

Strategic Silence in President George H.W. Bush's Response to Tiananmen Square

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Abstract: When the Chinese government cracked down on protestors in Tiananmen Square in June 1989, there were loud public demands that President George H.W. Bush denounce the action and that he send a strong message of disapproval through trade measures such as revocation of Most Favored Nation trading status. While President Bush strongly disapproved of the crackdown, he did not want to be publicly seen as demanding action from Beijing. Drawing on the resources of the George Bush Presidential Library, this study examines the reasons for that choice. While Bush wanted to advance the cause of human rights, he believed that a delicate security situation dictated that he not publicly pressure the Chinese. Angry public demands from the president risked further entrenchment and might have provoked an internal military struggle in China.

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Introduction

In May and June of 1989, students gathered in Beijing, China, to protest a lack of democratic forms in their nation's governance. That lack of democracy found its ultimate expression on June 3 when the ruling Communist Party grew weary of the protests. Government troops were ordered to Tiananmen Square to disperse the protestors, and television viewers the world over witnessed the peaceful protests being crushed by soldiers ordered to stop the gathering. Not wanting the protestors' statement to go unheeded, people around the planet began pressing their own governments to condemn the Chinese state and to take action to prevent such an event from recurring.

Many in the United States joined this call, and President George H.W. Bush¹ felt intense pressure to respond. In spite of this demand, however, Bush took a relatively moderate public tone which largely avoided condemning those who had ordered the attacks. Former Secretary of State James Baker explained the limited response of the administration in this manner:

¹ All references in this paper to "Bush" or "President Bush" refer to President George H.W. Bush, the 41st president. The only mention of President George W. Bush, the 43rd president, are briefly in the literature review when discussing previous work on silence.

We needed to proceed in a measured way. The Chinese leadership was clearly in an embattled frame of mind. Historically, in previous circumstances of internal turmoil, they had blamed foreign “barbarians” and turned even more reactionary. It was important not to respond in a way that played in to the hands of the hard-liners who were pushing for even more repressive action, which would inevitably lead to more bloodshed.

And finally, in expressing our outrage and condemnation of the bloody crackdown, it was important for us to do so, if possible, in a way to preempt punitive congressional legislation that might be difficult to reverse and could do needless long-term damage to the relationship. (Baker & DeFrank, 1995, p. 105)

Baker establishes that the goals of the Bush administration were largely consistent with those of the rest of the United States policy-making community. Bush wanted to advance democracy in China. However, he also wanted to avoid an even more serious wave of violence than had already occurred and wished to avoid damaging the strategic relationship between the two states. This study will examine whether Bush’s strategy of relative silence was successful in helping him meet those goals. This will be accomplished by first briefly reviewing the scholarship on silence as an intentional strategy. Having provided that frame, the study will provide further detail on the situation in Tiananmen Square and will examine the nature of the disagreement between Bush and his critics. The study will then examine the actions Bush did take. This paper concludes with a judgment concerning whether Bush’s rhetorical choices were an effective display of rhetorical leadership.

A Framework for Understanding Strategic Silence

A number of studies have attempted to define silence, and this study construes the concept narrowly as the intentional choice of an empowered actor who might have spoken and instead decided to remain silent in order to advance a deliberative goal. By extension, this study construes leadership as advancement of an agenda rather than public advocacy for it. A president of the United States is certainly an empowered actor who could speak and receive significant attention for his words; silence in the sense discussed here would also require that the failure to speak arose from having made an intentional choice in hopes of advancing some policy issue. This is similar to the definition of silence provided by Barry Brummett (1980, p. 289), who defined “political strategic silence” as “the refusal of a public figure to communicate verbally when that refusal (1) violates expectations, (2) draws public attributions of fairly predictable meanings, and (3) seems intentional and directed at an audience.” He also argued that silence was relative rather than absolute, and a leader saying less than might otherwise have been said would still be employing silence as a rhetorical tool. Brummett’s definition would thus allow, for example, brief statements and other comments. It would also allow for comments to be made by someone other than the president if these comments were seen as carrying less weight.

