

THE TIANANMEN SQUARE MASSACRE

*Accounts by personnel from the US Embassy who were present
June 4, 1989*

James LaRocco, Economic Minister-Counselor, Embassy Beijing, 1988-1990

Beijing Spring took place essentially between March and June 1989. It was a period of about two and half months in which Beijing completely opened up to discussion and ferment. It was so refreshing, so unexpected and so quickly crushed.

5 My son was 7 years old. The two of us would go out and ride all around all the neighborhoods and occasionally we would stop. I would see a group of about 30 people sitting around talking and they would be talking about what is democracy. I remember some of the conversations.

10 The most painful one was when we stopped our bikes and there was a bunch of young people. They said, "You're an American?" and I said, "Yes, I'm an American."

"Please explain your judicial system to us." I thought oh, my God. I can't do it in English. How can I possibly do this in Chinese?...

15 This was so exhilarating and so amazing to see these people so genuinely interested in democracy and participation and freedom of expression, freedom of being able to do all sorts of activities. They were still very much interested in order, no question about that. Order and stability are very big to Chinese because how else do you hold a country of a billion people together?

20 But they clearly wanted more say about their lives and they wanted more freedoms. They were feeling this was possible and it was very encouraging. We did this every night for months.

25 I must say that the weather that spring was delightful, perfect for outdoor congregation. I remember the Sunday before the Tiananmen crackdown. Our whole family went to the Square and we spent several hours talking with the students in their makeshift tent community. I filmed it, and I cherish that film, always troubled by what may have happened to those eager kids with such high expectations. At that time, you could feel the tension nearing boiling point. Something had to happen.

Mark Mohr, Deputy Director, Political section, Embassy Beijing, 1988-1990

30 We knew something was wrong at the time of President Bush's visit in February 1989, because they acted so awkwardly to prevent Fang Lizhi from attending the banquet. The trigger for the student movement was the death of Hu Yaobang on April 15, and you can't foresee someone's death.

35 At the beginning of the student movement, there weren't all that many students on the square. Then the regime, in its ham-handed wisdom, issued an editorial in "People's Daily" April 26 denouncing the students for their protests and occupation of the square and questioning their motives, which only angered the students and added momentum to the movement.

After the editorial, the movement grew rapidly, to the point that there were hundreds of thousands of students occupying the heart of downtown Beijing. Still the regime did nothing. We knew something was very wrong, but we had no idea what the divisions were within the leadership, or who was arguing with who.

5 There was a split in the leadership. A few years before, Deng Xiaoping had purged Hu Yaobang (pictured) as head of the Chinese Communist Party. Zhao Ziyang moved from Premier to Party chief, and Li Peng took over as Premier. Hu had favored an opening up of Chinese society, and was particularly beloved in academic circles and by the students. Deng put a lid on Hu's attempted reforms, and Li Peng kept the lid on. So Li was not popular.

10 When Hu died in April, the students began expressing their aggravation that a good man had died, while in their opinion a bad man (Li Peng) still lived. They expressed their protest in rallies and in posters in the days following Hu's death.

15 Of course, this was incendiary stuff. The students all camped out in Tiananmen Square. They took over the running of downtown Beijing. Finally on May 20, the regime declared martial law in the area around Tiananmen Square. Troops were brought in.

And sometime after midnight, June 4, they fired on the students, killing many. The shooting, courtesy of international television, whose personnel had been brought in to cover the visit of Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev to Beijing May 15-18, was broadcast around the world.

20 The reason that the situation had gotten to the point of violence, again, was that the party was split on how to deal with the students. Party chief Zhao Ziyang, who was politically a moderate and in favor of many of the positions that Hu Yaobang had taken, wanted a dialogue with the students.

25 Premier Li Peng wanted to deal with the students harshly, taking a typically old-line Communist Party position. Li had the support of Deng Xiaoping, so eventually Zhao was marginalized and the troops were given the order to use lethal force.

David Reuther, Economic Officer, Embassy Beijing, 1987-1990

30 Well, here you have the Chinese population in the spring of 1989 with this economic expansion that was being throttled in their eyes by corruption and their answer was to call for a dictator to clean up the corruption. They didn't see any other method of reinvigorating reform.

35 From our point of view, the spring of 1989 was not a democracy movement. We went down to Tiananmen Square and talked to demonstration leaders. They did not have a sophisticated understanding of democracy. Remember the demonstration leaders at first were students from the premier universities, meaning they were sons and daughters of ranking Party members.

When the government put out an editorial that said the students were being disruptive, student leaders took offense. In addition to their policy complaints was added the issue of face. So, a lot of things came together.

