



OXFORD JOURNALS
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

Rhetorical Trajectories of Tiananmen Square

Author(s): RANDOLPH KLUVER

Source: *Diplomatic History*, JANUARY 2010, Vol. 34, No. 1 (JANUARY 2010), pp. 71-94

Published by: Oxford University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24916034>

REFERENCES

Linked references are available on JSTOR for this article:

https://www.jstor.org/stable/24916034?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references_tab_contents

You may need to log in to JSTOR to access the linked references.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



Oxford University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Diplomatic History*

JSTOR

Rhetorical Trajectories of Tiananmen Square

In April and May of 1989, the protest movement that began in Tiananmen Square, in the center of Beijing, became one of the most dramatic and defining episodes in the presidential administration of George H. W. Bush. Global media covered the events daily, feeding images around the globe of students engaged in a standoff with police and military units. While the movement began as mourning for the death of the reformer Hu Yaobang, the drama quickly took on a different character, as students turned their attention from Hu Yaobang and towards perceived failures of the Communist Party of China (CPC) and corruption. The movement ultimately culminated in the bloody military crackdown against the protesters on the night of June 3–4, 1989.

As much of the world had been mesmerized by the students, immediately after the violent enforcement of martial law, global responses almost universally condemned China's ruling party, and demanded harsh action against the Chinese government. In the United States, the drama of the events provoked protests from right and left criticizing the Bush administration's response, which was seen as weak and ineffectual. Bush, however, insisted that relations with China were too critical to allow them to be destroyed over the incident. In fact, Bush said in October of 2007 that one of the most important actions of his administration was keeping the lines of communication open with the Chinese government immediately after the crackdown in Tiananmen Square, in spite of widespread opinion among the public and in Congress that China needed to be punished for the actions of the government and military. Bush indicated that had he not kept the lines of communication open, it would have taken significantly longer for China-U.S. relations to heal.¹

But understanding of the Tiananmen movement, and its diplomatic consequences, does not come easily. In the West, there is still a widespread incomprehension about why the Chinese government reacted the way it did and condemnation over the lengths it took to maintain its grasp on power. Moreover, in spite of the rapid economic gains of the almost two decades since the events, and the accompanying social and cultural changes that have radically altered so many aspects of Chinese society, the Tiananmen movement remains

1. Bush's discussion of this issue came during a discussion with students from the United States and China during the 2007 George Bush China-U.S. Relations Conference, Washington, DC. October 22–25, 2007.

largely undiscussed in China. Younger generations of students across China know almost nothing of the events, beyond that a “counter-revolutionary group” sought to “overthrow the government.”²

Both during and after the demonstrations, there was controversy concerning the nature of the movement. In the West, the movement was largely seen as a peaceful, democratic attempt to move the nation forward in its trajectory of internal reform. Global observers frequently linked the events in China to the broader and relatively nonviolent collapse of communism that had begun with the dismantling of the Soviet state and continued with the fall of communism in much of Eastern Europe. Although the Chinese government was aware of this view, they wanted nothing to do with it, insisting instead that the movement was counterrevolutionary and unpatriotic. The protesters themselves, in their attempt to redefine China, drew upon both Western symbols of democracy and Chinese legacies of reform, articulating a perspective that resonated around the world. Although the final, fateful events of June 3 and 4 ultimately defined the historical legacy of the movement, the battle of ideas that was being waged in Tiananmen Square and throughout China is in many ways the far more compelling struggle, given how that battle ultimately shaped what China would become.

Because of the presence of Western-inspired symbols, quotations, a large number of protesters who were able and willing to speak in English, and the presence of the international press, few of whom spoke Chinese, Westerners viewed the movement through a prism of Western conceptions of governance, political values, and ultimately, democracy. In Western academic literature, the event is often explained within a framework of internal power struggle within the Chinese government or as a struggle for democracy, against the unyielding constraints of Communist orthodoxy.³ But within China, both the government and the protesters drew upon a very different framework for understanding the events, grounded in Chinese historical referents, traditions, and analogies that

2. Of course, there are no public attitude surveys conducted within China to determine the level of knowledge of Chinese citizens regarding the Tiananmen events. However, the official refusal to “reconsider the verdict on Tiananmen” means that there is no opportunity for meaningful engagement, at a public level, as to the meaning or impact of the events.

3. For an example of the former, see Andrew Scobell, *China's Use of Military Force: Beyond the Great Wall and the Long March* (New York, 2003), 144–67. Prominent examples of the latter include Zhang Liang, “Reflections on June Fourth,” in Andrew Nathan and Perry Link, eds., *The Tiananmen Papers* (London, 2001), xi–xiv; Han Minzhu, *Cries for Democracy: Writings and Speeches from the 1989 Chinese Democracy Movement* (Princeton, NJ, 1991). Although the events occurred a full two decades ago, and the events generated hundreds of articles and books purporting to explain the events, many of the secondary writings overemphasized the perspective of the students and neglected the perspective of the government on the movement, thus neglecting one of the most important aspects of the events. One of the better analyses is Dingxin Zhao's *The Power of Tiananmen: State-Society Relations and the 1989 Beijing Movement* (Chicago, 2001). In contrast to the competing factions model for understanding Chinese political conflict, Zhao argues that the Tiananmen movement and the response to it arise from the dynamics between state-society relations and finds a solution in the configuration between a controlling state, a weak society, and evolving definitions of the relationship between the two.

obscured for many Western observers the deeply confrontational nature of the movement and ultimately contributed to the tragic conclusion.

I will argue in this article that the drama that played out in Tiananmen Square was indeed an epic battle over the future of China, within a multilayered, highly complex narrative framework, with multiple interpretations of the events even among government officials. In contrast, foreign political leaders and observers saw a deeply moving and complex story but misunderstood the perceived threat that the protesters presented to the Chinese government. George H. W. Bush himself sought to mediate the events both through statements to the press and the public, and through a personal letter he sent to Deng Xiaoping on May 29, although the contents of that letter remain classified. Although the United States ultimately did not determine the outcome of the events, the actions of the Bush administration after the fateful military resolution were very important for the Chinese leadership and did have a key role in finally moving China back into a position of standing in the world. I will demonstrate this by exploring the visions of three distinct groups: the protesters within Tiananmen Square, the Chinese government, and the Bush White House. I will argue in this article that the “narrative” that defined the movement implied policy options on the parts of all three groups and that, to use rhetorical theorist Kenneth Burke’s term, implied a “symbolic action” that necessitated policy responses. By clearly identifying the vision each of the groups had of the movement, it is easier to see how collective political action flowed in the subsequent events.

The Tiananmen movement represents one of the most vivid examples in recent history of a conflict of rhetorical trajectories, by which I mean the implied course that is present in narrative constructions. Burke argued that rather than just being conventional signals of meaning, language actually is an implied action, in that “a given terminology contains various implications, and there is a corresponding ‘perfectionist’ tendency for men to attempt carrying out those implications.”⁴ The terms, or language, we use to define a situation have built into them an implied trajectory, or an end, by virtue of the characteristic of humans that Burke calls a “terministic compulsion.” The compulsion to act according to “terministic screens,” or visions constrained by our language, mean that we act out the implications of our terms, regardless of the consequences. The terms themselves then take on the power of agency, as the symbol motivates both action and continued symbolic development.