While many scholars have studied silence, fewer have done so in the particular sense articulated here. Gunderson(1961) examined President Lincoln’s silence between his election and

inauguration and argued that Lincoln used silence well since he did not yet have the powers of the presidency. Black (1994) also studied Lincoln and silence, saying that Lincoln chose well in keeping his Gettysburg Address brief. Medhurst (1988) criticized President Truman for remaining silent in the face of Soviet expansion after World War 2, and Ritter (1994) praises President Johnson for remaining largely silent after the Kennedy assassination. Harlow (2010) praised the more recent President Bush for remaining largely silent in the face of Chinese currency manipulations and (2011) criticized him for his silence after failed elections in Nigeria in 2007. Harlow also praised the decisions of George H.W. Bush, the focus of this study, to remain silent during foreign policy crises in South Africa (2011) and Berlin (2006).

When I examine silence in this study, it is in the sense articulated by these previous essays. Politically empowered actors sometimes make a choice to remain silent, and the question is whether there really was an intentional choice and whether it met its strategic objectives. In order to evaluate President Bush's intent and the wisdom of his choice, we now examine events in Beijing in the Spring and Summer of 1989.

Beijing's Spring of Discontent

In 1986, Hu Yaobang was the leader of the Chinese Communist Party. Hu responded leniently to a student led pro-democracy movement that year, and as a result was forced to resign his position as general secretary in 1987 (Zhao, 2001, p. 147). His resignation caused him to become a hugely popular figure among students and intellectuals, and individuals such as *World Economic Herald* editor Qin Benli came under intense scrutiny by Chinese Communist Party conservatives for writing articles supportive of his policies (Berlin, 1993). On April 15, 1989, Hu died of a sudden heart attack and provided a small group of students who had been preparing for a movement long before his death with "an ideal occasion on which to start a movement" (Zhao, 2001, p. 147).

In spite of having angered his colleagues in the Communist Party with his lenient actions, a state funeral was planned for Hu. April 17, in anticipation of the funeral, protest activity centered on the Xinhua Gate—the doorway to the Central Committee and State Council (Zhao, 2001, p. 149). By April 22, approximately 50,000 students had gathered in Tiananmen Square in defiance of a government order to clear the area for Hu's funeral (Simmie & Nixon, 1989). By May 17, protest marches in Beijing had grown to an estimated 1,000,000 people, and smaller disturbances had broken out in the rest of the country (Simmie & Nixon, 1989, p. iv). Premier Li Peng called in the army to end the chaos on May 20, but the soldiers were stopped by unarmed civilians. The soldiers returned on June 2 to again be blocked.

June 3, 1989, would prove the fateful day for protestors in Beijing. At 11 p.m. that evening, soldiers began firing on the assembled protestors. By 2 a.m. the next day, the soldiers had fought their way into Tiananmen Square. Soldiers continued firing on students for four more days, and in one widely televised instance a student stood in front of a tank that threatened to run him over.

While precise casualty figures are unobtainable, the Red Cross at one point estimated that 2600 people were killed and 60,000 more were wounded (Simmie & Nixon, 1989, p. 194).

While these events had been taking place for some time, the rest of the world first began to take serious notice when the Chinese government began its violent repression on June 3. Pressure quickly mounted for President Bush to make a forceful rhetorical response. Letters to the editor in United States newspapers decried “the insufficiency of the Bush Administration’s response” (Ryavec, 1989) and said that “condemnation from the administration should have been immediate and resolute”(Diefenderfer, 1989).One newspaper editorial said that Bush “must condemn without reservation the government of the People’s Republic of China,”(Martyrs to democracy, 1989) and another concluded that Bush had been “inadequately outraged”(Geyelin, 1989).Condemnation of the Bush administration also came from the United States Congress, where Speaker of the House Thomas Foley argued that the president needed to do more(Friedman, 1989), and the House of Representatives voted 418-0 to support sanctions against China that the Bush administration opposed (New China sanctions approved by House, 1989).There were also street protests in New York(Fox & Davy, 1989) and Boston(Gillette, 1989) by members of the Chinese-American community who were angry that the Bush administration was not doing—and saying—more than they were. Much of the press equated presidential words with presidential leadership, and the paucity of words coming out of the White House was seen as a failure to lead.

Bush’s actions displeased his critics in several ways. First, Bush had initially refused to publicly criticize Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping(Devroy, 1989). While Bush had responded on the day of the events by saying he deplored the Chinese actions, his administration did not wish to be seen as severing ties with Deng. When the administration finally did single Deng out for criticism, it was through State Department spokesperson Margaret Tutweiler in a manner characterized by one London newspaper as “adopting extreme caution”(Davies, 1989). Even when the administration became willing to lightly criticize Deng personally, President Bush was not the person who delivered the message.

