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OPINION MAIN STREET

Donald Trump's Nixon Moment

Can the president persuade Xi Jinping to free Jimmy Lai from a Chinese prison?



By William McGurn [Follow](#)

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President Trump at the White House in Washington, May 11. AARON SCHWARTZ/POOL/EPA/SHUTTERSTOCK

“A hundred percent, I’ll get him out. He’ll be easy to get out.”

Thus spoke Donald Trump in October 2024, two weeks before the election that returned him to the White House. Radio host Hugh Hewitt had asked if he would urge Chinese leader Xi Jinping to free Jimmy Lai—a Hong Kong press baron who is arguably the Chinese Communist Party’s most hated man—from his prison cell in Hong Kong.

Now, as President Trump travels to China for his summit with Mr. Xi, the pressure is on. Whether he succeeds or fails to gain Jimmy’s freedom will

tell the world whether he is a brilliant negotiator or just another politician who makes promises he cannot keep.

The good news is that Mr. Trump hasn't forgotten his pledge. As he was boarding Air Force One in the fall of 2025, a reporter from the Eternal Word Television Network asked if he would speak to Mr. Xi about releasing Jimmy. "It's on my list, I'm going to ask," Mr. Trump said.

About that time Pope Leo XIV also spoke to Mr. Lai's wife, Teresa, and their daughter after a general audience in Rome. Mr. Trump had also held a private meeting with Jimmy's son Sebastien and has publicly repeated several times, most recently on Monday in the Oval Office, that America wants this man freed. This is encouraging news not only for Jimmy's wife and children, but for close family friends (myself included)—and all those who see in Mr. Lai's fate a mirror of Hong Kong's future.

The heavy security presence Hong Kong insisted on during Jimmy's trial—the government acted as if he were Osama bin Laden rather than an ailing septuagenarian—show how much the authorities fear his message. This makes it all the more challenging for China to let him go.

But there's precedent. In the immediate aftermath of the brutal 1989 crackdown on students who had protested in Tiananmen Square, dissident astrophysicist Fang Lizhi sought refuge in the U.S. Embassy in Beijing. The Chinese, who had put Fang atop their most wanted list of Tiananmen protesters, demanded him back, which America refused. Diplomatic efforts slowed to a halt. There could be practically no movement while Fang remained stuck inside the embassy.

So it was until April 1990, when former President Richard Nixon wrote a letter to Deng Xiaoping making the case that it was time to "seize the moment" and make a "big play." Nixon acknowledged that China would come in for a flurry of criticism at first. But so long as Fang remained in

Beijing, Nixon argued, he would be an impediment to Chinese objectives. Fang was released two months after Nixon's letter.

Today we are at a similar impasse. Jimmy's release isn't only a question of Mr. Trump's negotiation skills. It's also a question of whether Mr. Xi has the wit to appreciate what Mr. Trump is offering: a way to solve China's Jimmy Lai problem once and for all.

Mr. Trump has a huge stake in how it plays out. During Jimmy's trial, the Hong Kong government made preposterous claims, arguing that as a journalist Jimmy promoted subversive values. These were the same values that had transformed Hong Kong from a barren rock into a prosperous metropolis—Anglo-American values, in short, rooted in freedom and the rule of law. Jimmy's "crime" was trying to preserve what makes Hong Kong tick—and distinct from China.

Putting Jimmy in prison only enhanced his reputation around the world. This month more than 100 members of Congress—Republicans and Democrats alike—signed a letter urging Mr. Trump to press Mr. Xi to let Jimmy go.

That isn't easy for Mr. Xi to do. But it's wiser than the alternative, which is to let Mr. Lai become a stumbling block to China's global ambitions. Freeing Mr. Lai would not only get him off Beijing's hands. It's a helpful concession to make when Mr. Trump is pressing Beijing over its imports from Iran.

For Mr. Trump the stakes are likewise high. Everyone knows the president has said that freeing Jimmy would be easy. If the president fails to make it happen, Jimmy and his family will pay the highest price.

But Mr. Trump will pay a high price too. Many of those Democrats who signed the letter calling for Jimmy's release will mock him for failing to make good on a promise he called "easy."

If, on the other hand, Mr. Trump leaves Beijing with Mr. Lai's freedom secured, he will take a huge victory lap. And he will have earned it.

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