Lucien Pye, in his post-Tiananmen analysis, hints that the massacre became almost inevitable due to the positions staked out by the various personalities from both the government and the student movement within the context of Chinese political culture. The use of key rhetorical strategies, such as the humiliation of the existing government, the use of shame to portray moral decay, and the heroic declarations of self-sacrifice backed the Chinese government into

4. Kenneth Burke, *On Symbols and Society* (Chicago, 1989), 73.

a position from which it could not retreat. The students themselves chose roles for themselves that demanded them to push the Chinese government until the point of final blowback. As Pye and others have shown, the students enacted age-old rituals in order to impress upon the public that their stance was moral and right, and played these roles brilliantly to evoke public sympathy.⁵

For this article, I will draw upon three distinct sets of rhetorical evidence, in an attempt to discover the narratives that were used to describe the movement and from which it is possible to draw out the implied trajectory of physical and diplomatic action. Much of the source material for the Beijing protests is still not part of the public domain, and the collections that do exist are subject to charges of bias in selection. But the voluminous amounts of press coverage and the existing documents that are in the public record do provide an adequate starting point for this analysis. Writings and speeches from the Beijing protesters were often recorded by visiting journalists and collected as written essays that were distributed in the square. Many of these were collected and published immediately after the events by an anonymous editor and published intact in a volume called *Cries for Democracy: Writings and Speeches from the 1989 Tiananmen Protest*.⁶

Few documents from either the U.S. or the Chinese governments during the movement are available for public scrutiny, although there is an abundance of “official” perspectives that were published *post hoc*. The Chinese government offered an official early “verdict” on the movement in a *People’s Daily* editorial on April 26, 1989, that infuriated the students and led to prolonged protests. This editorial, along with documents published more recently as *The Tiananmen Papers*, help shed light on how at least some elements of the governing body viewed the protests. In 2001, a collection of party documents that were compiled during the period of the Tiananmen movement were published as *The Tiananmen Papers* and, according to the compiler, are a record of top leadership meetings and decisions during the Tiananmen period.⁷ Former foreign minister Qian Qichen, who was in office during the events, has recently published a volume in which he addresses the issue from the government’s perspective but reveals little of the internal party discussion regarding the movement. Qian’s memoirs do, however, discuss Bush’s concerted attempt to keep China-U.S. relations on an even keel and, perhaps surprisingly, seem to indicate that Bush was more eager than the Chinese leadership to keep relations steady and that Deng Xiaoping believed U.S. actions subsequent to the crackdown were solely

5. Lucien Pye, “Tiananmen and Chinese Political Culture: The Escalation of Confrontation from Moralizing to Revenge,” *Asian Survey* 30, no. 4 (1990): 331–47. See also Craig Calhoun, *Neither Gods nor Emperors: Students and the Struggle for Democracy in China* (Berkeley, CA, 1994).

6. Han, *Cries for Democracy*. The name “Han Minzhu” is not an actual name, but rather a Chinese pseudonym for “Chinese democracy.” “Minzhu,” or democracy, was the most used word in the major writings of the period. The assistant editor was identified as “Hua Sheng,” also a pseudonym, meaning “the voice of the Chinese people.”

7. The compiler is a pseudonym for a government official who had access to the documents and provided them to the editors of the volume. Nathan and Link, *The Tiananmen Papers*.

responsible for the strains in the ties.⁸ More recently, a secret collection of recordings by deposed CCP General Secretary Zhao Ziyang has been released, which sheds significant light on the internal division within the CCP over the movement.⁹

On the U.S. side, many of the documents from both the White House Situation Room Reports and the National Security Council are still classified. A small collection of documents has been released on the Internet as part of the National Security Archives project at George Washington University.¹⁰ In addition, I have drawn from archival materials located at the George Bush Presidential Library, at Texas A&M University, as well as published accounts of the events by political leaders, including George Bush Sr., National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft, and American ambassador James Lilley.¹¹

The rest of this article will draw upon each of these sources to explain the three competing narrative visions that sought to define the Tiananmen movement, and the “implied actions,” or the policy responses implied in each of these visions. I will turn to the self-understanding of the protesters themselves, as it can legitimately be said that this is the vision that propelled the nation towards the collision and potentially could have radically altered China’s own understanding of itself.

THE BEIJING PROTESTORS: LOYAL DEMONSTRATIONS AGAINST A CORRUPT REGIME

Although the protests in the spring of 1989 were not exclusively located within Beijing, as there were protests in every major Chinese city that roughly corresponded to the Beijing protesters, the events in Tiananmen Square itself were the heart of the larger national movement. The students, intellectuals, and other citizens who filled the square largely saw themselves as loyal servants to the regime, seeking to correct, or even remonstrate, against an unjust regime.

8. Qian Qichen, *Ten Episodes in China’s Diplomacy* (New York, 2005). See particularly the substance of Deng’s letter to Bush on August 11, 1989, 138.

9. Zhao Ziyang, *Prisoner of the State: The Secret Journal of Premier Zhao Ziyang* (New York, 2009).

10. George Washington University Library, *Tiananmen Square 1989, the Declassified History, National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 16*, <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB16/index.html> (accessed November 14, 2007).

11. Bush himself wrote two letters to Deng Xiaoping, one on May 29, prior to the military crackdown, and one on June 20, some two weeks after the crackdown. The first letter remains classified, while the second was published as part of a collection of Bush’s letters. George Bush, *All the Best: My Life in Letters and Other Writings* (New York, 1999) 428–43. Bush and his National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft also discussed the Tiananmen movement in their book *A World Transformed* (New York, 1998). Former Ambassador James Lilley published his view of the events surrounding Tiananmen in his book *China Hands: Nine Decades of Adventure, Espionage, and Diplomacy in Asia* (New York, 2004). One noteworthy analysis of this episode is in Harry Harding’s *A Fragile Relationship: The United States and China since 1972* (Washington, DC, 1992). Dingxin Zhao’s analysis in *The Power of Tiananmen: State-Society Relations and the 1989 Beijing Student Movement* (Chicago, 2001) is also a powerful analysis of the movement from the perspective of political legitimacy.

The protesters, however, were in no way united in their understanding of the proper aims, tactics, or goals of the movement. Rather, the leaders of the movement were often, if not regularly, in conflict with one another, and this conflict in many ways fueled the ongoing standoff with the government. In fact, in one of the cruel ironies of history, the only reason that the students remained in the square on the night of the fateful crackdown was because a minority of students had earlier voted to stay on, while the majority had voted to leave. In an attempt to honor their own understanding of “democracy,” however, many of those who had voted to leave stayed on.¹²

The movement began immediately after the death of former Premier Hu Yaobang, who had lost his position after student demonstrations from December of 1986 to January of 1987, largely because of his reluctance to act harshly against those students. After he died in April of 1989, students poured out of the universities in Beijing, and given the close proximity of the annual Qingming festival, a traditional period of mourning for the dead, the students found a number of reasons to continue their initial protests. From the earliest period of the movement, students used phrases such as “those who should have lived, have died, while those who should have died, have lived,” an implied rebuke to leaders such as Deng Xiaoping and others who remained atop the Chinese government.¹³

Although their point, that Hu had been correct in his assessment about the legitimacy of the 1987 protests, had been made by their initial presence in Tiananmen, the students were enticed to stay in the square by the visible support they received from the public. The impending state visit of Soviet Leader Mikhail Gorbachev gave further reason to remain, as Gorbachev was seen as a brave reformer, willing to confront the realities of the Soviet state and, as such, likely to be in sympathy with the movement. Although China’s economic reforms had actually gone much further than Russia’s, Gorbachev’s willingness to confront the inefficiencies and injustices of the entire political and social system, as well as economic inefficiencies, made him a hero to the student protestors. Gorbachev’s persona, as well as the fact that hundreds of foreign journalists had come to Beijing to cover the state visit, fueled the ongoing protests.

