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On a spring day in 1989, a series of pro-democracy protests drew the ire of China's government—and ended in tragedy

MASSACRE AT TIANANMEN SQUARE

BY EUGENE FINERMAN

Tiananmen Square is the cultural center of Beijing. It is on the itinerary of every tour of China's capital. Government-approved guides point out the monuments, museums and edifices that make Tiananmen the showcase of Communist China. Along this great public square are the National Museum and the Great Hall of the People where foreign dignitaries are honored at state dinners that seat 5,000 people. There is also the Mausoleum of Mao Zedong, the founder of Communist China, with his iconic 15-by-20-foot oil portrait; the "Great Helmsman" himself envisioned Tiananmen as the glory of the People's Republic. Entire neighborhoods were demolished in 1958 to create the world's largest public square, but Mao was not one to suffer details. History, he believed, would justify the cost. That is the rationale of tyranny, and sadly, it often proves correct. When faced with the prospect of losing political power, the successors of Mao would show the same ruthless resolve in crushing the pro-democracy movement, resulting in the massacre in Tiananmen Square.

Mao, the "Chairman," may have been a capable general and an intimidating tyrant, but he was an absurd administrator. The mundane mechanics of government actually offended him. Instead he offered maxims, but inspiration does not grow crops or run industries. And too often his visions proved illusionary. For example, he imagined that China could industrialize if every family had its own blast furnace: Make your own steel in the backyard. The idea was ridiculous but no one dared ignore his command. Of course, this "Great Leap Forward" was a disaster, squandering manpower and resources. Private farming was outlawed in favor of collectivism, which was enforced

The death of Chinese Communist Party leader and liberal reformer Hu Yaobang, an advocate of democratic reform and a hero to college students, drew thousands of young people to protest in Tiananmen Square in April, 1989.

through coercion, violence and terror. The result: famine, which claimed the lives of 30 million people.

When Mao died in 1976, the governance of this schizophrenic China—a world power with a hand-to-mouth economy—was left to a committee of old veterans, men who had survived both war and the Chairman's temper. Some remained true Communists, but a prevailing majority saw that China's prosperity required pragmatism rather than dogma. In the words of China's new leader of the period, Deng Xiopieng, "It doesn't matter whether a cat is black or white, as long as it catches mice."

China was still primarily an agrarian society, so the first reforms were in agriculture. Allow private property, permit initiative and profit, and you could turn peasants into farmers. In a decade, the average rural income had tripled. To industrialize China required a more drastic deviation from Mao and Communism: foreign capital. The coastal provinces became "special economic zones," luring foreign business with the promise of Western products at Chinese wages. In 1980, the minimum wage in the United States was $3.10 an hour; that would have been a week's wages in China. And the undershirts made in China were indistinguishable from those woven in South Carolina. Such profits encouraged the Chinese government to permit further commercial initiative. The Chinese themselves now were permitted to go into business. The aspiring entrepreneur, craftsman or merchant had the opportunity to prove his worth in the marketplace. In effect, the Chinese people had economic freedom. So began the boom that continues to propel China.

Yet these new policies would raise issues and create divisions in Chinese society. Within a decade of these economic reforms, college students were wondering why there were no political reforms. Was freedom permitted only in economics? That seemed illogical and unjust. The party leadership was aware of this growing dissension but was unsympathetic. Deng Xioping equated democracy with chaos. Within the leadership, there had been one supporter of democracy: the party's general secretary Hu Yaobang. Deng fired him in 1977 and chose Zhao Ziyang as the new general secretary. Zhao represented the second generation of Chinese leaders, not an old guard revolutionary but a pragmatic bureaucrat. Deng trusted him to pursue prosperity while preserving the political order.

So the economy boomed and dissent grew. Ironically, this status quo ended with the death of Hu Yaobang, an advocate of democratic reform, on April 15, 1989. He remained a hero to college students. They held memorial services that also were political protests. On April 26, the Communist Party's official newspaper printed a front-page denunciation of the students: "Their purpose was to sow dissension among the people, plunge the whole country into chaos and sabotage … stability and unity."



The vitriolic accusations only incited a rebellious reaction. On April 27, thousands of students from Beijing University marched on Tiananmen Square and occupied it in the name of democracy. There, amid the monuments to Chinese Communism, the student protesters set up their camp. They made no provisions for sanitation, so their shantytown soon became squalid. To the dismay of the Communist leadership, the heart of Beijing was both a democratic forum and an open sewer.

Deng was not in a conciliatory mood. "We do not fear spilling blood, and we do not fear international reaction." Zhao, however, remained a pragmatist. He noted that the popular sentiment of Beijing sided with the students; perhaps the party should accept a more democratic system. If he could end the impasse, the party leadership would agree to some concessions. On May 12, the front page of *The People's Daily* printed Zhao's proclamation of human rights and a promise of a democratic China. However, Zhao also urged the students to end their Tiananmen demonstrations and return to classes.

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On May 30, 1989, students and residents of Beijing gather in Tiananmen Square around the "Goddess of Democracy," a replica of New York's Statue of Liberty. A man blocks a column of army tanks in Tiananmen Square on June 5, 1989. A day later, tanks from the People's Liberation Army (PLA) guard a strategic avenue leading to Tiananmen Square.

But the students only increased their demands for democratic reforms. On May 13, 3,000 went on a hunger strike. Their militancy undermined Zhao; by May 17, party leaders had stripped him of power. But he made one last appeal to the protesters, visiting them on May 19 and pleading with them to leave. They ignored him and the following day's declaration of martial law. The students had a blithe confidence in the righteousness of their cause and in the support of Beijing's populace. How could the People's Army fight against the People?

