Opinion polls show that many Americans favor buying products made in the United States over imported goods. They believe that by “buying American” they can help protect U.S. industries and save American jobs.

What do you think? Would you be willing to check product labels every time you shop to avoid buying imported goods? Before you answer that question, you may want to read about one family’s experience of living for a year without buying goods made in China.

A Year Without “Made in China”

by Sara Bongiorni, The Christian Science Monitor, Dec. 21, 2005

BATON ROUGE, LA—Last year, two days after Christmas, we kicked China out of the house. Not the country obviously, but bits of plastic, metal, and wood stamped with the words “Made in China.” We kept what we already had, but stopped bringing any more in.

The banishment was no fault of China’s. It had coated our lives with a cheerful veneer of toys, gadgets, and $10 children’s shoes. Sometimes I worried about jobs sent overseas or nasty reports about human rights abuses, but price trumped virtue at our house. We couldn’t resist what China was selling.

But on that dark Monday last year, a creeping unease washed over me as I sat on the sofa and surveyed the gloomy wreckage of the holiday. It wasn’t until then that I noticed an irrefutable fact: China was taking over the place.

It stared back at me from the empty screen of the television. I spied it in the pile of tennis shoes by the door. It glowed in the lights on the Christmas tree and watched me in the eyes of a doll splayed on the floor. I slipped off the couch and did a quick inventory, sorting gifts into two stacks: China and non-China. The count came to China, 25, the world, 14. Christmas, I realized, had become a holiday made by the Chinese. Suddenly I’d had enough. I wanted China out . . .

On Jan. 1 we launched a yearlong household embargo on Chinese imports. The idea wasn’t to punish China, which would never feel the pinprick of our protest. And we didn’t fool ourselves into thinking we’d bring back a single job to unplugged company towns in Ohio and Georgia. We pushed China out of our lives because we wanted to measure how far it had pushed in. We wanted to know what it would take in time, money, and aggravation to kick our China habit.

We hit the first rut in the road when I discovered our son’s toes pressing against the ends of his tennis shoes. I wore myself out hunting for new ones. After two weeks I broke down and spent $60 on sneakers from Italy. I felt sick over the money; it seemed
decadent for a pair of children’s shoes. I got used to the feeling. Weeks later I shelled out $60 for Texas-made shoes for our toddler daughter.

We got hung up on lots of little things. I drove to half a dozen grocery stores in search of candles for my husband’s birthday cake, eventually settling on a box of dusty leftovers I found in the kitchen. The junk drawer has been stuck shut since January. My husband found the part to fix it at Home Depot but left it on the shelf when he spotted the telltale “Made in China.”

Mini crises erupted when our blender and television broke down . . . We killed four mice with old-fashioned snapping traps because the catch-and-release ones we prefer are made in China. Last summer at the beach my husband wore a pair of mismatched flip-flops my mother found in her garage. He’d run out of options at the drug store.

Navigating the toy aisle has been a wilting affair. In the spring, our 4-year-old son launched a counter-campaign in support of “China things.” He’s been a good sport, but he’s weary of Danish-made Legos, the only sure bet for birthday gifts for his friends. One morning in October he fell apart during a trip to Target when he developed a sudden lust for an electric purple pumpkin.

“It’s too long without China,” he wailed. He kept at me all day.

The next morning I drove him back so he could use his birthday money to buy the pumpkin for himself . . .

My husband bemoans the Christmas gifts he can’t buy because they were made in China. He plans to sew sleeping bags for the children himself . . . but I fear he will meet his match with thread and needle.

“How hard can it be?” he scoffed.

The funny thing about China’s ascent is that we, as a nation, could shut the whole thing down in a week. Jump-start a “Just Say No to Chinese Products Week,” and the empire will collapse amid the chaos of overloaded cargo ships in Long Beach harbor. I doubt we could pull it off. Americans may be famously patriotic, but look closely, and you’ll see who makes the flag magnets on their car bumpers. These days China delivers every major holiday, Fourth of July included.

I don’t know what we will do after Dec. 31 when our family’s embargo comes to its official end. China-free living has been a hassle. I have discovered for myself that China doesn’t control every aspect of our daily lives, but if you take a close look at the underside of boxes in the toy department, I promise it will give you pause.

Our son knows where he stands on the matter. In the bathtub one evening he told me how happy he was that “the China season” was coming soon.

“When we can buy China things again, let’s never stop,” he said.

After a year without China, I can tell you this: You can still live without it, but it’s getting trickier and costlier by the day. And a decade from now I may not be brave enough to try it again.

Sara Bongiorni is the author of A Year Without “Made in China”: One Family’s True Life Adventure in the Global Economy.