The students considered themselves, and actively portrayed themselves, as heirs to the mantle of legitimacy from the May 4th Movement of 1919, which began in Beijing as a protest over the terms of the Treaty of Versailles. That treaty, which transferred German territorial rights over China to Japan, propelled a popular protest, largely led by students and intellectuals, which both protested the weak state of the Chinese government and promoted the value of Western science and democracy for China’s future. The May 4th Movement is

12. Dingxin Zhao, *The Power of Tiananmen*, 193.

13. Binyan Liu, *Tell the World: What Happened in China and Why* (New York, 1989), 8.

taken within China as an important rebuke to the Chinese government, which was unable to resist the humiliations of foreign incursions. Since that time, it has been an important icon of student progressive activism in China, in that every political group from the Kuomintang to the CCP claimed to be in the spirit of the May 4th Movement. The 1989 students even went so far in this identification as to draft a “New May Fourth Manifesto,” which stated in part:

Seventy years ago today, a large group of illustrious students assembled in front of Tiananmen, and a new chapter in the history of China was opened. Today, we are once again assembled here, not only to commemorate that monumental day but more importantly, to carry forward the May Fourth spirit of science and democracy. Today, in front of the symbol of the Chinese nation, Tiananmen, we can proudly proclaim to all the people in our nation that we are worthy of the pioneers of seventy years ago.¹⁴

This manifesto, written by Wuer Kaixi, one of the more prominent student leaders, not only makes the case that the students had the same goals as the May 4th Movement, but also implies that just as the government of 1919 was unworthy of ruling China, so also was the current government. Although, as noted before, the protesters in Tiananmen Square were not always united in their thinking, revolution was clearly one of the dominant discourses that arose. In another speech delivered at Tiananmen, Wuer Kaixi went further and declared that the Chinese leadership was a “pretender” government, composed of “reactionary warlords, reactionary government, and fascist military,” words used previously to describe those who opposed the establishment of the Republic of China during the early part of the century.¹⁵

Wuer was not the only student to directly challenge the Chinese government, but his presence and his manner indicated that he, as one of the most visible of the Tiananmen protestors, would have nothing to do with the CCP. In addition to the speech noted above, Wuer demonstrated his disdain for the CCP in numerous other ways. Among the most well-known of stories is when the Premier Li Peng finally agreed to a meeting with some of the student leaders. Wuer came to the meeting still dressed in his hospital clothing from his hunger strike, which was interpreted by most as indicating his lack of respect for Li and the government, and then proceeded to criticize Li for arriving late. Wuer later stated that he was angry with Li’s “haughty and high-handed attitude” and that his goal was to make it clear that, as representatives of the “students and the people,” his goal was “to create an equal status between the people’s movement and the government.”¹⁶ To make the insult even deeper, all of this was broadcast

14. Wuer Kaixi, Speech at Tiananmen Square, “The New May Fourth Manifesto,” in Han, *Cries for Democracy*, 135.

15. Han, *Cries for Democracy*, 376.

16. “Witnessing Tiananmen: Student Talks Fail,” BBC Online (May 28, 2004), <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/3757433.stm>.

on national television, further highlighting the public humiliation of the nation's premier at the hands of a twenty-year-old student.

Gao Wenqian, who was working for the CCP at the time, recalled that one of the most moving of the placards he witnessed was one carried by professors from Qinghua University, which said, "We have kneeled down too long and are getting up to stretch our legs!" This reference to the humiliation of the intellectual class before the CCP directly challenged the authority of the CCP yet again, as it indicated that Mao's famous "The Chinese people have stood up," meant that only Mao had stood up. Gao later said of the placard, "it was the professors' placard that made the biggest impression on me. Theirs was the one which most plucked at my heartstrings, and also, I think, most truly reflected the inner thoughts of the Chinese intellectuals."¹⁷

While students leaders such as Wuer frequently evoked the word "democracy"—as noted below, especially when speaking to foreign journalists—their understanding and use of the word demands clarification. The use of the word "democracy" does not necessarily mean that the student protesters actually envisioned some sort of procedural reforms that would guarantee a more democratic input into policy decisions. Rather, the students tended to argue for something in between the current state and a full-blown democracy, with many arguing that the greater mass of Chinese citizens was not ready for democracy but that intellectuals like themselves should have a greater role in running the country. As Daniel Kelliher argues, the movement drew from workers and peasants in terms of moral support, but the student leaders of the movement drew little in either inspiration or organization from the citizenry of the nation. In many ways, the movement was a group of elites (college graduates consisted of less than 1 percent of the population in 1989) calling for more power from other elites to be exercised on behalf of the citizens themselves.¹⁸

Not all of the students argued for the downfall of the CCP. At one point, after the personal pleading of Party Secretary Zhao Ziyang, some of the leaders downplayed their extreme language in order to not provoke the government. Other elements, however, actively challenged the CCP. They argued that the movement was indeed against the CCP. In an unsigned "big character poster" entitled "Reflections on the History of the Chinese Communist Party" posted at Tiananmen Square, the challenge to the legitimacy of the CCP was made explicit:

The history of the Chinese Communist Party positively informs us that it indeed deserves to be called the most evil party of its time. It only cares about

17. "Witnessing Tiananmen: Protests Mount," BBC Online (May 26, 2004), <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/3749869.stm>.

18. Daniel Kelliher, "Keeping Democracy Safe from the Masses: Intellectuals and Elitism in the Chinese Protest Movement," *Comparative Politics* 25, no. 4 (July 1993): 379–96. See also Lei Guang, "Elusive Democracy: Conceptual Change and the Chinese Democracy Movement, 1978–79 to 1989," *Modern China* 22 (October 1996): 417–47.

its own position and pays no heed to the future of the country and the people. . . . All the promises it made upon founding the country turned out to be nothing more than lies. . . . Other than wasting China's youth for forty years, the Communist Party has brought nothing to China. . . . Today, the Communist Party, especially its members who are government cadres, has already become a new privileged class of Chinese society. . . . Of course, actual power is in the hands of Deng Xiaoping and his relatives, disciples, sycophants, and card buddies. . . . Great turmoil across the whole of China is imminent. The Communist Party's day of reckoning is about to arrive.¹⁹

As noted earlier, narrative visions contain within themselves implied action, based upon the "reality" portrayed in the rhetorical vision. In this case, since the Chinese state remained backward, and the CCP was corrupt and ineffective, then the situation demanded some action and the rise of an agent to lead the action. In this case, the implied, or called-for, action was revolution, and the agents were the students. Stories from China's ancient past abound of scholars who endured the persecution of emperors in order to promote the truth and serve as the "conscience of the emperor."²⁰ The 1989 students were clearly aware of this role, and openly sought to remind the nation that as scholars, no matter the discipline, they were duty bound to remind the government of truth. One group of students wrote,

We are students of Beijing Aeronautics Institute. Our sacred mission is to uphold the people's interests. . . . Our actions these last few days sprang from our patriotic hearts, from our pure and loyal love for our great motherland. . . . Citizens, our interests are now closely bound together. We swear to stand with the people to the death, to struggle to the very end!²¹

It is clear from this passage, and numerous others like it, that in defining themselves in this way the protesters, or at least a significant minority of them, saw the fateful clash as inevitable. In addition to the tens of thousands of students demonstrating in the streets, hundreds committed themselves to a hunger strike and pledged to not end their hunger strike until the government relented on its pressure of the movement. Because their interests were closely intertwined with that of the citizenry at large, they had no option of any sort of compromise with the government.

