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The Chen affair: American imperialism wrapped in humanitarianism

Bruce Ramsey

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In rescuing Chinese dissident Chen Guangcheng, the U.S. was poking its nose into Chinese affairs in a way Americans would not tolerate if China did it to us, writes editorial columnist Bruce Ramsey.

I welcome Chen Guangcheng to the United States, assuming he makes it here. Chen and the activists helping him have deftly used the U.S. government and media to secure a promise of sanctuary for himself and his family.

Good for him. It is not such good conduct on the part of the U.S. government, which is poking its nose into Chinese affairs in ways Americans would not tolerate them doing to us.

Our government interferes in lots of places. We excuse ourselves. Washington Post columnist Kathleen Parker summed up the standard view two days ago. Why provide sanctuary to Chen Guangcheng? "If not us, then who?"

Because we can. It is an imperious argument.

With China, it was the second such interference this year. The first came on Feb. 6, when the police chief of Chongqing, Wang Lijun, sought refuge in the U.S. Consulate in Chengdu.

According to media reports, Wang had been a strong-arm cop in Sichuan province on behalf of Communist Party boss Bo Xilai. Wang apparently offered up information on Bo's wife's role in the murder of an Englishman, and suddenly was fleeing 200 miles to an American consulate. U.S. officials took him in for a day and negotiated on his behalf.

Imagine China's consulate in Los Angeles doing this for a rogue police chief from, say, Las Vegas. Americans would be furious.

Now comes Chen. He is a more sympathetic figure, a crusader against China's one-child policy. He has been beaten by police. And he is blind. Picture a blind man climbing over walls and breaking his foot in a scramble to escape confinement. Chen did.

He could not go to Ambassador Gary Locke's office and knock on the door. The entrance to the embassy is on a street closed by Chinese police. The embassy had to get Chen, resulting, according to The New York Times, in "a car chase through the streets of Beijing."

Why do this? Chen is not an American. He has no right to U.S. protection.

Sheltering him also compromises the embassy's mission. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Treasury Secretary Tim Geithner were about to arrive in Beijing to discuss trade, currency policy and the North Korean bomb with the Chinese. Angering them could affect those negotiations.

The embassy said it provided sanctuary to Chen because he was injured and blind. It was being a good Samaritan. That is a feel-good reason. A better one is that President Obama is running for re-election, and Mitt Romney is trying to make him look weak. Obama cannot afford to look weak.

What ensued in Beijing was dickering between the Americans, who held Chen, and the Chinese, who held his wife and kids. The Chinese side is furious that the U.S. put it in the position of having to negotiate over one of its own. They demanded a U.S. apology, which I expect they will not get. Again, Obama cannot afford to look weak.

We celebrate that our government has done a humanitarian thing and ignore its imperial aspects.

Suppose some country interfered with us in this way. Imagine a political figure athwart of U.S. law, former presidential candidate John Edwards, let's say. Suppose he lost his case and fled to the French embassy to defend his human right to be free from America's one-woman-at-a-time policy. The French might defend such a right. Imagine that they sheltered him and offered him a place at a university in France.

What would we think of the French?