The *Washington Post* may have best summarized the response of the Bush administration when they said he was “walking a careful line between his desire not to provoke the Chinese leadership and a denunciation of the massacre in Tiananmen Square”(Hoffman & Devroy, 1989). Why, however, did Bush not wish to provoke the Chinese leadership? In order to answer that question, it is important to examine what Bush did do in response to the events in Beijing.

Bush’s Silent Response

Barry Brummett(Towards a theory of silence as a political strategy, 1980, p. 289) argues that a political actor is engaged in strategic silence when speech is expected of them and they do not publicly respond, and he notes that silence is “relative to what might be said.” This strategy would require a political actor to limit their response, although it would not mean that he or she was completely non-communicative, and it could certainly extend to the presence or absence of

other public signals designed to send a message. This appears to be precisely what President Bush did in this case. Bush made an intentional decision to not rhetorically sever ties with the Chinese. According to a series of “Talking Points for Congressional Calls on China” prepared for the president, Bush argued that, “Their leaders will not move if they will be seen as capitulating any more than we would”(George Bush Presidential Library (GBPL), Talking points for congressional calls on China). Bush wanted to allow the Chinese leadership to save face so that they would not be seen as acting under threat of American pressure. This seems consistent with previously cited journalistic accounts of Bush’s response, and consistent with the account given by James Baker some years later in his biography.

Still, the Bush administration felt the need to defend itself against the criticism that they had failed to act and had said nothing. Press Secretary Marlin Fitzwater (GBPL, Talking points on China) assembled a document listing statements by the president against the Chinese on June 3, 5, and 8. Each of these statements condemned the Chinese, but called for restraint in future dealings with the Chinese leadership. Representative of the president’s position was this part of his opening statement at the June 5, 1989 press conference:

In recent weeks, we’ve urged mutual restraint, nonviolence, and dialog. Instead, there has been a violent and bloody attack on the demonstrators. The United States cannot condone the violent attacks and cannot ignore the consequences for our relationship with China, which has been built on a foundation of broad support by the American people. This is not the time for an emotional response, but for a reasoned, careful action that takes in to account both our long-term interests and recognition of a complex internal situation in China.(Bush, The president's news conference: June 5, 1989, 1990, p. 669)

Bush continued this statement by stressing the need for an ongoing relationship between the United States and China. Such a relationship would surely have been damaged by statements by Bush more harshly condemning the Chinese:

There clearly is turmoil within the ranks of the political leadership, as well as the People’s Liberation Army. And now is the time to look beyond the moment to important and enduring aspects of this vital relationship for the United States. Indeed, the budding of democracy which we have seen in recent weeks owes much to the relationship we have developed since 1972. And it’s important at this time to act in a way that will encourage the further development and deepening of the positive elements of that relationship and the process of democratization. It would be a tragedy for all if China were to pull back to its pre-1972 era of isolation and repression.(Bush, The president's news conference: June 5, 1989, 1990, pp. 669-670)

It is interesting to note, however, that the president’s statements had been made only after heavy scrutiny from his national security staff. For example, Peter Rodman of the National Security Council received a fax from the Central Intelligence Agency in the White House Situation Room on June 9 with a proposed statement for the president(GBPL, Statement on China with CIA

cover sheet). While the statement condemned the Chinese action several times, it also discussed an “expectation that over the longer term” the Chinese government needed to conduct “a dialogue with its own people”(GBPL, Statement on China with CIA cover sheet, p. 4). The statement also argued that they did not want to see China turn inward and that “we do not want to cut off the broad range of contacts that have been built up between ourselves and the Chinese people”(GBPL, Statement on China with CIA cover sheet, p. 5). A fax on June 23 from NSC officer Francis Fukuyama to Rodman announced the suspension of military contacts and arms sales between the United States and China, but largely continued the same theme(GBPL, Unclassified fax between Fukuyama and Rodman). This statement discussed the previously mutually beneficial relationship between the United States and China, and cast the relationship between the two nations in the longer term.