By the end of the movement, the sense that a dramatic conflict was inevitable seemed especially true. On June 3, when it became clear that martial law would indeed be enforced, the students released this statement:

19. Han, *Cries for Democracy*, 59–60.

20. See, for example, Alan R. Kluver, "Student Movements in Confucian Societies: Remembrance and Remonstrance in South Korea," in G. DeGroot, ed., *Student Protests: The Sixties and After* (London, 1998), 219–31.

21. "A Letter to Citizens of Beijing," in Han, *Cries for Democracy*, 75.

Today is the third of June, 1989. . . . History will show that this day will be a symbol of shame, a day that the people will always remember. On this day, the government has ripped off the last shred of the veil covering its hideous visage. It has dispatched thousands of brutal troops and police, who have frenziedly attacked totally unarmed students and people, to suppress the students and people. We no longer hold out any hope whatsoever for this government. We now solemnly declare: if Li Peng's government is not brought down, China will perish and the people will no longer have any right to existence whatsoever.²²

Thus, the Beijing protestors saw themselves as the inheritors to a long tradition of Confucian scholars, serving as the conscience of the nation, and challenging the CCP to be true not only to its own ideals, but to their ideals as well. They saw themselves in some ways in Leninist terms, as the “vanguard of history,” in that they would lay down their lives to challenge the oppression of a corrupt regime over China's intellectual classes. The “rhetorical” reality constructed by the students and other protestors helped to create the reality that indeed did transpire; compromise with a corrupted state was impossible, and, as loyal citizens, the only recourse was to lay their lives down for their country.

THE BEIJING GOVERNMENT: THE THREAT TO NEW CHINA

Within the governing halls of Beijing, the rhetorical reality was also just as uncompromising. Those within the government who argued that the students were indeed patriotic, soon found themselves dismissed from their posts or otherwise sidelined. The Chinese state dismissed out of hand the identification of the students with the May 4th Movement or any other patriotic movement. Although a large number of lower- and mid-level officials sympathized with the students, and supported the movement—though as will be shown below, their public support might have been more calculated than real—the state could not easily ignore such direct challenges to its authority and legitimacy. Party Secretary Zhao Ziyang was sympathetic to the students, for example, and argued that the students were really only asking the Chinese government to live up to its own ideals.²³ He believed that the student protests were just “expressions of frustration and were not a challenge to the entire political system.”²⁴ Zhao's convictions about the generally “patriotic” nature of the movement were so strong that they led to a firm split between the top government officials, and he refused to attend the meeting that declared martial law and was soon removed from his office.

22. “Urgent Call to Mobilize from the Protect Tiananmen Headquarters,” in Han, *Cries for Democracy*, 359.

23. “Comrade Zhao Ziyang's speech at the meeting of the board of governors of the Asian Development bank” (May 4, 1989), in Link and Perry, *The Tiananmen Papers*, 115–16.

24. Zhao Ziyang, *Prisoner of the State*, 11.

Other senior leaders, however, believed that the students resembled not so much the May 4th students as they did the infamous Red Guards, the radical, out-of-control youth that Mao unleashed on the nation in an attempt to shake the nation out of its bureaucratic inertia during the decade of the “Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution” from 1966 to 1976. Li Peng, in reacting to Zhao Ziyang’s Asian Development Bank speech, echoed the views of many of the “old guard” of the CCP when he argued that, regardless of what most students believed, a “small minority,” or “black hands,” of those orchestrating the movement wanted to use the movement to “negate the leadership of the CCP and negate the entire socialist system.”²⁵

Indeed, most of those in the top levels of the Chinese government had all too vivid memories of the tumultuous decade of the Cultural Revolution, when youths who claimed to love their country and Chairman Mao effectively shut the nation down, causing untold misery and probably close to thirty million unnatural deaths. What began as a movement among students in Beijing quickly turned into a national nightmare, in which zealous youths sought to find any evidence of “counterrevolutionary” thought or behavior, and punished whatever they found with humiliation, intimidation, arrest, internal exile, or even death. Deng Xiaoping himself had been sent to work on a labor farm in rural China. His son, Deng Pufang, had been permanently crippled when tossed from a building in the name of “the revolution.” Other famous first-generation revolutionaries found worse fates, such as Premier Liu Shaoqi who was arrested and eventually died in a dank prison. Literally millions of others suffered, including almost everyone with any position of authority, including teachers and school principals.

Lest it seem like these ancient memories could not have been in play, it is critical to remember that at the time of the 1989 movement, memories of the Cultural Revolution, which ended only in 1976, were not yet fifteen years old, less time than has elapsed since the Tiananmen movement and the writing of this article, and thus it is not altogether surprising that words of criticism flowing from Tiananmen Square reminded the top leadership of the decade-long Cultural Revolution.

The 1989 movement did not make any explicit linkages to the Cultural Revolution, nor did the government officials make direct connections between the movements. Rather than reciting Mao’s Thought, officials such as Li Peng argued that the 1989 students were driven by “bourgeois liberalization” or an unsophisticated longing for the “so-called freedoms” of the West. The Cultural Revolution ideology, slogans, and stated purposes all differed dramatically from those of the 1989 movement, although there are a number of similarities in terms of tactics and strategies between the two, and ultimately, the noncompromising rhetorical battle that emerged. The invisible “black hands” driving the

25. Link and Perry, *Tiananmen Papers*, 118.

movement could be seen as the “Gang of Four,” who manipulated Mao’s legacy during the Cultural Revolution to unleash the pent-up frustrations of youth to show their “patriotic zeal” and bringing chaos upon the nation. Perhaps most tellingly, the use of the term “turmoil,” *dongluan*, conjured up images of the battles of the Red Guards. Finally, the uncompromising discourse of the student movement in effect, if not in intent, challenged the government in ways that could not be ignored.²⁶

Moreover, the Chinese government was suspicious of the movement’s foreign origins and support. A June 1 emergency report of the Beijing Party Committee argued that “one important factor in this turmoil has been the large amount of spiritual support and material aid that various hostile forces, organizations, and individuals at home and abroad have directly or indirectly provided to the organizers and plotters,” and went on to particularly indict the Voice of America (VOA) for its “extremely inglorious” role, for airing programs which added fuel to the fire and “inciting turmoil.”²⁷ Not to be overlooked, as Nick Cull argues in his own contribution to this *Diplomatic History* forum, VOA officials would not have been entirely displeased with such a description of their work and impact. The report also accused newspapers and organizations in the United States, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the United Kingdom for publishing false reports and for providing the financial support to the movement. Whether or not the reports arising from the movement were false, there is little doubt that much of the money supporting the movement did indeed come from outside of the mainland.

