

This opinion piece by PCI Vice President, Tom Plate, appeared in the South China Morning Post on Tuesday, June 4, 2019.

*Opinion*

## **This June 4, perhaps the US should forget Tiananmen, if we are ever to move on from anger and recrimination**

- To this day, no one has nailed down precisely what happened between protesters and government troops in Tiananmen Square in 1989. Yet the rumour mill grinds away and disputed memories continue to poison China-US relations



**Tom Plate**

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Illustration: Craig Stephens

This is about the downside to overwrought moralising. For, inconvenient truths must be carefully considered on this day marking the 30th anniversary of the Tiananmen Square uprising and suppression. Much is at risk, given the ethical framework through which the United States views China, and vice versa.

The truths presented here are not so obvious. The American perspective tends towards rank propaganda, a reconstruction of the past, driven by the political interests of the present, even as Beijing tries to pretend this infamous event was minor – a mere myth that belongs with other phantoms of the new cold war opera.

One truth is that, even to this day, no one has nailed down precisely what happened at Tiananmen, such as how many people were actually killed by government troops – hundreds or, some say, thousands. No one knows how much troops were provoked, or the myriad motivations of the various interests involved in that tragic

swirl of circumstances in the square.

Nor can anyone say for sure how insane was the rulers' decision that the upheaval was an existential threat – or whether, to put it unkindly, the judgment of Deng Xiaoping and his inner circle was clouded by undiagnosed post-Cultural Revolution post-traumatic-stress disorder. Perhaps the mere sight of antagonistic young people wanting to run things pulsed through panicked old men like an electric shock.

And it is quite uncertain whether Western hands were all that clean in the mess; whether journalists took sides, some pitching in to help protesters strategise for maximum media play; or even whether the protesters' commitment to Western democracy was as universally shared in the square as reported by the foreign media.

With each new annual degree of separation from the events of 1989, the potential for unreality looms larger than ever. But the lack of a clear picture of what did happen decades ago never seems to muffle the roar on this international day of political sermonising. Given the tension, recrimination and evaporating trust between China and the US, this incautious cacophony is especially disturbing, even pre-war-like, in its blindness to nuance.

Decades after Tiananmen, when what we know for sure has to be weighed against what for sure we don't, we are perched unsteadily on the edge of the grand canyon of possible unreality: historical memory. And this is a slippery place. Compared to properly documented history, historical memory is the permanent rumour mill grinding away in the hearts of angered peoples and nations – not easily dislodged and, worse yet, easily weaponised into hatred and churned into a “just war”.

So, if the desirable goal between two nations is peaceful, productive relations, hurling propaganda at each other takes the countries further from the road of reconciliation. In the gutsy book, *In Praise of Forgetting: Historical Memory and Its Ironies*, policy analyst David Rieff writes: “Far from political remembrance being always a moral imperative, there will be times when such remembrance is what stands in the way.” Too often, collective memory leads to “the determination to exact revenge rather than commit to the hard work of forgiveness”.

To put it less elegantly, when you dislike a person, you look at them and every blemish on their face becomes an affront. In truth, currently, there is no lecturing of China that rises above superpower politics. Americans must come to terms with that.

Coming from a nation that, for all its founding ideals, has committed violations of human rights and humanitarian law abroad and at home, our sermons on the mount of American exceptionalism have the ring not of freedom but of hypocrisy – or self-deception. And this is hardly due to President Donald Trump alone, but to a long legacy of mixed moral messages and missed opportunities, along with our actual national triumphs that we are not loath to trumpet.

In America's piling on of negativity towards “the other superpower”, let us not forget the unwise contributions of some China “scholars” and “experts” who jump at these Tiananmen anniversaries like trigger-happy big-game hunters with licenses to kill.

As French historian Jacques Le Goff says, “Memory only seeks to rescue the past in order to serve the present and the future.” Undoubtedly, many people inside China welcome the West's posturing in the hope that relentless hammering will induce regime change. While misconceived, that attitude is not hard to understand.

The government of the People's Republic of China currently has an image problem in the West, driven in part by the realities of its tougher policies and harder attitudes. Tensions tighten with every tit-for-tat tariff tweet from Trump, and every counter tariff from Beijing. But even if the regime were to change colours before next year's ritual dirge for Tiananmen, would it change for the better or worse?

The Communist Party has many faults – not wholly unlike (please permit me) America’s Republican and Democratic parties, whose diminished capacities are now fully on display. But to bury under a blanket of condemnation the party that helped countless Chinese citizens move up the economic ladder after decades of misery is to deny one of history’s great astonishments.

The memory of Tiananmen should remain embedded in history – entrusted solely to honest historians. In this instance, disputed memory is working to poison relations between China and America, when there are already more than enough gravamen begging to be addressed, some of them urgently.

So, the question for America this June 4 is: does it want to be “right”, or effective? Philosopher George Santayana is often quoted as saying: “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” But memory is a tricky thing, and too much remembrance might imprison us in the wrong lessons.

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