Jan Berris  
“Bringing Chinese and Americans Together”  
Critical Issues Seminar Series: Summary of Talk  
Wednesday, April 2, 2014

After Dr. Zbigniew Brzezinski’s talk last week on U.S.-China relations from the point of view of the former U.S. National Security Advisor under President Jimmy Carter, the talk series "Critical Issues Confronting China" turned its attention to a seasoned on-the-ground operator: Jan Carol Berris, Vice President of the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations (NCUSCR). As Berris acknowledged at the outset of her talk, whereas Dr. Brzezinski is passionate about policy making, she is passionate about people, linking people from different countries into meaningful dialogues and exchanges. And this is exactly what the National Committee does as a premier American organization dedicated to productive U.S.-China relations since its establishment in 1966 by a small group of academics, Quakers, and businessmen.

Having worked for the National Committee since 1971, Berris has witnessed many significant historic moments in U.S.-China relations. Her proud institutional memories include hosting and traveling with hundreds of Chinese delegations over the past 40-plus years, the first being the most exciting: the historic visit of the Chinese ping pong team in April 1972. She has also traveled to China over 150 times, with groups ranging from tennis players to a Supreme Court Justice.

Unlike today’s myriad channels to the PRC, during those earlier years, the National Committee was one of the only two American organizations that ran exchanges between the two countries. It played an instrumental role in the rapprochement between the two countries after almost three decades of enmity. It has ever since been at the forefront of this dynamic relationship by encouraging constructive dialogue, fostering face-to-face interaction and forthright exchange of ideas, as well as educating Americans and Chinese about the realities of each other’s countries.

The National Committee organizes and hosts a variety of programs: Track II dialogues on cutting edge issues, exchanges in a variety of fields, and conferences and seminars on current issues in the Sino-American relationship. In the last 15 years or so, it has focused many of its programs on the younger generation through its Public Intellectual Program (nurture the younger generation of American China specialists), Young Leaders Forum (brings together Chinese and American stars in diverse fields), Student Leaders Exchange (provides home-stay based visits to China for select members of the Presidential Scholars and the Intel Science Talent Search), and U.S. Foreign Policy Colloquium (an intensive three day seminar in Washington for U.S.-based PRC graduate students to learn about U.S. foreign policy).
In its first six years (1966-72), the National Committee focused solely on public education, including conferences and seminars. The hosting of the Chinese ping pong added an exchange component to NCUSCR's work. As that expanded, the Committee decided (in 1974) to hive off almost all of its public education functions to a newly beefed-up China Council of the Asia Society. (Along with the programs went dedicated Committee funding and even a Committee staff member.)

In the late 1980s, NCUSCR gradually moved back into public education: those activities have expanded greatly in the past 10 years, with several meetings a month in New York, and one of its signature programs, CHINA Town Hall: National Reflections, Local Connections. This is an annual two-part program that begins with a webcast of a senior U.S. official speaking about current issues in the Sino-American relationship and answering questions from audiences at over 65 venues around the United States and greater China; the second part has experts speaking at each venue on a China-related topic chosen by the local community.

National Committee programs often touch on sensitive issues; it is in a unique position to bring together people with disparate points of view as a result of its long history of working with the Mainland and the respect it commands there. Another activity is the Committee's hosting (along with the US-China Business Council) of a large luncheon or dinner for hundreds of people about once each year, when China's senior most officials visit the United States. But long before the Committee began running such events, Berris had the opportunity to meet China's senior leaders.

The first, and most impressive, was Zhou Enlai. The meeting took place at the Great Hall of the People in 1974 and she confirms Zhou's well known public image: sophisticated, charming, witty, and handsome. Zhou said to Berris, then the youngest delegation member, "The United States has foreign troops stationed around the world but China does not and never will send troops to occupy another country. If it does in the future, Jan should be the first person to stand up to criticize us."

According to Berris, Premier Zhu Rongji was also very impressive, smart, sophisticated and, unlike most of his fellow senior leaders, totally comfortable with off-the-cuff, public speaking – even in English! He came to the United States as head of a delegation of Chinese mayors in the summer of 1990, barely a year after Tiananmen. Yet he spoke forthrightly about the situation in Shanghai, the city he ran, in terms Americans could understand. Wang Daohan, was also on that trip, and was another favorite of hers. A former mayor of Shanghai and founding director of the Association for Relations across the Taiwan Straits, she found him to be an old-fashioned mandarin intellectual and gentleman, just like Koo Chen-fu, his Taiwan counterpart in the Koo-Wang Talks.

Berris travelled with Guangdong governor Xi Zhongxun, the current China's president's father, for three weeks in 1991 shortly after he was rehabilitated. He led a
large delegation of provincial officials in 1991. While not immediately comfortable, he became more so as he travelled from east to west across the United States, with no untoward incidents. In the end was so relaxed that he donned a grass skirt at the Polynesian Cultural Center outside Honolulu and even tried the hula!

Berris' vast experiences with hosting China's leaders in the U.S. over forty plus years are a testimony to the National Committee's constructive and productive role in enhancing U.S.-China relations.