

CECC HEARING
THE 20TH ANNIVERSARY OF TIANANMEN

June 4, 2009

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Mr. Chairman, Members of the Commission:

I am honored to participate in this commemoration of a most significant event in recent history. Someday June 4th, 1989 will be recognized as the seminal episode that evoked the political future of one fifth of humanity.

True, the Chinese authorities have shrouded, distorted, and defaced what happened in the seven weeks that led to the bloodshed in the Square. True, the Chinese youth of today have scant knowledge and even scantly interest in how two decades earlier their age group stirred the hearts and minds of the people. True, Tiananmen anniversary demonstrations around the world have faded. Timid governments, visa-anxious academics, contract-hungry entrepreneurs tip-toe semantically: The Tiananmen massacre becomes the “June 4th incident,” if not a valid response to chaos.

History will render a just verdict. Let us recall what happened. Common descriptions of that spring suggest only that students marched in Beijing. Not true. Demonstrations flourished in over 250 cities and towns throughout China. And if students were the vanguard, people from all walks of life – workers, peasants, teachers, merchants, journalists, lawyers, monks, police, soldiers and Party members -- championed them. In the capital up to a million petitioned for fifty days without an act of violence, indeed any vandalism -- unless one counts the paint sprayed on Chairman Mao’s portrait.

No wonder the amazing spectacle in the Square inspired millions in Eastern Europe who went on to achieve more benign outcomes.

For the Chinese people, the Goddess of Democracy symbolized not only the hope for greater freedoms but curbs on corruption and inflation. Their requests were moderate -- calls for dialogue with the government, not its overthrow. By the close of May, the petitioners camped in the Square had dwindled to a few thousand. Surely the ending did not have to be tragic. But the red-faced patriarchs ruled to hammer home lessons and petrify the public. Twenty years later no one yet knows how many were bloodied, maimed or died in the massacre.

Meanwhile, the Party drew firm conclusions.

First, maintain a united Politburo on sensitive issues. So far, success.

Second, nip demonstrations in the bud. Despite a couple hundred per day by even official count, the authorities have contained and isolated them.

Third, gain legitimacy through prosperity and nationalism. Economic reforms accelerated after the massacre. To China's credit, the standard of living has risen continually and dramatically. The Yuan, not Marxism and Maoism, is the ideological glue. So too is nationalism which innately goes hand in hand with China's rise in the world.

Finally, control the media. Here, too, the government has kept the lid on, screwing it tight on delicate topics. Still, media outlets press the envelope. And the internet and the cell phone haunt the Party most. For every new censor, there are dueling bloggers and hackers. Today, their weapons are humorous double entendres. Tomorrow, what?

To date, therefore, Beijing defies history – the emerging middle class and elites eschew politics, content to follow the Party's lead. The only checks and balances they hanker to expand are those held by their banks. Ironically, the most disaffected today are the peasants and workers.

Evidently no Tiananmens lurk around the corner. But I've learned my lesson on predicting China's future. In 1989, I was overly optimistic, if not naïve, about political reform. The depressing record of repression and human rights violations since then is amply documented by this Commission, the State Department and international monitors. The grieving parents of Tiananmen, still harassed, still seek answers. The grieving parents of Sichuan now suffer the identical fate.

Nevertheless, I remain convinced that China will move toward greater transparency and liberty -- not as a concession to the West but as the proven route to a brighter future. The rule of law, a thriving civil society, the accountability of officials, freedom of the media and expression would serve Beijing's own stated goals: economic growth, political stability, the control of pollution and corruption, the improvement of ties with Taiwan and the United States, the heightening of its stature in the world.

How fast, how smooth, how democratic – who can predict?

No doubt only Chinese can determine China's fate.

Meanwhile, we should strive for positive relations with Beijing. I have done so for forty years.

Supporting human rights and democracy is a salient dimension of our policy. But America's vast and crucial agenda with China cannot be subsumed to one element. This is a painful but prudent calculation we apply to countries around the globe. With a Burma or Sudan our values can be our dominant preoccupation. With a China or Saudi Arabia we pursue a more nuanced course.

Let us encourage China toward a more liberal society by appealing to its self-interests.

Let us cooperate with China on a host of bilateral, regional and global challenges.

And let us remain confident that one day the official verdict on June 4th will be overturned, that "hooligans" will be heroes, that "Black Hands" will be harbingers of history.

For fabrications litter the ash heap of time while authenticity survives. Zhao Ziyang was Premier and then Party Secretary. He was sympathetic to the petitioners and against the launching of tanks. He wept in the Square. He was thrown out of office and into house arrest for sixteen years. He died in ignominy.

And yet? On this 20th Anniversary, his recordings speak truths. The journey toward freedom may begin with soft whispers from a solitary grave.