever is in charge, and protects our individual rights and freedoms. Without the rule of law, we are subject to the rule of the mob.

The economic crisis cannot be ended without resolving the question of property rights. We must protect and respect the citizen’s property rights in the wealth and income they generate, recognizing they, and not others, rightly own what they have produced.

ED KONECNIK
Flushing, N.Y.

If left wins, good loses

When the dust settles after the Democratic debates and the primary votes are in, a clearer picture of who will lead the nation after 2020 will emerge. If the radical “Democratic Socialists” manages to overtake the Trump administration, the winners will be the United Nations and its roster of third-world-country members, abortion advocates, welfare cheaters, Islamic radicals, illegal foreign intruders (aka, “undocumented immigrants”), sanctuary cities, Russia, China, Iran and North Korea, Cuba, Venezuela and others. The losers will be Israel, small businesses, Christians, gainfully employed taxpayers, the medical profession, the coal industry, individual

entrepreneurship, the military, traditionalists, minorities, white males and conservative free speech.

The neo-Democrats need minorities in order to maintain their base, to outnumber elections. In order to maintain the supply, the left has to feed this base an entitlement bone once in awhile. This makes them more dependent on the government dole, which in turn keeps them from breaking out of poverty and out of their community-organized urban plantations.

GEORGE GIFTOS
Boca Raton, Fla.



BOOK REVIEW

Homeowner expectations on a street called Lowland Way

THOSE PEOPLE
By Louise Candlish
Berkley, \$26, 368 pages

By Claire Hopley

A year ago Louise Candlish’s first novel “Our House” kept home-owning readers on the edge of their seats with a twisty tale of a wife who came home to find another couple moving into her lovely London house. She discovers her husband had sold it — despite the fact that she was the co-owner.

Now the author’s second novel returns to the same territory: The leafy middle-class suburbs of London, where desirable older homes go for eye-watering sums and sell for astronomically much more once their youngish, affluent purchasers have fixed them up. They convert attics; install the latest appliances; and dig out basements where none existed before. Though they keep a vigilant eye on surging London house prices, for the moment the new owners are content to raise their children and enjoy a social life with their like-minded neighbors.

“Like-minded” is the crucial adjective. In Lowland Way Naomi and Ralph Morgan take the lead in friendliness and social responsibility. Ralph’s brother Finn lives next door with his wife Tess, who has collaborated with Naomi in a Play Out Sunday scheme that requires everyone to move their parked cars from the street on Sunday so the kids can safely play outdoors. Moving cars is necessary because their handsome homes were built before the day of the automobile so they have no garages and parking has to be found on the street.

That becomes a huge problem when Darren Booth moves in with a bunch of old cars that hog the parking space in front of everyone else’s home. When he plonks an old orange RV outside Ralph’s house, Ralph is outraged because that it forces him to leave his BMW streets away.

Darren’s next-door neighbors Ant and Em have more serious problems. Darren plays hideously loud heavy metal late into the wee hours. By day his construction projects are equally noisy. Not only can Ant and Em not sleep, but their baby seems to be developing hearing problems.

Sissy, who lives opposite, is also hit hard by Darren’s antisocial habits. She has been running a successful B&B business, but soon her guests’ online reviews commend her hospitality but warn others to stay away because Darren’s noise and mess spoils a visit.

Complaints have no effect. What are responsible bourgeois people like Ralph and Naomi, Finn and Tess, Em and Ant and Sissy to do?

The sections of this novel include transcripts of the interviews the Lowland Way residents have given to the police. They tantalize because for much of the novel readers don’t know exactly what the police are investigating — just that it’s something serious. No one could be blamed for suspecting a death is involved.

Other sections focus on the residents. We see the destruction of Ant and Em’s home life. We watch as Sissy’s loses her livelihood and much more. We see Ralph’s reach boiling point after an accident involving his skateboard-riding son. And we sympathize with Tess’ frustrations — not just with Darren but also with her with her assertive in-laws. “As usual, they were the most important people in the world, theirs the only perspective to be considered. The rest of us are only here to enhance them, she thought. They’re egomaniacs, not so different from the Booths.”