Local artists, as a symbol of democracy and a tribute to its defenders, had constructed a statue of foam and papier-mâché. It was transported in pieces to Tiananmen and assembled there on May 29. The statue, 33 feet tall, of a woman defiantly bearing a torch, was named "The Goddess of Democracy." Within five days it would be crushed by a tank.

On June 3, there were 10,000 protesters encamped in Tiananmen Square. Late that night, in armored vehicles and on foot, some 15,000 soldiers converged on the square. They had hoped that the late hour would give them the element of surprise, but it was too large a force for stealth. An alarmed populace swarmed into the streets, trying to block the troops. But the soldiers had orders to take control by any means necessary. There was insufficient tear gas to disperse the crowds, but there were enough bullets. The suppression continued throughout the following morning. Hundreds were killed, and thousands wounded. The exact numbers may never be known; bonfires reportedly burned bodies. Although the events are known as the Tiananmen Square massacre, most of the bloodshed occurred in the streets leading there. In the square itself, the encamped protesters were driven out at gunpoint but without casualties.

Tyranny had prevailed. Yet on June 5, one gesture of defiance stirred the world. In Tiananmen, the crowds looked on as tanks patrolled the square. A single man, wearing a white shirt and carrying shopping bags, darted in front of a tank and stopped it. The tank attempted to move around him; he blocked it. One man against a tank; the impasse lasted several minutes. He could have been run over or gunned down, but the tank's crew refrained. Perhaps they too respected courage. Two men eventually hustled him away. Were they his friends or the police? We don't know his identity or his fate—just his heroism.

The world denounced the massacre. But in a month, it was business as usual. After all, in the words of the U.S. State Department, the executions and arrests were China's "internal affairs." In China, the leaders of the student movement were put on a "Wanted" list of criminals. At least 1,500 were arrested for their "counter-revolutionary" activities. Zhao Ziyang lived under house arrest for the rest of his life; he died in 2005.

Today, China has the second largest economy in the world. Even now, the Chinese government forbids public discussion of the "turmoil." Yet, the truth still has its advocates. In his *June Fourth Elegies*, author Liu Xiaobo wrote:

"Beneath the forgetting and the terror/this day's been buried. … In memory and bravery/this day lives forever."
(Translation by Jeffrey Yang)

Liu Xiaobo received the Nobel Prize in literature in 2010 … a year after he began serving an 11-year prison sentence for "inciting subversion of state power."

Primary and Secondary Source Documents

United States Documents from the Tiananmen Square Massacre
Cable, From: U.S. Embassy Beijing, To: Department of State, Wash DC (June 4, 1989)

As the PLA moved to consolidate its hold on the city center in the immediate aftermath of the crackdown, Embassy officials watched closely as tanks, APCs, and trucks passed by the U.S. diplomatic compound, moving west toward Tiananmen Square, reporting these movements back to the State Department. In the space of one hour on the early morning of June 5, this cable reports, "more than seventy tanks moving at a fast speed passed the diplomatic compound heading toward the square." Sources also report the presence of large numbers of burned out military vehicles scattered around the city. The document forwards some early casualty estimates, and also reports on the release of ten foreigners who had been detained by Chinese public security, including several journalists. Most intriguing, however, is a report, attributed to a Chinese-American who witnessed the Tiananmen Square violence, claiming that, "The beating to death of a PLA soldier, who was in the first APC to enter Tiananmen Square, in full view of the other waiting PLA soldiers, appeared to have sparked the shooting that followed."

Cable, From: Dept. of State, Wash DC, To: U.S. Embassy Beijing, China (June 4, 1989)

As reports flowed in from the embassy in Beijing, the State Department's China task force was busy updating other diplomatic and consular posts around the world on the situation in Beijing. This SITREP reports the current situation in Beijing where, "The PLA is mopping up isolated resistance," and notes that "casualty estimates vary from 500 to 2600 deaths, with injuries up to 10,000." The cable also discusses the foreign reaction to the recent events, noting especially that, "Taiwan's President Lee Teng-hui called in AIT [American Institute in Taiwan] chief David Dean in Taipei to hear his appeal for the US to join in condemnation and consideration of sanctions."

Secretary of State's Morning Summary for June 5, 1989, China: After the Bloodbath

By the morning of June 5 (Eastern Standard Time) the "severity of the assault" had become clear to U.S. officials. This intelligence summary, prepared by the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research, reports that, "Troops shot indiscriminately into crowds of unarmed civilians, including women and children, often with automatic weapons… Foreign journalists report seeing fleeing protesters shot in the back." The document notes the large number of destroyed military vehicles littering the Beijing streets, and reports that an undisclosed entity had "secured a university campus where students had captured an armored personnel carrier, and issued a warning that executions of students would begin tonight."

Source: http://nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB16/#d15

Directions: Based on the information from primary and secondary source documents, answer the following questions.

1. Do you think the students should have stayed in the square after the troops showed up? Explain your answer.

2. Are the students responsible for the violence that happened in the square?

3. How do the Chinese and U.S. Embassy accounts present the events differently?

4. Why is there such a large difference between the casualty estimates for the Tiananmen Square Massacre?

5. The Chinese government would later claim that violence began because some of the protesters attacking the troops. Do you believe this is true? Why or why not? Explain your answer.

6. What could be the potential problems when a government decides to use violence against its citizens?