On the same day as the Beijing Party’s emergency report to central authorities, another report from the state security ministry confirmed that the United States had indeed been engaged in “ideological and cultural infiltration,” aimed at undermining socialism through multiple forms, including political, cultural, and economic engagement. This report even went so far as to accuse the U.S. government of “direct intervention and open support” for the movement, and it cited as evidence President Bush’s order to the Hong Kong embassy to closely monitor the situation and the obvious attention that was paid to the movement by U.S. embassy and consular officials.²⁸ In this indictment, there was no attempt to distinguish between official U.S. government personnel and policy and U.S. or other Western journalists. Extensive coverage of the events in Tiananmen by Western journalists was thus viewed as further evidence of the nefarious intentions of the American government. Even American students studying at Beijing’s universities were seen as agents of Bush administration policy. Although the U.S. administration had tried to find a middle road between

26. See Shaorong Huang, “The Power of Words: Political Slogans as Leverage in Conflict and Conflict Management during China’s Cultural Revolution Movement,” in G. Chen and R. Ma, eds., *Chinese Conflict Management and Resolution* (Westport, CT, 2002), 241–58.

27. Link and Perry, *Tiananmen Papers*, 334.

28. *Ibid.*, 343–45.

the two extremes—as will be explored in greater detail below—there is little doubt that Beijing saw Washington’s fingerprints all over the movement. Rather than a purely domestic reform movement requiring engagement and potential compromise, the protesters were interpreted and coded as agents of foreign provocateurs, a trope that tapped directly into China’s long history of foreign control and manipulation. Qian Qichen states in his memoirs that Deng Xiaoping blamed the United States for the damaged relationship that developed in the aftermath of the crackdown and subsequent crisis, even though he knew that Bush and Scowcroft were doing everything in their power to keep the relationship intact. Deng rightly judged that Bush was unwilling to break off relations because it might drive China back into the orbit of the Soviet Union or into isolation.²⁹ That Sino-American relations suffered nonetheless proved to Deng’s mind at least that strained relations were not only Washington’s fault, but perhaps even Washington’s design. As Mary Sarotte notes in her article for this forum, Communist leaders, though mindful of constituents, were more likely than their Western counterparts to infer in them the same level of power and political omnipotence as they themselves tended to enjoy.

Thus, it did not take long for the government to begin a propaganda battle with the protestors. The first, and most monumental, salvo came on April 26, barely eleven days after the death of Hu Yaobang, when the *Renmin Ribao* (People’s Daily) newspaper published perhaps the most important piece of communication during the entire event, an editorial that reflected the central government’s understanding of the events, and was read verbatim on television. The article itself was probably a revised version of a speech that Deng Xiaoping gave and reflected his view that the students were a threat not just to the current political structure, but to the nation itself.³⁰

The April 26 editorial established the party line, and because it argued that the movement was being directed by outside and oppositional forces, it was clearly not “patriotic” in its essence. If there was patriotism in Tiananmen Square, the article argued, it was the misguided patriotism of students who had been duped by enemies of China. While the editorial made reference to legitimate grief over the death of Hu Yaobang, it also claimed that an “extremely small group of people with ulterior motives” then sought to manipulate the masses to destroy the state itself:

Under the banner of democracy, they were trying to destroy the democratic legal system. Their goal was to poison people’s minds, to create turmoil throughout the country, to destroy political stability and unity. This was a planned conspiracy, a riot, whose real nature was to fundamentally negate

29. Nicholas D. Kristof, “Strained U.S. Ties Reported in China,” *New York Times*, October 5, 1989.

30. “Deng Xiaoping and the April 26 Editorial,” in Nathan and Link, *The Tiananmen Papers*, 71.

the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party and to negate the socialist system.³¹

The use of the term “turmoil” was itself a rhetorical declaration of war. In addition to overtly reminding the nation of the Red Guards, the term implied that rather than conscientiously guiding the nation, the demonstrators were endangering all the gains of the past century. By defining the demonstrators as conspirators, rioters, terrorists, and counterrevolutionaries, decisive violence was made to appear not only justifiable, but necessary: “The whole Party and the people of the whole country must be fully aware of the seriousness of this struggle, unite, [and] take a firm stand against turmoil.” If the demonstrations were to continue, the party stated, the nation itself was at risk. Regardless of their sympathies for the legitimate grievances of the people, to allow the demonstrations to continue would be an abdication of sacred duty. Deng himself was reported to have said “This is a well-planned plot whose real aim is to reject the Chinese Communist Party and the socialist system at the most fundamental level.”³²

The government’s April 26 editorial had exactly the opposite of its intended effect. Rather than giving pause to the students to reflect upon how they looked to the government, it infuriated them, prompting a whole new set of demands, beginning with the retraction of the editorial itself. The students were angered to have been labeled “counterrevolutionaries” and saw in the editorial the very insolence and arrogance that they were protesting. The protesters thus strengthened their commitment to the demonstrations and later demanded an official withdrawal of the term “turmoil,” given the implications of the term.³³

It is important to remember that many Chinese believed that the nation had made significant gains in the previous decade and a half. Deng Xiaoping had broken the insistence on political orthodoxy and, more importantly, had begun the processes of economic reform that would lead to dramatic improvements in the overall quality of life, in the efficiency of China’s economy, and in the rise of China as a global power. By 1989, the effects of these policies were still early, but nevertheless they were dramatic. Deng and others believed in the direction China was headed and dreaded above all a return to the political chaos that had ruled before. As evidence for its position, the government publicized incidents of corruption among the student leaders and tried to connect the students with Taiwanese and foreign spies. Deng Xiaoping told military commanders that the key issue was whether or not the movement was rightfully called “turmoil,” or

31. “We must take a firm stand against turmoil,” Editorial, April 26, 1989, in Han, *Cries for Democracy*, 85.

32. “Deng Xiaoping and the April 26 Editorial,” in Nathan and Link, *The Tiananmen Papers*, 73. Zhao Ziyang later recorded that the editorial made it tremendously difficult for the government to move forward and to calm the students. Much of his conflict with Deng Xiaoping and Li Peng revolved around how to mitigate the impact of the editorial.

33. Craig Calhoun, *Neither Gods nor Emperors: Students and the Struggle for Democracy in China* (Berkeley, CA, 1994), 49.

dongluan: “This word ‘turmoil’ exactly describes the problem,” Deng explained. “What some people opposed was this word; what they demanded revised was this word.”³⁴ For Deng, the turmoil of the immediate past was something to be avoided at all cost, lest China not recover again.

The result of the resolute commitment to the April 26 editorial was that the Chinese government later became locked into its own role as the defender of the state and all the gains that had been made since the overthrow of political orthodoxy since 1976. As the challenge to the state was clear, there was no ambiguity about what must be done. The government had to take a firm line and implement dramatic changes to guarantee the stability of the state, particularly from the young, passionate, and “counterrevolutionary” students.

THE BUSH ADMINISTRATION: IDEALISTIC STUDENT PROTESTORS

Western observers viewed the students far differently from the Chinese government, thinking them most often as heroes cut from the same democratic mold as had inspired their own national founders, or at the least as representative of the same spirit of democracy that seemed on the rise in the broader events of 1989. The subsequent crackdown solidified the impressions of many that China’s dictatorial character remained the same, despite a decade of economic reform.