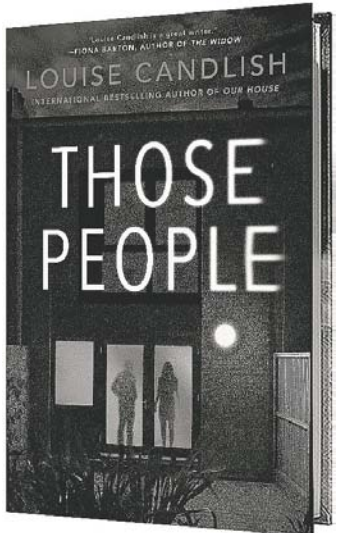
Not surprisingly, everyone thinks about the desirability of getting rid of Darren one way or another.

By the middle of this novel most readers will have their metaphorical money on the Lowland Way resident they think most likely to dislodge Darren. Louise Candlish takes us into their minds, showing us their fears and their non-negotiable interests. She is an acute observer. She’s sympathetic to her

characters need to establish themselves as economically successful and socially serious. But, by naming the totems they set so much store by — the expensive new windows, the right school for their children, the smart vacation venues — she also suggests their tunnel vision. We see there’s something a little overwrought in the denizens of such places as Lowland Way.

The issues the author raises will resonate with readers who live in a nice but pricey neighborhoods that they want to keep that way, but the page-turning attention generated by Darren’s arrival fades in its final quarter of the novel because the early focus is on the two Morgan families shifts to Ant and Em and Sissy. Though the picture of their devastated lives is effective, the fading attention to Ralph and Naomi, Tess and Finn are a little bewildering. Nonetheless, this is a compelling summer read that inevitably raises issues about homeowners’ expectations.

Claire Hopley is a writer and editor in Amherst, Mass.



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COMMENT & ANALYSIS

The ‘Halloween’ routine

Mrs. Clinton’s bewitching reign of error

“Have broomstick, will travel” is not how Hillary Clinton’s calling card reads, but it should. The septuagenarian professional politician is swooping over the American landscape in her billowing jackets, threatening to once again lay waste to the presidential election process. Last time around, Republicans were relieved to have survived her reign of error. As All Hallow’s Eve draws near, it is her own Democrats who are faced with uncertainty over what her threatened political resurrection might unleash.

The former first lady cum Democratic presidential wannabe, currently on a national tour with daughter Chelsea to promote “The Book of Gutsy Women” as their new brand of feminism, spooked the party establishment recently with a less-than-subtle threat to upend the crowded field of contenders with her soliloquy on the 2020 presidential election.

“All that matters is that we win,” Mrs. Clinton told an audience of admirers at Revolution Hall in Portland, Oregon, as reported by news station KGW8. “I hate to be so, you know, simplistic about it. We have to nominate ... the best I say all of that because it’s hard to know who’s going to be the best candidate to beat this president, assuming this president is still running. I mean this is a really complicated political environment.”

Translation: None of the current crop of candidates stands head and shoulders above the others, and no one has yet proved to have the chops to beat President Trump. So a certain someone (you know who) might yet prove to be the best candidate.

For the dozen or so Democrats struggling to reach the top of the candidacy heap, Mrs. Clinton’s pointed comments are like an enchanted silver dagger in the heart, or the back. Thus far, the party faithful face a choice of candidates positioned on the left, more left and most left along the political spectrum, each one running on promises to spend money on socialist programs costing anywhere from trillions to tens of trillions of dollars that the nation doesn’t have.

Hillary has singled out Rep. Tulsi Gabbard of Hawaii, for a special spell, charging her with being a “Russian asset,” though offering no evidence: “She is a favorite of the

Russians,” Hillary cackled to the Campaign HQ podcast hosted by former Obama campaign manager David Plouffe. “They have a bunch of sites and bots and other ways of supporting her so far. That’s assuming Jill Stein will give it up, which she might not because she is also a Russian asset.”

So Ms. Stein, whose third-party run in 2016 cost Hillary votes, was a Russian puppet, and Ms. Gabbard, a major in the Hawaii Army National Guard, is too. This from the woman who jeopardized national security when she placed sensitive secrets on an unsecure email server and whose campaign paid for a dossier on Mr. Trump filled with unverified political dirt provided by foreign sources. Nonsense.