At first glance, the situation in China primarily concerned the violation of human and civil rights rather than United States national security. Two books—one published in 1989 and the other in 1990—explain, however, that Bush understood the Tiananmen Square massacre as primarily an issue of national security. First, Andrew Nathan of Columbia University’s East Asian Institute explains that leaders of the Chinese Communist party were primarily concerned with retaining their own positions of power and influence regardless of human rights policy and were therefore irrationally frightened of any political liberalization. As such, demands by the United States that China move more quickly on human rights issues might have backfired by causing those leaders to turn even further inward with even more violent responses. Specifically, Nathan argues that:

Although the May-June demonstration were peaceful and did not seek to overthrow communism or the ruling party, Deng labeled them a “counter-revolutionary rebellion” because of their demand for independent political organizations and a free press. These demands threatened the Leninist principle of one-party dictatorship. To advocate political freedom, even without opposing communism, amounted in Deng’s eyes to “wanting to overthrow our state and the Party.” His us-or-them mentality decreed that any call for limitation of the ruling party’s power was equivalent to an attack on the political system as such. As Premier Li Peng stated a few days after declaring martial law, “If we were going to retreat any further, we might as well have handed China over to those people.”(Nathan, China's crisis: Dilemmas of reform and prospects for democracy, 1990, p. 2)

Nathan reveals that the Chinese leadership was frightened of losing power. By itself, however, that would not seem sufficient reason for the Bush administration to sacrifice the public goodwill and possible tangible benefits to the Chinese democracy movement that would come with demanding action on human rights. Two other factors entered in to the equation: Bush did not think that the Chinese would respond to American pressure, and there were profound global security questions at issue.

In Bush's press conference of June 5, he was asked whether he thought that "the Chinese leadership cares what the United States does or thinks right now." Bush's response revealed that not only did he think his words and actions would not help, but that they might actually cause damage:

I think they are in the sense of contradiction themselves right now. China has historically been less than totally interested in what other countries think of their performance. You have to just look back to the Middle Kingdom syndrome. And you look back in history when outsiders, including the United States, were viewed as barbarians. So historically, China, with its immense pride and its cultural background and its enormous history of conflict—internal and external—has been fairly independent in setting its course.(Bush, The president's news conference: June 5, 1989, 1990, p. 672)

The other part of the equation that concerned the Bush administration was global security. Guocang Huan, formerly of the Center for International Affairs at Harvard, argued in 1989 that China's policies towards the United States played an important role both in shaping their relationship with other countries, and in forming China's own domestic policies(Huan, 1989). Huan argues that:

Internationally, China is a regional power with global strategic importance. Its policy toward the United States will influence the trend of the triangular relations among Washington, Moscow, and itself. Given the key role that both Beijing and Washington play in the security of the Asian-Pacific region, China's policy toward the United States will also have a significant impact on the stability and balance of power in the region in the long run.(Huan, 1989, p. 144)

China's policy toward the United States would be especially significant because the People's Liberation Army (the Chinese government forces) was at the brink of civil war as the result of the crackdown. Two weeks after the attacks, the *Journal of Commerce* reported that a "civil war... seemed to be in the offing when there were reports of fighting between the Chinese army units that had brutally cleared Tiananmen Square and other army contingents"(Connors, 1989, p. A1). If the relationship between China and the United States had deteriorated to the point that some sort of further military action were called for, Chinese leaders would have to deal with an additional problem. They were already paranoid about maintaining power, they were already dealing with an army that was about to start shooting at itself, and the unwelcomed provocation of outsiders risked lighting a powder keg.

A civil war in China seemed all too real a possibility. The American press reported that on June 5 "duels had broken out between rival troops" roughly a mile from Tiananmen Square as soldiers loyal to different political leaders fired at each other(China on the brink of civil war, 1989). Various army units were taking position against one another, and the air force was preparing to seize control of the situation from the army(China on the brink of civil war, 1989). Journalist

Daniel Southerland (1989) reported that “tanks and troops from rival Chinese army units maneuvered for combat positions” even while politicians were holding talks “to settle a bitter power struggle that has thrown the government and military into crisis.”

While the risk of open civil war in China subsided within a few days of the initial crisis, the security threat would remain present for some time. China was even then a key to global stability, and anything which set them ill at ease was problematic. Even with the immediate threat of civil war decreased, Paul Godwin of the National Defense University reported that the Chinese military had lost a great deal of credibility with their own people and, as a result, would face an array of problems developing a stronger modern military force (Trainor, 1989). The PLA had long been using antiquated weaponry, and their participation in the crushing of their own citizens would only add a massive public relations challenge to their attempts to become a First World military. Harry Harding of the Brookings Institution wrote that even after the immediate threat passed, there was still a great deal of turmoil within the army that caused military leaders to be unsure of the fate of their modernization efforts or even their basic command structure (Trainor, 1989).

