

## **Wu'er Kaixi, 1989 Tiananmen student leader, political commentator and Founder, Friends of Liu Xiaobo**

Ladies and Gentleman of the Committee, Senators, Members of Congress, and through you, the Freedom Loving People of the United States of America,

It is a great honor to return to what I call the "Chapel of Democracy" on Capitol Hill, at the invitation of the Congressional-Executive Commission on China, and the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission. It was the Honorable Mr. Lantos himself, may he rest in peace, who invited me here three decades ago, after the torch of democracy that we lit in Tiananmen Square was brutally extinguished and I began my life of exile.

"Wu'er Kaixi is here to remind us that the struggle for democracy in China is not over," is how Mr. Lantos introduced me at that hearing. Those words still ring true, perhaps truer now than ever before. I said then that the Chinese Communist Party could not be trusted and was an existential threat to freedom and democracy around the world. It gives me no pleasure to say now that, "I told you so."

I was called a "lover of democracy" at that Congressional Human Rights Foundation hearing, though many people have asked me since, "What do you know about democracy?" It's true that when we student leaders led the mass democracy movement in Beijing, our knowledge and understanding of democracy was often limited to its face value and textbook doctrines, because we were from a communist, totalitarian regime. But that is precisely why I am a lover of democracy and longed for it, because I know what it's like not to have democracy and freedom. It is the most precious of gifts and we must never take it for granted.

That's why I have returned to this "Chapel of Democracy," to warn you once again that democracy is under attack. As the standard bearer and defender of democracy, it is your solemn duty to protect it. I also have to tell you the light of democracy in China was snuffed out because you let us down ... **you betrayed us!**

Instead of supporting the students and people on the streets, who were prepared to die in the cause of a nascent democracy movement in China; your leaders chose instead to engage with the Communist regime. You did so to protect your own interests and for commercial reasons. You led and the world inevitably followed.

Even so, ultimately, I firmly believe in the spirit of American democracy. I know you will in the end correct the mistakes of the past to create a better future. My definition of democracy is "not trusting," and constantly exercising democracy, until we arrive at the right judgment and choice. This is what I want for the people of China.

I still mourn the loss of friends, fellow activists and family. As a survivor I keenly feel the guilt and pain that belongs to the captain who didn't go down with his ship. Though it was a great thing that we tried to do, I sometimes wonder whether I would do it all over again. The cost was too great, measured in the blood spilled by my fellow countrymen.

We made the ultimate sacrifice and stood with you to inspire victory in the most challenging battle of the 20th century, against the totalitarian communists in the Cold War. Yet, in China, we are still waiting to taste the fruit of that victory.

I don't want to return to this "Chapel of Democracy" in the future and say, "I told you so," or once again remind you of the lessons of the past. With our shared conviction in the power of democracy, I hope that we can at last write a fitting conclusion to the story that started 30 years ago with the Tiananmen Square protests. China deserves democracy too.

### **What are the lessons of Tiananmen Square?**

It was 30 years ago that we took to the streets of Beijing and earned the world's sympathy and respect for attempting to plant the seeds of freedom and democracy in Tiananmen Square. We humbly asked China's leadership to fulfill their promises to the people because in those heady days everything seemed possible.

Democracy was flowering in Poland and the "New Thinking" of Mikhail Gorbachev was creating excitement in the Soviet Union. In China, it was the beginning of "Opening up and Reform," and the people were anxiously waiting for it to expand into the political domain, as we were promised.

As a 21-year-old student leader, marching on the streets of Beijing and occupying Tiananmen Square, we not only had the support of the Chinese people, we had support from all over the world, particularly in democratic countries. Clearly you felt we were fighting for the same thing you had fought for and live by. It felt like history was on our side, and victory would be ours too.

But history records that this wasn't the path for China at that time. On June 4, 1989, the Chinese Communist Party sent in tanks and troops to massacre the people it claimed to represent. In order to save its own skin, the Communist Party brutally suppressed freedom of expression and crushed all dissent. It has continued to rule since then, at the barrel of a gun, using fear and lies.

The support we had didn't last, and we the Chinese democracy activists were abandoned to our fate. Mentioning Tiananmen became an inconvenience for the leaders of the world's democracies. We were betrayed.

Naturally, today's world leaders are not responsible for the mistakes of their predecessors. But if you ignore the lessons of the past and continue to look the other way rather than hold the Communist Party accountable for its crimes, it will be too late to say or do anything about it – and this looks suspiciously like a policy of appeasement.

### **Why do you think the Chinese democracy movement was betrayed?**

The policy of engagement with China started in the early 1970s, with Henry Kissinger. As the chief architect of this policy, he insisted that it was in the national interest of the United States to form a united front against the number one enemy of

the country at the time, the Soviet Union. Certainly, there was no moral foundation for being so accommodating to the one-party Chinese regime.

When the Chinese leadership massacred its own peacefully protesting people, would this policy be altered? No, it wouldn't. Not only did it take four days for the late President George H.W. Bush to condemn the atrocity, he secretly went to Beijing not long after. Later that very same year, the Berlin Wall fell, and soon after the Soviet Union collapsed.

The Cold War, lasting four decades, had ended. The national interest that Dr. Kissinger proudly proclaimed he was protecting had expired. Yet the policy remained and Dr. Kissinger was received as one of Beijing's greatest friends, and became rich by brokering favored access to the China market for American companies. I have waited a long time for the United States to realize there is something fundamentally wrong with this picture. Perhaps it is only now that a businessman-president finally sees it?