To be sure, Hillary has choice words as well for the man who denied her the political prize she craved — and still covets. In recently rehashing her loss to Mr. Trump on PBS News Hour, she raised the possibility of a rematch. “I mean, obviously, I can beat him again,” she boasted. Her peculiar definition of “beat” — winning the popular vote, losing the Electoral College and thus the White House — smacks of the musing of someone seriously out of touch with reality.

Democratic voters have moved on even if Hillary has not. The candidate with momentum is Elizabeth Warren, a slightly younger version of Hillary — blondish, Ivy League-ish, and without the decades of baggage that has left the former secretary of State sagging beneath the weight. Ms. Warren may fall short in her campaign erected upon promises to quadruple federal spending on schools to the tune of \$800 billion, and to shake every piggybank from coast to coast for the trillions to spend on Medicare for All and the Green New Deal, but “I’m with her” isn’t going to fly in 2020, broomstick or not.

Hillary’s bold talk of a rematch with Donald Trump is nothing more than a flight of fancy, but her incessant murmurings about getting even are spooking the political landscape. For the sake of her party, the angry lady ought to drop the “Halloween” routine and save her incantations for those private conversations with the ceiling before bitterness gives way to sleep.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Congress running roughshod

I’m a 74-year-old retiree and lifelong independent voter. As I watch and read about the ongoing impeachment proceedings against President Trump, I get more and more heartsick about the way Congress is behaving.

For something as serious as removing a president from office, I would expect Congress to conduct a thorough investigation, seeking out information from all sources. The proceedings should not include

a pre-determined assumption of guilt, as we see today. This is, sadly, similar to the Kavanaugh hearings, in which a candidate was assumed guilty before and during the hearing. The Democratic Party is hell-bent on a guilty charge with no evidence. That is not the America I grew up in, nor is it what I want.

We have 535 members in Congress, yet thus far just a very small percentage of that body (Adam Schiff and company) are driving all

that we hear — or don’t hear. Any president should be treated with respect and everything should be done to provide an open discussion. I’m not seeing that, and I am saddened that we have a nation that seems to be accepting the tragedy unfolding before our eyes.

We must remember: Congress works for us.

TOM TYSCHPER
Gilbert, Ariz.

Illegal vendetta actions

The words despicable and loathsome don’t come close to accurately describing Reps. Jerry Nadler, Adam Schiff and Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi.

These three Trump-hating malcontents have destroyed the faith the country had in the U.S. Constitution by illegally changing the rule of law in attempts to destroy our president, making him the most tortured and maligned president this country has ever seen.

President Trump brought us back from the disastrous Obama years that killed morale with class warfare

and race relations, and which set our country back to times long forgotten. We are no longer the whipping boy for other countries that losing all respect for us. And this brings me back to the three aforementioned anarchists.

Mr. Schiff is one of dirtiest politicians I’ve ever seen. In fact, I would put him at the top of the list of all the criminals I encountered during my long career in law enforcement. He lies with impunity. He is nothing less than a diehard sociopath who has no conception of remorse or feeling for those he tortures. His so-called intelligence committee is

run like a banana republic, denying the Republicans the right to confront any of his witnesses.

Mr. Schiff, Mr. Nadler and Mrs. Pelosi have violated numerous laws governing politicians. They have also violated their oaths of office with their unethical practices. Thus, I felt it my civic duty to file charges with two government agencies to have these three answer for their crimes against the president and the people of the United States.

GREGORY J. TOPLIFF
Warrenville, S.C.



The astounding “Saw-a-president-in-half” trick

BOOK REVIEW

The personalities that shaped 20th-century China

BIG SISTER, LITTLE SISTER, RED SISTER: THREE WOMEN AT THE HEART OF TWENTIETH CENTURY CHINA

By Jung Chang
Alfred A. Knopf, \$30, 400 pages

By Claire Hopley

The three Soong sisters characterized in the title of Jung Chang’s latest book about 20th-century China were Ei-ling (born 1889), Ching-ling (born 1893) and May-ling (born 1898). Their father, Charles, was an American-educated Methodist missionary who made a fortune in publishing. Unusually for the era, he educated his daughters in America, each spending nine years in this country.