While Bush was sympathetic with the human rights concerns that resulted from the Tiananmen Square massacre, his administration was focusing on the security implications of that situation. While he did cut off military exchanges and weapons sales, that was insufficient to satisfy his critics who were primarily concerned with human rights issues. The problem particularly manifested itself in Congress where Bush was attempting to derail legislation designed to sharply punish the Chinese leadership. Legislation was proposed with several different punishment mechanisms, but two particular proposals clashed with Bush administration strategy: A bill to automatically grant new visas and renew existing visas for Chinese students in the United States, and a bill to deny China Most Favored Nation (MFN) trading status. This was significant, because global trading arrangements over the last quarter-century and more have placed China in a central role which they simply did not occupy at the time.

On June 5, Bush sent a cable to United States Ambassador to China James Lilley that said the United States would grant “sympathetic review of requests by Chinese students in the U.S. to extend their stay here” (GBPL, Unclassified Department of State Incoming). Bush did not want the public statement that congressional action would almost mandate, but instead wished to provide administrative relief to affected students. This proved to be a foretelling of congressional action, because no fewer than 9 similar bills were introduced in either the House or the Senate. Some bills increased immigration quotas, others lengthened the stays of Chinese nationals already in the country, and still others sought to grant employment rights to persons of Chinese citizenship living in the United States. While only the bill proposed by Representative Nancy Pelosi passed both the House and the Senate, the White House drew up detailed responses as to the shortcomings of each (GBPL, Background paper congressional legislation status report).

It was to the Pelosi bill, however, that the White House devoted the most attention. It is interesting to note that the administration did not oppose the provisions of the Pelosi bill per se.

Indeed, the Bush administration wanted to act in such a manner as to allow Chinese students to extend their stays in the United States in what they viewed as the most efficient manner possible. What the White House wanted was to avoid having any bill at all. They wanted to act through administrative relief mechanisms rather than formal legislation so that they could avoid publically offending the government in Beijing. One National Security Council memorandum referred to the Pelosi bill and said that “in each instance, the Administration has afforded relief to students and other Chinese aliens equivalent to, or greater than, the relief provided by the bill”(GBPL, National Security Council January 9, 1990). The memo then went on to describe how the Bush administration was doing a better job of allowing Chinese students and other Chinese nationals to remain in the United States and work than the legislation would do.

It is interesting to note what is not present in this memo or the others detailing why the congressional legislation should be defeated. The Bush administration did not criticize the immigration bills on their merits. It is typical of political discourse in the United States to hear one party say why the solution proposed by the other has some significant flaw. In this case, however, it did not happen. In their own minds at least, the Bush administration wanted to do more than did their legislative opponents. They simply did not wish to be seen doing it in public.

This raises the question of whether an intentional strategic silence was still central to the president’s leadership strategy. By the time this memo was written in January 1990, it was already well-established administration policy to say very little publicly in response to the events in Tiananmen Square. Bush, however, did not want the United States to be seen criticizing China through legislation either. To act silently was acceptable, but to speak and potentially anger an already frightened and divided opponent was not. Bush was practicing a form of Brummett’s strategic silence by publicly saying little despite his private diplomatic maneuverings. Bush highlighted this philosophy during the opening statement of his press conference of June 8, 1989:

The events in China are such that we, obviously, deplore the violence and the loss of life, urge restoration of order with recognition of the rights of the people. And I’m still hopeful that China will come together, respecting the urge for democracy on the part of the people. And what we will do in the future, I will announce at appropriate times; but right now, we are engaged in diplomatic efforts, and other countries are doing the same thing. And let’s hope that it does have an ameliorating effect on this situation. (Bush, The president's news conference: June 8, 1989, 1990, p. 695)

In contrast, Bush opposed legislation to deny Most Favored Nation trading status (MFN) to China on both the basis of policy and on the basis of wanting to avoid public posturing that would offend the Chinese leadership. Denial of MFN trading status to the Chinese government became a central issue in the relationship between Bush and Congress. The White House strongly opposed congressional efforts to restrict China’s ability to trade and economically prosper (save, of course, for the military issues mentioned previously). For the Bush White House, this meant that they also supported granting MFN to China. In contrast, many in Congress thought it important to send a signal to the Chinese leadership by refusing China the trading privileges and access to American markets that MFN implies. In response to being

questioned as to what he would “say to the American people who might wonder why we are not more forceful in being the world’s leading advocate of democracy,” Bush replied:

Well, some have suggested, for example, to show our forcefulness, that I bring the American Ambassador back. I disagree with that 180 degrees. And we’ve seen, in the last few days, a very good reason to have him there. In fact, one of your colleagues, Richard Roth of CBS, was released partially because of the work of our Embassy, of Jim Lilley, our very able Ambassador.