### **How would you describe the China situation now?**

With the accession of Xi Jinping to the Communist Party throne we are stepping back into the past, as it appears he intends to make himself emperor for life. If the policy of engagement with China was just about the money, it's a bad strategy. Flush with funds, China is buying influence around the globe through its Belt and Road Initiative and turning countries into tributary states that avoid antagonizing the dragon for fear of its displeasure.

We have discovered that technological progress in the hands of the Communist Party is not a benign influence. China has blocked the free flow of information by building a "Great Firewall." It bans Google and Facebook and any other source of information it cannot totally control. This leaves domestic companies with state ties like Huawei, Tencent and WeChat a competition-free environment. The Party uses companies such as these to build a surveillance state for its own people, like no other before in history.

My family is from Xinjiang and I am ethnically Uyghur, so it's natural for me to feel empathy for this region of China where at least 1 million people have been thrown into what are euphemistically called "re-education camps." In any other era or country, they would be called what they are, concentration camps. This is the biggest mass incarceration of a group based on their ethnicity or religion since the Holocaust.

The supposedly autonomous state of Tibet has also suffered at the hands of the Communist Party. Its religious freedoms have been curbed and tens of thousands of Tibetans have been detained or have fled the country and live in exile, like His Holiness the Dalai Lama. Similar to Xinjiang, it is being Sinicized, as the ethnically dominant Han move in and take over these once independent lands.

Freedom is retreating in Hong Kong despite China's promises to safeguard its democracy until at least 2047. A new extradition bill meaning Hong Kong can transfer fugitives to China is just the latest example of how the city is losing its soul

and being rapidly assimilated within the mainland. Hong Kong was a city of the world, but it has lost her to the totalitarian Chinese regime because of that policy.

Any individual who sticks his head up is hammered down. People sometimes forget that the Nobel Peace Prize winner, Liu Xiaobo, returned to China to support the Tiananmen protests. His only crime was being a human rights activist, yet he was imprisoned for much of his life, before dying two years ago from cancer. He was an exceptional individual, a teacher and friend from my student days, but he is only one of millions who have been scourged by the Chinese communists.

There is a tendency in democratic countries for its leaders to give China the benefit of the doubt. I have heard you justify one-party rule by reasoning the country is so massive or unique that “special conditions” should apply. You make excuses or try to minimize the China threat by saying it has not fought a war in more than 30 years and is not an expansionist power. But this ignores the facts.

Just ask the majority of nations that border the South China Sea, which China almost totally claims as its own, despite the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea ruling against it in 2016. China flouts international maritime conventions and illegally occupies islands, turning them into military outposts that threaten Vietnam, Philippine and other nations too.

If you ask the majority of people in Taiwan if they feel threatened by China, or whether it is an expansionist power, you would be met with a resounding answer in the affirmative. China constantly threatens to invade Taiwan and prevents it from joining international organizations, even the World Health Organization, despite the fact it has one of the world’s best public health systems and so much to offer.

By any measure, Taiwan is one of the most freedom loving and democratic countries in the world, a bastion of free speech and an example to others. Yet, China intends to possess the country by hook or by crook and promises violence if anyone suggests different, or even calls Taiwan by its real name.

You, the leaders of the free world, acquiesce to this bullying and ignore the inconvenient truth, which is that Taiwan is in fact a successful, independent country, with its own army, currency, government and people. If this is not appeasement, I don’t know what is.

### **What should be done to put right the mistakes of the past?**

Three decades ago, if you had acted on principle and with foresight, you would have demanded that China acknowledge its crimes in Tiananmen Square. You should have insisted on press freedoms, capitalism and democracy. If China refused to reform the whole world would have followed as you blocked it, and it would be a better place now. Not only for a fifth of the population who are Chinese but the rest of the world too.

This is certainly what the Honorable Mr. Tom Lantos believed and loudly declaimed, time and time again, as chair of the Congressional Human Rights Caucus, now known of course as the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission.

It is because I spoke up for freedom that I became a “public enemy” and have been a “wanted person” most of my life. I haven’t seen my parents for over three decades and they are elderly and becoming frail now. I have tried my utmost to see them and even turned myself in at Macau, Hong Kong, Chinese embassies in the United States and Japan. Ironically, despite my “wanted” status, the regime would not relent.

On the other hand, I doubt I would be alive today if I had remained in China. After Tiananmen, I was lucky to escape and make it to free Hong Kong, long before it was handed over by the British to China. I then moved to France, the “cradle of democracy,” where I helped organize an international underground movement to assist Chinese dissidents and continue the struggle for democracy. Later, I was fortunate enough to be allowed to study in the United States, the world’s leading democratic nation. Taiwan is now my adopted home and a shining beacon of democracy and human rights, the first country in Asia to allow same-sex marriage.

I have been lucky enough to live in some of the freest places on Earth and have had 30 years to absorb the ideas of democracy. In that time, I have been labeled a democracy activist, and it is a badge I wear with immense pride.

As I have made plain today, I feel the democracy movement in China and democracy itself was betrayed, betrayed by you. But, as I also made clear in my introductory remarks, this argument is based on my strong faith in American democracy. I firmly believe you will in the end correct the mistakes of the past to create a better future.

In my experience, democracy is not a religion or a set of standards, it’s a practice, a dynamic process, constantly refined and improved. It’s not perfect but it always aims for perfection. It makes mistakes, but through voting allows choice and change and the opportunity to put right the mistakes of the past. Democracy cautiously trusts the people and the will of the people is expressed through the democratic process. This is a very powerful and virtuous idea.

I truly want to believe that the world’s leaders, including those here today, are wise enough not to repeat the mistakes of yesterday. I trust you have the courage to face up to China before it’s too strong and it’s too late. This would, at long last, make our bloody sacrifice in Tiananmen 30 years ago worthwhile.