40 But Tiananmen was fascinating, in part, because it was a reverberation of what was happening in Europe. European Communism was failing in 1989 yet Gorbachev's visit in the

spring and the whole things starts off in a very Chinese way, a demonstration for the funeral for an honored leader was the excuse to get out into the streets.

Once the students were out on the streets you couldn't lock the barn door. Gorbachev came, but the demonstrations caused obvious schedule changes....

- 5 The Tiananmen students were very disciplined. They could have been civil rights marchers in the 60s. They had their own security, cleaned the square and tried to maximize their presentation of themselves as within the Chinese system by their politeness and conduct....

10 From time to time, to keep their morale up and connect with the public, the students marched out of the square and around the internal beltway. That would bring them by the embassy and housing compound. I don't think the Rose Bowl parade or the Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade was ever as exciting as sitting up on the roof watching just miles and miles and blocks and blocks of people — 10 across — marching down the road.

15 One of the more beautiful things was the parade of the motorcycle brigades.... Each vehicle had a small Chinese flag on the handlebar and then three very large Chinese flags on poles at about the third rank....

Such parades were very stirring and obviously got people quite involved. In fact, the positive public response was the reason the authorities became worried and the hardliners saw things spinning out of control.

20 What is remarkable about Tiananmen Square is the push and pull between the hardliners and the moderates right up to the end. We heard rumors that the PLA [People's Liberation Army] was divided. The struggle between the two was like the Greek myth about the sun and wind betting which one of them could get a traveler to take his coat off. That is what Beijing was like up to those first days in June.

25 The Conservatives said to the Liberals, "Okay, let's see if you guys can get them to stop demonstrating." So, troops were sent in unarmed without their officers and the Beijing public stopped them from getting to the student center. The moderates in the government failed, the moderates in the student demonstration slipped away with martial law.

30 The streets were left to the people of Beijing and a more inexperienced group of student demonstrators. Well, if a political process started moderately, it rarely becomes softer, and often reverts to harder.

What happened on the night of June 4 was that the hardliners moved armed troops into Beijing and, like the Paris Commune of 1848, the population of Beijing rose up. The students were a minor focus of what happened that evening. The Western press missed a good story by creating a students versus government story.

35 Forgotten in that story — and part of the legacy for the Chinese — was the city of Beijing rose up in revolt. All the destruction, all the death, was caused by the troops fighting their way into Beijing. By the time the PLA arrived at Tiananmen Square, the students surrendered and were marched off very easily, according to a Latin American ambassador who was near the square until early in the morning....

Obviously on the night of June 4 there was shooting all over the place. Beijing was full of tourists and business people. It became obvious that the situation in Beijing was very unstable. So, all the embassies in Beijing evacuated their nationals.

5 We ultimately evacuated about 1500 Americans, tourists, business people, our own embassy staff. The Japanese evacuated 4000 out of all of China. All the embassies slimmed down their missions.

10 There were probably fewer foreigners in Beijing on June 6, 1989, than in the last 500 years. Think about it. The point is that the dream of any nationalistic Chinese for the last 200 years, since the First Opium War, is to get the foreigners out of China, because it is the foreign influence that corrupted and weakened China. So, there were conservative elements in the Chinese structure that were very pleased to see these departures.

LAROCCO: Our radar was totally focused on what was going on. We couldn't avoid it. It was right outside our doors, whether at home, while shopping, in the parks or at the embassy.

15 At the same time, I would say that we were a bit naïve. On the day of the Tiananmen crackdown, we had Boy Scouts camping out at the embassy. They were there as tanks rolled down the street just outside the compound.

While I and others faulted the RSO [Regional Security Officer] and our intel, I must confess that the notion that a government would run over and deliberately shoot down its own people was very difficult for us to comprehend....

20 There was nowhere to escape so we saw the tanks going down the streets. We saw people thrown onto the backs of trucks and taken off. We saw people shot at. We heard gunfire all the time. All of our local employees left because they were actually employees of the PSB, run by Chinese security. So all of our 300+ local employees were gone. With our families evacuated, we Americans were on our own.

25 We were outraged because these were people who we really depended on to keep the embassy operating. All of them were ordered to go home. I can tell you certain stories of certain Chinese who in fact, defied that order, but I don't want to do that because I can't be sure that even to this day they would be safe from recrimination.

30 The PLA – Chinese Army — shot as many as 600 rounds into an apartment complex where our Americans lived. I don't know how much of that story ever came out. We were truly outraged, but the message was clear: Get out.

35 There was a Chinese 'ayi', as she was called, a maid who saved the lives of American children by throwing her body over them as the bullets raked across the room above them. We moved the families out as quickly as we could....My children had matured overnight via Tiananmen.