Some have suggested, well, you’ve got to go full sanctions on economic side. I don’t want to cut off grain, and we’ve just sold grain to the People’s Republic of China. I think that would be counterproductive and would hurt the people.(Bush, The president’s news conference: June 8, 1989, 1990, p. 697)

Bush also showed his opposition to making a statement through use of economic sanctions or other actions later in the June 8, 1989 press conference when he said: “And there’s a relationship over there that is fundamentally important to the United States that I want to see preserved. And so, I’m trying to find a proper, prudent balance, not listening to the extremes that say, take your Ambassador out; cut off all food to the Chinese people to show your concern”(Bush, The president’s news conference: June 8, 1989, 1990, p. 699). Opposition to congressional efforts to restrict MFN status came from many areas in the Bush administration. The State Department opposed the bill (and wanted to grant China MFN) because denial of MFN “would have no direct, immediate impact on the Chinese leadership and government but would adversely affect the livelihood of thousands of workers” and because American allies were opposed to this action(GBPL, Undated letter from Janet Mullins at State to Senator Lloyd Bentsen). The Treasury Department was opposed to the bill because it “inappropriately limits the ability of the President to effectively conduct the foreign policy of the United States”(GBPL, Undated letter from Edith Holiday at Treasury to Senator Lloyd Bentsen).Both of these positions were revealed in letters between the agencies and Senator Lloyd Bentsen, then chairman of the Senate Finance Committee. While they reveal important parts of Bush’s thinking in favoring MFN for China, perhaps more revealing are the confidential deliberations of the American Consulate in Hong Kong, the American Embassy in Beijing, and the National Security Council.

The United States Consulate in Hong Kong sent a cable to the Secretary of State on November 16, 1989, describing economic conditions in China (GBPL, Bankers discuss China risk: Good-bye to the Magic Kingdom).The cable covered several areas, including a discussion of reticence among bankers to lend money to China. This hesitation was premised upon a lack of information from the Chinese government concerning local businesses—a hesitation that Most Favored Nation (MFN) status might help alleviate. The memo also said that the Chinese government had only limited foreign exchange funds. Unless something was done, they would not be able to pay their bills beyond two more years(GBPL, Bankers discuss China risk: Good-bye to the Magic Kingdom). According to the cable: “The next two years could see a drastic recentralization. If the picture does not improve, economic pressures could bring down the present leadership.”(GBPL, Bankers discuss China risk: Good-bye to the Magic Kingdom)Such a thing

is always dangerous, but the danger is magnified in a country whose army is on the brink of war with itself. The intervening years have shown that granting China access to American markets allowed for huge development of their foreign exchange reserves. If, on the other hand, they could not gain U.S. dollars by selling products to the United States, their economy might face extreme peril. A June 1989 report from the United States Embassy in Beijing confirmed this information by saying that the Chinese had increased their exports to the United States significantly in the previous two years (from \$6.3 billion in 1987 to a projected \$10.2 billion for 1989) and that they had a growing favorable balance of trade which made them particularly susceptible to loss of access to American markets (GBPL, Foreign economic trends and their implications for the United States: People's Republic of China). Beyond the loss of existing markets for the Chinese, the president did not want to send the wrong message and risk the China- United States relationship in the future:

I don't want to see a total break in this relationship, and I will not encourage a total break in the relationship. When you see these kids struggling for democracy and freedom, this would be a bad time for the United States to withdraw and pull back and leave them to the devices of a leadership that might decide to crackdown further... And so, let others make proposals that in my view don't make much sense. I want to see us stay involved and continue to work for restraint and for human rights and for democracy. And then down the road, we have enormous commonality of interests with China, but it will not be the same under a brutal and repressive regime. So, I stop short of suggesting that what we ought to do is break relations with China, and I would like to encourage them to continue their change. (Bush, The president's news conference: June 5, 1989, 1990, p. 671)