Within the Bush administration in particular, reports flowed in both through official sources and the international press. Cables from the U.S. embassy to Washington emphasized the mass nature of the movement, with hundreds of thousands participating in cities throughout the nation. For example, at least ten thousand students had participated in demonstrations in Chengdu by May 18, representing well over one-fifth of the university-level students in the region.³⁵ By May 22, the crowd was estimated to have grown to one hundred thousand.³⁶ In Shenyang, the American consul reported that at least two hundred thousand students and supporters were demonstrating in the northeast, with at least one thousand on hunger strikes.³⁷ Even in provincial Guizhou, one of China’s most remote cities, students protested, with the U.S. embassy estimating that “cumulatively tens of thousands” had participated, with at least twenty or thirty hunger

34. “Deng Xiaoping’s Remarks to Martial Law Officers on June 9,” in Han, *Cries for Democracy*, 370.

35. Cable, US Embassy to Secretary of State, May 18, 1989, Document 41, OA/ID CFO1722, “New Student Protests Hit Chengdu,” White House Office of Records Management : Subject File, White House Situation Room Files, China, Part 1 of 5, George Bush Presidential Library, College Station, Texas.

36. Cable, US Embassy Beijing to Secretary of State, May 22, 1989, CFO 1722-004, Subject: Chengdu Demonstrations Hit New Peak, George Bush Presidential Library.

37. Withdrawal/redaction sheet, Cable, May 19, 1989, CFO1755, American Consul Shenyang to Secretary of State, 200,000 Students and Supporters Demonstrate in Northeast, More than 1000 on Hunger Strike, George Bush Presidential Library.

strikers.³⁸ In Hong Kong, still controlled by the United Kingdom though set to revert to Chinese authority within a decade, approximately 1.5 million marched in solidarity with the Beijing movement.³⁹ U.S. Ambassador James Lilley said in one transmission, “the seeming coordination with protests elsewhere, the similarities of political concerns, and the genuine enthusiasm of students and others demonstrate how deep and widespread public sentiment against corruption and for democracy is throughout China. Its spread to Guiyang should be a telling sign to central government leaders in Beijing.”⁴⁰ Indeed, as we have seen above, the movement was indeed seen in just these terms by central authorities, though they viewed it more as a threat than with the inspiration Lilly and other American officials perceived.

Likewise, Western journalists, who were in Beijing in preparation for the visit of Gorbachev, portrayed the students as noble, generous, and idealistic, and focused on the acts of generosity by people in Hong Kong and elsewhere who sent material support to the students. Foreign journalists in large part responded as they did based on the shared convictions of Western nations and duly enshrined in their respective national myths: revolution, freedom, and democracy. The students clearly understood this mythic connection with the Western world, sought to emphasize these mythic narratives, such as the American and French Revolutions, and deliberately emphasized the two-hundred year anniversary since the French revolution of 1789. The Goddess of Democracy statue, crafted on a university campus and brought to Tiananmen Square, was clearly based upon the Statue of Liberty, although ultimately the student artists decided to make the sculpture more “Chinese.”⁴¹ To add further insult, the students placed the Goddess statue immediately in front of the large Mao portrait on Tiananmen Gate itself, as if to challenge the legitimacy of the very founder of the state. In addition, students wrote signs, in English, quoting Patrick Henry and Abraham Lincoln. Such signs almost inevitably showed up in Western news broadcasts.

For its part, American analysts, and the American public more generally, viewed in the students a patriotic movement, not altogether different from the university protesters in the United States during the Vietnam War. During the protest movement, Bush made extraordinary attempts to convince Deng that the students posed no threat to the Chinese government, thus indicating that the administration understood just how irreconcilable the positions in Beijing had become. Bush himself probably did hear the challenges to the state, but he

38. Cable, US Embassy Beijing to Secretary of State, May 20, 1989, Subject: Guizhou Student Demonstrations, George Bush Presidential Library.

39. Cable, US Embassy Beijing to Secretary of State, May 29, 1989, CFO1722-008, Subject: Second Mammoth Pro-Democracy March in Hong Kong, George Bush Presidential Library.

40. Cable, US Ambassador James Lilley to Secretary of State, CFO 1722-002, Subject: 15,000 to 20,000 in Hefei, George Bush Presidential Library.

41. Han, *Cries for Democracy*, 344.

believed that they would be drowned out by the voices of reform and moderation both within and outside of the government. Where George Bush saw the sincerity of Kent State, and was sure that the earnest advice of a sincere friend would help to bring about a peaceful end, Deng Xiaoping saw the lawlessness of the Red Guards and was convinced that Bush's "sincere advice" was nothing more than the empty words of someone plotting the overthrow of socialism.

Although the Bush administration undoubtedly had sympathy for both the students and the precariousness of the government's response, it likely missed the inevitability that had already been charted out by the discourse of the students. For example, Ambassador James Lilley said in a cable to the secretary of state, "the genuine enthusiasm of students and others demonstrate how deep and widespread public sentiment against corruption and for democracy is throughout China" and seemed to not realize that the stakes were far greater than that. The governmental leaders believed that the students' arguments that they (the students) were merely "against corruption" was disingenuous, as it was clear from all of the discourse arising from the movement that there was a very real and substantial threat to the legitimacy of the Chinese government.

In the United States, the Bush administration measured the risk of trying to both encourage the students, while also not be seen as "interfering" in Chinese affairs. The way to do this was to deny that the United States was directly involved, while still linking the protests to U.S. values. Secretary of State James Baker, in a White House press conference before a meeting between President Bush and Wan Li on May 24, argued that it was indeed Western principles of democracy that motivated the students, even if they claimed their support was for Gorbachev: "they may have that name [Gorbachev] on their lips, but they have the policies of the West in mind. It is the philosophy of the West that they are advancing, and it is the values of the West that they are seeking."⁴² President Bush claimed in an interview with Britain's *Guardian* newspaper that he was closely following the events and interpreted them as part of the wave of democracy sweeping the world: "glasnost and the Beijing demonstrations proved that the democratic way is on the march and it is not going to be stopped."⁴³ The year 1989 was proving to be one of dramatic global change, he argued, with democracy cresting the world over; China appeared but one more mark along that path.

Bush interpreted the events largely out of his own experience as head of the U.S. Liaison Office to China in 1974 and 1975. By that time, the Cultural Revolution was not completely over, but it was beginning to wind down, and the radical mayhem of the late 1960s had begun to subside. While in Beijing, Bush

42. Cable, Secretary of State, Washington D.C., to all East Asian and Pacific Diplomatic Posts, May 24, 1989, CFO1722-005, Subject: May 24 EAP Press Summary, George Bush Presidential Library.

43. Martin Walker, "NATO Is a Winner, Says Upbeat Bush," *The Guardian* (London), May 24, 1989.

heard painful stories from the Cultural Revolution, and knew of its devastating impacts. In the diary that he kept while serving in China, he remarked that he had been reading the book *Hostage in Peking*, a memoir by British journalist Anthony Grey of his experiences during the early days of the Cultural Revolution. Clearly bothered by the stories he is reading, he writes in his diary, "It is 'must reading' because it only happened in 1967–68 and part of 1969, and it gives you a real indication of what things were like only a very short time ago."⁴⁴ Elsewhere in his diary, Bush indicates that he felt that he had few attempts at honest conversation, but it is inconceivable that he had not heard other stories of the suffering of Chinese, in addition to Grey's book.

