

Rep. Smith ambushes Chinese ambassador

by William Jones

Rep. Chris Smith (R-N.J.), the self-styled Human Rights watchman and chairman of the House Human Rights subcommittee, got in over his head, when he invited China's Ambassador Li Zhaoxing to a meeting — that turned out to be a hearing. On the day of the hearing, Smith appeared in the hearing room, disgruntled over the fact that the Chinese Ambassador hadn't come. "I told the Ambassador we would be here this morning as scheduled and that we hoped he would be here too. . . . Unfortunately, he is not here," Smith said. "We had planned to ask him some very direct and detailed questions about human rights in China, starting with the facts: Did anybody really die at Tiananmen Square in 1989? Are there forced abortions in China? Are there political and religious prisoners? Where is the nine-year-old Panchen Lama, who was abducted three years ago by agents of the Chinese government? . . . On these questions and so many others, it is useless to exchange opinions until we get to the bottom of serious factual disputes. . . . Ambassador Li has stiffed the committee."

Smith knew full well that Ambassador Li was not coming to be "grilled" by the committee. As Embassy officials explained later in the day at their own press conference, the Ambassador had been eager to come to discuss any issues of concern with Smith and members of the subcommittee, but he wasn't prepared to participate in the charade that had obviously been prepared for him.

A dialogue, not a soap opera

First, it is highly unusual for a foreign ambassador to appear before a Congressional committee, and well-nigh unheard-of that one would come to be interrogated by hostile committee members. Under the U.S. Constitution, the foreign policy of the United States is the prerogative of the Executive branch. This fundamental fact of political life was underlined by Zhang Keyuan, a liaison officer of the Chinese Embassy. "In keeping with general diplomatic practice, it is not appropriate for the Ambassador to appear as a witness before the Congressional subcommittee," he said. "A dialogue should be a dialogue, and not a soap opera in front of cameras."

But it was precisely a soap opera that Smith had been preparing. Not only was he intent on having Ambassador Li appear as a witness, but he originally intended to invite Chinese dissidents, such as Harry Wu and Wei Jinsheng, to the same panel to exchange views with the Ambassador. This

obviously was unacceptable, and Smith agreed to have no outside persons asking questions or making statements.

Negotiations for what was to have been a meeting between Ambassador Li and members of the committee had been going on for some time. Initially, when Smith had issued a "public invitation" to Ambassador Li to discuss human rights issues with the committee, the Ambassador had been happy to have a "face-to-face dialogue on the issue of human rights," Huo Mingwu, a Congressional liaison officer with the Chinese Embassy, explained. It was made clear to the Congressman, however, that this would be a meeting between the Ambassador and members of the committee, and that he was not coming as a witness to a hearing, which would have been a breach of diplomatic protocol. In his formal invitation, sent a few days later, Smith, however, referred to the meeting as a hearing. When the Embassy reacted to this reformulation, Smith's office changed it in their next press release.

As late as a day before the scheduled meeting, the Ambassador was prepared to attend. However, Embassy officials came across a notice of the event posted by *Congressional Quarterly* on the Internet, which again referred to it as a hearing. It read in part, "The hearing is the second of two subcommittee hearings on human rights in China. The first was held on June 26." On June 26, Smith had held a hearing with the former director of a planned-birth office in China about forced abortions.

When Smith appeared in the hearing room on Aug. 5, he turned it into a press conference. "Embassy officials gave what I consider the most flimsy excuse imaginable: that one media outlet had called this a hearing, therefore the ground rules were violated," Smith said. An astounding statement, given that *Congressional Quarterly* is considered the newspaper of record for the U.S. Congress. The release said that the "information [was] verified as of 07:04 pm 08/03/98." Verified, no doubt, by Smith's Human Rights subcommittee.

Chinese Embassy officials blamed the error, which prompted the Ambassador to cancel the meeting altogether, on an outside person who wanted to sabotage the meeting, rather than on Smith. Nevertheless, the fact that Smith did not cancel the event, but castigated the Ambassador for not appearing at the scheduled time, indicates that Smith believes that, "the show's the thing."

Mr. Huo underlined that the Chinese Ambassador, in office only since the spring, is eager to talk to any and all U.S. representatives, even in a public setting. In the short time he has been in Washington, he has had meetings with numerous members of Congress.

Smith's antics with diplomatic protocol indicate that he is not simply intent on exposing human rights abuses, but is playing out a broader agenda that threatens U.S.-China ties, which are vital for reorganizing the bankrupt global financial system. In response to Smith's outrageous behavior, Ambassador Li graciously extended an invitation to him to come to the embassy to discuss human rights.