The Bush administration's analysis of the impact of the bills restricting MFN, much as the decisions on what should be said publicly by Bush, ultimately came down to a question of security policy. The National Security Council (NSC) drafted a memo on December 28, 1989, that argued that the positions taken by the Departments of State and Treasury were correct from its perspective (GBPL, Memorandum for G. Philip Hughes). Also, the NSC drafted a confidential memo on May 9, 1990 "summarizing the economic costs of the loss of MFN." While much of that memo was unavailable to this researcher due to a still-extant national security restriction, the entire first page is available and indicates that the NSC thought there indeed were important economic costs to the loss of MFN by the Chinese. From the perspective of the NSC, this represented a security risk.

Bush took a series of actions in response to the massacre in Tiananmen Square. He issued early statements saying that he deplored the violence, he cut off military contacts, and he took administrative action to make it easier for Chinese intellectuals to stay in the United States. What he did not do, however, was give a major speech on the subject. He did not even allow his subordinates to condemn the Chinese leadership too harshly. He also sought to stop any piece of legislation which would make an official statement that the United States government was punishing the Chinese. In each case, he acted with an eye to some sort of economic or national

security implication. While some actions were taken and some statements made in support of human rights, this seems to have been a secondary concern of his policy. His defense on this question was that he wished to avoid a worse crackdown. The question remains as to whether his rhetorical choices were effective leadership.

Evolution of Bush's Strategic Silence

It is important to note that there was a bifurcation in George Bush's policy in response to the massacre in Tiananmen Square. The documents available in his presidential library as well as secondary sources such as James Baker's book strongly support the notion that Bush was primarily concerned with security rather than human rights policy. Political scientists John Rourke and Richard Clarke (1998) write that this is precisely the policy that President Clinton continued upon assuming the presidency from George Bush. According to Rourke and Clarke, both presidents viewed engagement with the Chinese as important to national and global security concerns. Each also believed that engagement and economic development would best serve the long term human rights interests of the Chinese people by giving them a stable climate in which to live and prosper.

The historical record seems to support the notion that, from a security perspective, Bush choose well when he elected to not condemn the Chinese leadership. James Baker noted that cultural factors historically made the Chinese resentful of outside influence, and Andrew Nathan's study finds that the primary interest of the Chinese leadership was maintaining their own positions of power and privilege. It is difficult to imagine a tyrant in history who, given these circumstances, would have welcomed the words of a giant state with whom he or she was in strategic competition.

The historical record also notes that the Chinese government was at war with itself. The air force was preparing to take strategic control of the situation in Beijing from the army, and various units of the army were maneuvering for tactical position against one another. The existing leadership was financially desperate. The situation was remarkably sensitive, and a harsher condemnation by the United States might have tipped the balance in a direction that would have been ugly. Given Beijing's strategic position in the power triangle with Washington and Moscow as the Cold War came to an end, the results of instability would have been at best unpredictable. It is hard to imagine a post-Olympics Beijing which serves as the leading creditor to the United States as being that fragile, but the strategic situation was substantially different decades ago.

Bush's legislative silence and his failure to formally speak on the matter had the same impact on national security after Tiananmen Square. Given the meanings attached to legislative action and legislative silence, each fits within the definition of what Brummett calls strategic silence. Punishing China with loss of Most Favored Nation status (MFN) might have sent the right message, but it would have been devastating to a state that was on the brink of default. Loss of MFN would have sent a message from the United States and would have had a harmful impact on the Chinese economy. In addition, Bush's decision to implement immigration policies without

a stringent presidential speech and without a “message” from the United States Congress probably helped avoid greater hostility from China. The same even holds true for not wanting policies he favored. Given the delicacy of the situation, any message not sent may well have been the one that did not push China into greater distress.