Because of his time in China, Bush took pride in Deng's reference to him as a *lao pengyou*, or "old friend," and thought that he knew China well enough that he could see beyond the surface.⁴⁵ He stated specifically in a letter to Deng Xiaoping that his status as a *lao pengyou* enabled him to make a personal appeal on behalf of the students.⁴⁶ He later stated, "I had a keen personal interest in China and I thought I understood it reasonably well, enough to closely direct our policy toward it."⁴⁷ Further, Bush and other key members of his administration had visited China in February of 1989, just two months prior to the beginning of the demonstrations. In this, his first visit to China as the U.S. president, Bush was confident that he understood the motives and the beliefs of the Chinese leadership, concluding that "a real level of trust was developing."⁴⁸

It was not just Bush's personal experiences that shaped the administration's response, but also a belief that increased contact, including trade contact, would be a catalyst for social change. Bush believed that should trade relations be thwarted, it would end the one internal incentive for internal reform. As he wrote later, "I believed that the commercial contracts between our countries had helped lead to the quest for more freedom. If people have commercial incentives, whether it's in China or in other totalitarian systems, the move toward democracy seems inexorable."⁴⁹ Moreover, a dramatic period of political transition was beginning, as just prior to the gathering in Tiananmen Square, Poland had legalized Solidarity, and the Soviet Union had allowed elections that went against the Soviet party, and ultimately led to the demise of the USSR. To curtail trade and cultural contacts, Bush believed, would be to hinder the very process of change, economic liberalization, and ultimately democratization that he believed it was Washington's sacred duty to encourage.

Bush knew that it was important to not be seen as encouraging the students in their rebellion, but he sought to find ways to do so anyway. He later said, "I'm

44. Jeffrey A. Engel, ed., *The China Diary of George H. W. Bush: The Making of a Global President* (Princeton, NJ, 2008).

45. Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, 94.

46. Bush, *All My Best*, 429.

47. Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, 90.

48. *Ibid.*, 97.

49. *Ibid.*, 89.

old enough to remember Hungary, and I don't want to be a catalyst for encouraging a course of action that would inevitably lead to violence and bloodshed," in reference to the failed uprising in 1956 in which those who briefly tried to oust the Communist party waited in vain for Western help to arrive. In fact, to the Chinese leadership, it was clear that the movement was being directed by an "extremely small minority" within China but that its ultimate sources were foreign. Deng himself told Brent Scowcroft during his secret July visit after the turmoil that "we have been feeling since the outset of these events more than two months ago that the various aspects of US foreign policy have actually cornered China."⁵⁰

The message that the Chinese leadership heard is not necessarily what the Bush administration had intended. Scowcroft later told Deng that what "the American people perceived in the demonstrations they saw—rightly or wrongly—was an expression of values which represent their most cherished beliefs, stemming from the American Revolution."⁵¹ In his memoirs, former Foreign Minister Qian Qichen largely agrees with this account of the July visit, and he states that Scowcroft's purpose in the trip was to explain the difficult political situation that Bush found in trying to maintain China-U.S. relations.⁵² In this sense, the drama in Tiananmen Square was the drama of the Cold War played out on a small scale for enraptured Western audiences. Western observers saw in the events the conflict between East and West of the last four decades, not the internal struggles of a nation coming to grips with reform. The fact that it was students and intellectuals in China who took up the position of freedom and democracy merely served to vindicate Western mythic narratives.

Throughout the movement, Bush tried to be discreet in his approach to the demonstrations, calling on the Chinese government to recognize the patriotism of the protesting students, and yet he seemed unaware that the Beijing leadership believed that the United States was pushing the students directly into the movement. This is evidently the main point of the private letter to Deng Xiaoping on May 29, 1989, five days prior to the military offensive, but the contents of that letter have not yet been released. From his other public statements, though, it seems that the letter probably made the case that the students were patriotic and demanded only limited reforms. Bush wrote in *A World Transformed* that "To many it appeared that reform was merely a sham, and that China was still the dictatorship it had always been. I believed otherwise. Based on what I had seen over the previous fourteen years, I thought China was slowly changing and that the forces of reform that had been building were still strong."⁵³

50. *Ibid.*, 106. See also the discussion of Scowcroft's visit to China in Bartholomew Sparrow's article in this issue of *Diplomatic History*.

51. Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, 107–08.

52. Qian, *Ten Episodes in China's Diplomacy*, 132–39.

53. Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, 98.

Even well into the demonstrations, the administration continued to argue to the Chinese that the early response to the students, largely hands off and patient, was the only way to respond to the protests, seemingly unaware that history had moved past that point and that, by approximately mid-May, compromise was more or less impossible, given the constraints of the narratives that had been told. The Chinese would argue that they had been “patiently waiting” for the movement to die down for almost six weeks after the official declaration of the “counterrevolutionary” nature of the movement; how could any legitimate government wait any longer?

Immediately after the bloodshed, however, as outrage grew in the United States and around the world about the events in Beijing, the administration was forced to strike a delicate balance between calls from around the world for harsh action to be taken against China and trying to avoid permanently damaging formal relations with China. A number of influential congressional leaders, in particular, found it quite easy to push forward an alternative narrative about China, in which the crackdown merely revealed the sham of reform in which China had engaged. Bush noted in his memoirs the disjunction that was created: “To many it appeared that reform was merely a sham, and that China was still the dictatorship it had always been. I believed otherwise. Based on what I had seen over the previous fourteen years, I thought China was slowly changing and that the forces of reform that had been building were still strong.”⁵⁴

The official statements from the administration drew criticism from both the Left and the Right, in that Bush was accused of “groveling” before the Chinese leadership and “kowtowing” to the “butchers of Beijing.” As Harry Harding notes, the administration’s immediate actions, including increasing Chinese language programming on VOA, a cut-off of arms sales to China, and establishing a new “human rights standard” for resuming normal relations with China, were largely acceptable, but quickly the disjunction between the administration’s view of China and that of other Americans became a significant point of pressure. For example, a *New York Times* editorial in December 1989, entitled “Hailing the Butchers of Beijing,” argued that “Only six months ago, Deng Xiaoping and his hard-line allies ordered troops to fire on student demonstrators, killing hundreds. Since then a realigned leadership has reversed a decade of reforms, reimposing police-state controls and purges. Power now seems left in the hands of a shaky coalition of octogenarians.”⁵⁵ The editorial went on to argue that indeed, Bush had complied with the demands of China, rather than holding the leadership of the nation accountable for what had happened, and that Bush’s push to keep relations moving forward “dishonors democracy.”

Indeed, as Jim Mann argues, it seems that the administration largely missed the significance of the bill sponsored by Nancy Pelosi that would allow Chinese

54. Ibid.

55. “Hailing the Butchers of Beijing,” *New York Times*, December 12, 1989, <http://www.nytimes.com/1989/12/12/opinion/hailing-the-butchers-of-beijing.html>.

students then studying in the United States the ability to remain in the United States. The administration opposed the bill, but it passed by 403 to 0, and was subsequently passed by the senate by voice vote. Although Bush vetoed the bill, he was forced to offer the same protection by executive order. Mann argues that this showdown between Congress and the administration allowed Congress to add a new dynamic to U.S.-China relations, which had previously been dominated primarily by the White House, a dynamic that has since made a significant impact on political relations between the countries.⁵⁶

CONCLUSIONS

This rhetorical analysis of the narratives that framed the events in Tiananmen Square helps to demonstrate the ways in which the “rhetorical visions” of three different groups of people led to very different courses of action and reveals some interesting aspects of the Bush administration’s diplomacy during this period. By comparing and contrasting three incompatible visions, it helps to illuminate the ways in which the violence that ended the student protests was but the culmination, or terminus, of the violence already implied in the narratives that each group employed.

