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The Clinton administration has publicly announced that it will not sponsor this year’s resolution before the United Nations Human Rights Commission in Geneva that would condemn the People’s Republic of China (PRC) for human rights violations. However, both supporters and opponents of the administration’s action have it wrong.

Supporters posit that not sponsoring the resolution is not a reward. Instead, they state that the decision has been made as a calculation that not sponsoring the resolution will lead to human rights progress in the PRC. In other words, the decision will increase the probability that a behavioral class—human rights violations—will decrease in intensity and frequency. However, operant conditioning research on modifying undesirable behavior (in the eyes of the modifier) would suggest that punishment and omission training best result in decreasing behavioral intensity and frequency. Certainly, dropping the resolution is neither—instead being an example of negative reinforcement that usually increases a behavioral probability. Moreover, engaging in operant conditioning, before as opposed to after the event to be conditioned, usually leads to a less effective result. Research on the psychology of change does not support the supporters.

Opponents of the administration's decision posit that there is now no leverage inducing human rights change in the PRC. The problem with this position is that it is founded on the assumption that threats that are face-valid (to the modifier) will be perceived as threats to their target. Opponents also seem to believe that leverage could not include creating a psychological situation wherein decreasing human rights violations might be perceived by the target as being in its own interests—not merely those of the modifier. (In fact, the perception of a change in one's own behavior being in the interest of a modifier can induce reactance in a target thereby decreasing the likelihood of any behavioral change—and in some cases even strengthening the target behavior judged by the modifier to be undesirable.)