From the perspective of economics and, in turn, national security, Bush silent leadership appears to have been effective. Unfortunately, making choices that were appropriate to national security did not advance the human rights agenda in the manner desired by the president’s opponents and, indeed, by the president himself. This study is being completed in 2016 as the People’s Congress meets in China, and that assembly still has very limited powers and is not representative of the people it serves appears to have had devastating consequences for human rights. Andrew Nathan, cited earlier, noted this two decades ago:

Accommodating a rising China has become one of the most difficult issues for the foreign policies of the West and Japan. A consensus has formed in the United States that progress can be made on issues involving trade, intellectual property rights, arms proliferation, and Taiwan by taking clear stands in favor of core Western interests. But division over both ends and means has brought human rights policy to a state of crisis. (Nathan, 1997, p. 246)

Nathan also noted that a perceived clash has emerged between business interests and human rights policy. This can be traced to the Bush administration as follows: Bush favored engaging the Chinese in the hope of preventing the human rights situation from getting any worse. To do that, he favored extending Most Favored Nation status (MFN) to China. In so doing, he began a policy that extended into the Clinton presidency and substantively continues today. Over the years, however, this slowly took away the weapons the West had with which to push China towards greater action on human rights. Out of a desire to remain economically engaged and provide export markets for the Chinese, the United States has pushed human rights issues to the sidelines. As Nathan (1997, p. 246) notes, “China’s rights performance then worsened, poisoning the atmosphere in which the administration pursued other policy issues.”

One defense of the policy of remaining silent on human rights in order to engage China is that the worst did not happen. China did not collapse—neither economically nor militarily— and China has not involved neighboring states nor strategic competitors in a physical war. Indeed, China is on pace to overtake the United States and become the largest economy in the world. With that growth has come at least grudging economic liberalization. In practical terms, that means that many people in some parts of China can choose how they will earn a living and support themselves. While hardly a utopia, this is progress over a system in which an individual’s station in life is assigned by the state. While that is hard to imagine in China a decade and a half in to the twenty-first century, it was the reality within living memory.

Bush’s silence on China may have helped to avoid a massive economic and security crisis in the short to medium term. However, the failure to lead publically resulted in, at best, the human

rights situation in China not improving. However, if the test of leadership is the efficacy of action the question must be asked what choice Bush might have made which would better have served the cause of human rights in China. It is conceivable that there was no action available which would have meaningfully advanced the cause of freedom for Chinese citizens, and thus the best choice was to do as Bush did and focus on the security situation.

Conclusion

Bush's silence on the Tiananmen Square massacre can best be characterized as having mixed results. It resolved an immediate and very real security crisis, but it left over a billion people without a political voice. While it need not be the obligation of the U.S. president to provide voice to citizens of a foreign state, promotion of democracy and human rights has evolved as a major goal of U.S. foreign policy. However, any criticism of the president's actions in June 1989 and the following months should be tempered by exploring what might have happened had he selected a different course. While Bush's response to Tiananmen Square was imperfect, it seems unlikely that a perfect response existed. The evidence available in the Bush Presidential Library suggests that being seen as denouncing China might have provoked a circular firing squad in the Chinese military, and the results of that could have been so bad as to be incalculable. Beyond the immediate military issues, it might also have provoked an even worse crackdown on human rights from Beijing. My judgment is that President Bush made the best choice he could given the situation he faced. He had to distinguish the world which was from the world which he wished to be, and that meant solving the problem in front of him—or at least not making it any worse.

In separate books, Amos Kiewe(1994) and Denise Bostdorff(1994)raise the possibility that presidential speechmaking during moments of foreign policy difficulties can amplify an existing crisis or raise a new crisis where none previously existed. People in the United States look to the president for guidance on foreign policy matters with which they are unfamiliar, and sometimes presidential speeches thus make crises worse. While a very real problem already existed in China, presidential speechmaking or support for sending signals through sanctions would have sent the message that the U.S. government viewed the situation as one demanding immediate resolution via actions the Communist Party was unwilling to take. That would have started a feedback loop in the U.S. demanding progressively tougher action, and at some point it would likely have caused the leaders in Beijing to show force to prove they were still in charge of the country.

Whatever one makes of this case study, one thing is clear. President Bush was widely criticized during his presidency for not speaking during important foreign policy events, and that lack of speech was typically attributed to indifference or an unwillingness to lead. The public record indicates something altogether different. George H.W. Bush knew precisely what was going on in China and cared very much about it, and his silence was an intentional strategic choice. While the efficacy of that choice appears to have been mixed in this particular case, scholars and popular critics should consider the possibility that presidential silence is a choice intentionally made in order to advance particular policy goals. On at least some occasions, it is a useful tool in

the presidential foreign policy arsenal. Hopefully, this case study will invite further scholarship into the question of when the tool is best used.

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