The inevitable question that arises is whether there was a sense of inevitability to the brutal military force. Indeed, much hinges on whether the protesters were demanding reform (*gaige*) or revolution (*geming*), as the difference between these two words in many ways sums up the way in which the Bush administration saw the events. In China, revolution was the dominant understanding, whether in the sense of *overturning* the revolution, as the government saw it, or in the sense of *completing* the revolution, as the students saw it. The Tiananmen protesters believed that they were calling attention to the broken promises made by the CCP, while the party leadership, or at least the most important part of it, believed that the students threatened to overturn the revolution and all the social gains that had come with it. Given this discourse of revolution and counterrevolution, it is unlikely that the government would look the other way while the students threatened the state.

In Washington, however, as in much of the rest of the world, the polarized extremes were not obvious. From outside of China, it looked as if the students were asking for reform, regardless of the strident rhetoric on signs and placards. Perhaps part of the reason is that in much of the West, revolutionary rhetoric is not taken seriously. When even pop stars and discount stores promise “revolution,” it is hard to see any bitter edge to the word, and the radical challenge to the state presented by the students was not obvious. Having survived the decade of the Cultural Revolution, in which careers, families, communities, and even lives were destroyed, the Chinese government was unlikely to take these calls lightly.

56. James Mann, *About Face: A History of America’s Curious Relationship with China, From Nixon to Clinton* (New York, 1999), 193.

A legitimate question remains, then, as to whether a nation that had suffered the Cultural Revolution could have, realistically, taken any other course of action. In fact, at any of a dozen junctures during the protest movement, either the students or the government might have chosen to use different language and deflated the strident challenge that existed. Many of the voices within the student movement did indeed use the language of the party, and moderate their demands, but the movement overall could not escape the charges that it was “counterrevolutionary,” justifying in the minds of many in the party a harsh treatment. Well prior to the military crackdown, students had written their wills, and openly proclaimed their intention to die on behalf of their country. Although the students might not have had a clear idea of the consequences of their actions, their words became self-fulfilling prophecies, in that by portraying themselves as the noble challengers to the corrupt government, they left no options open to the government.

In another sense, the students were also victims of a series of events that demanded ever more dramatic action. From the death of Hu Yaobang, to the annual May Day and Qing Ming holidays, to the arrival of Mikhail Gorbachev, and the anniversary of the 1919 May 4th Movement and the French Revolution, it seemed that each week provided yet another occasion to raise the stakes and see themselves in a mythic light. Even when the students from Beijing got tired and went home, the square continued to be fed by students from faraway provinces who began to stream into the city to take their places on the front lines of history.

The government, though, also had opportunity to turn back, if in nothing more than changing the wording of the April 26 editorial, which had the unintentional effect of regaling the students’ resolve. Although Zhao Ziyang and others in the government tried to find ways to label the protesters as just overly idealistic students, too many in the top layers of government, including Deng Xiaoping himself, saw in the chants, the mass marches, the arrogance of the students, not misguided patriotism, but rather the shadow and the form of the Red Guards. To those in the government, the open calls for the death of sitting government officials, declarations calling for the overthrow of the Communist party, the humiliation of the national government, and the mass political organization were too much to ignore, and demanded immediate and decisive action, and officials who opposed these actions were themselves seen as criminals.⁵⁷

In the United States, hopes were high that the government would understand that the students were asking for reform and make an outward show of

57. Party Secretary Zhao Ziyang, the highest ranking Chinese leader who had been sympathetic to the students, lived the rest of his life under house arrest. When he died in 2005, the official response was muted, perhaps in fear that a similar movement would arise. Official press accounts did not even note that he had been a top political leader. So far, moves by some government leaders to rehabilitate his name and reputation have been unsuccessful.

respecting the students' demands, and the situation would return to normal. Then, the events could be interpreted as a significant step towards democratization. But these visions were fed only by Western hopes, not by the situation as it existed. To the Chinese government, the students and other protesters had not only undermined their authority in front of the world, but had set about to systematically destroy the ruling party. For example, by demanding that the students be allowed to form and negotiate through "independent" or "autonomous" student unions, and thus to ignore the government-organized student organizations, the protesters made it clear that the replacement of the CCP was the goal, and there was really no room left for compromise. In the face of this challenge, the most the government could allow was that the great mass of students were "deceived" by a handful of evil manipulators. To have granted that the hundreds of thousands of people in the streets were correct in their judgment would have been to deny the legitimacy of the party itself.

The narrative frameworks on the part of the students and the government were both deeply nuanced and complex. Historical allusions, and not just to American political figures, dominated the discourse, and analogies permeated every aspect of the discourse. Every element of the drama served to reinforce strategic moves. As each new day took the conflict to a new level, it became no longer possible to find a middle road.

But could the Bush administration have taken any other action that would have averted the crisis? The answer seems to be no. It is difficult to say how well the administration understood the realities of China, but there are indications that the administration, which had openly called for dramatic social and political change in China, and, in the case of Baker, even indicated that the students were moving China precisely where the United States wanted it to go, did not seem to understand that that very discourse served to prove the administration's role in the events. Given that reality, it is likely that any subsequent communications from the United States would only reinforce that view, and dramatic threats to cut off relations, boycotts, or stronger action would again reinforce the view in Beijing that this event was of Washington's making.⁵⁸

Let us return to where this article began, with the rhetorical trajectories of Tiananmen Square. Although the events that transpired in the streets of Beijing in 1989 have been analyzed extensively, even as late as 2008, there has been no convergence of trajectories, or a coming together of the disparate narratives of Tiananmen. The governments in Beijing and Washington, and the participants themselves, still view the events through fundamentally incompatible frames. In China, the government's line about the counterrevolutionary nature of the movement has been largely accepted (although not necessarily believed) by all who deem it relevant, which is a surprisingly small number of people.

58. Jim Mann argues that although President Bush overestimated the value of his "friendship" with China in helping to mitigate the subsequent events, it really did not matter, as the Tiananmen events had their own logic, and nothing coming from Washington was likely to alter the outcome. Mann, *About Face*, 193.

As for the student perspective, only those who participated in the protests themselves will dare to, privately, venture a differing opinion. There is no public acknowledgement of any government culpability, and the government steadfastly refuses to allow any public reconsideration of what actually transpired.

In the United States, policy towards China must still take into account the ghosts of Tiananmen. Current debates about issues, such as the valuation of China's currency, the growing hunger of China's economy for energy and economic resources, and the consequences of China's emergence as a geopolitical power, largely revolve around an understanding of the fundamental nature of China's government and its relationship to its people, which were shaped by the events in Tiananmen Square.⁵⁹ This is not a new phenomenon, in that U.S. policy towards China has always been largely dependent on perceptions of China shaped largely by media.⁶⁰

But perhaps a convergence of rhetorical visions is becoming increasingly irrelevant. In China, due to the almost unbelievable economic growth, the transition to a modernized, even postmodern society, and the largely successful rebranding exercise that was the Beijing Olympics, the events of 1989 are as far away, both in time and in emotional consequence, as the events of May 1919. Both are equally irrelevant to the tasks of participating in a China that has fully joined the modern world.

59. For an example of the lingering influence of this vision of China, see James Mann, *The China Fantasy: How Our Leaders Explain Away Chinese Repression* (New York, 2007).

60. Alan R. Kluver, "The Logic of New Media in International Affairs," *New Media and Society* 4, no. 4 (2002): 499–517.