All three married men at the highest levels of power. Ei-ling caught the eye of Sun Yat-sen, now widely revered as the father of the country. Eventually she married H.H. Kung, with whom she built a business fortune before he became prime minister under Chiang Kai-shek.

Sun Yat-sen switched his affections to Ching-ling. She’s called Red Sister because she shared his interest in communism, never lost faith in the party and chaired several important committees in Mao Zedong’s government, eventually earning the title honorary president of the People’s Republic of China.

Gen. Chiang Kai-shek, the Nationalist leader of China from 1928 to 1949 and of Taiwan from 1949 to 1975, allied himself with Sun early in his career and worked with him until his death in 1925, but did not share his Communist sympathies, and later fiercely opposed both the politics and armies of Mao, which won control of China in 1949. Chiang deeply distrusted almost everyone, revering only his deceased mother, and, at least during the earlier years of his marriage, May-ling, who was his diligent helper.

Indeed all three sisters worked on their husbands’ behalf. Ei-ling is credited with masterminding her family’s financial success, and she devoted huge sums to purchasing materiel for the Nationalist cause. May-ling spent much of the early 1940s rallying troops. Ching-ling, who survived Sun Yat-sen by 56 years, devoted herself to his work and beliefs.

She was probably more committed to communism than he was because his main motivation was not political but personal ambition. He abandoned his first wife and children in pursuit of power; he left Ching-ling exposed to shell-fire while he escaped to a gun-boat; and, believing he deserved to be president of the new Republic of China, he did not hesitate to wage fierce wars that devastated China. Maj. Magruder, the American attache in Canton, said he was driven by the “one motive in life and

that is self-aggrandizement.” Certainly, Ms. Chang’s account confirms this.

In comparison, Chiang Kai-shek, though described as “a lout” by the author, and undoubtedly an ambitious and merciless power-grabber, seems more honestly committed to his beliefs.

At least at the beginning of his marriage to May-ling, he was a devoted husband, though later, and perhaps prompted by her lengthy visits to New York, he seems to have cooled. Chiang often mentioned her efforts in his faithfully kept diary, and she comes alive in the letters to her American college friend. These show her frank interest in luxuries, writing boastfully of her parents’ wealth and her own lavish lifestyle. But after her war work in the 1940s, we hear little more of her, even though her life spanned three centuries. (She died at age 105 in New York in 2002.)

It’s hard to tell much about Ei-ling’s motivations except that money was among the chief. Born a Christian, she became very devout and encouraged May-ling to find strength in her faith. While her husband

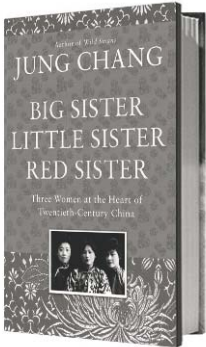
and her brother were powerful government ministers, Ei-ling dealt with business. But how did she control and extend the family’s banking wealth? What exactly did she invest in? This and more remains vague.

Perhaps inevitably given available sources, this book mostly focuses on the careers of Sun Yat-sen and Chiang Kai-shek. There is much to cover, including several wars and innumerable foreign adventures and devious maneuvers. Both men were eager for foreign funds and military help, especially from Russia and Japan. Though both were Nationalists, both can be said to have helped the Communist cause in China by leading destructive internal wars waged during the nearly five decades following the abdication of the Qing dynasty in 1911.

The Soong sisters flittered in the background of these men’s lives. Ching-ling, the Red sister, stands out as the most interesting and serious of them. She was devoted to her husband, and then unwavering in the Communist cause, even when these commitments threatened her welfare. Though always affluent, she seems to have lacked her sisters’ fascination with money and luxury. And unlike them, she stayed in China until the end of her life, aiding it as she thought best.

The complicated history of China during this period is little-known to most Westerners, so this readable book helps fill a gap. By hooking it onto personalities — Sun Yat-sen, Chiang Kai-shek and the Soong sisters — Jung Chang has been able to chart a comprehensible way through these decades and an immense mass of information that could otherwise be difficult to digest.

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