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ABROAD AT HOME; Thunder Out of China

By ANTHONY LEWIS MAY 21, 1989

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History happening before our eyes: That was our awed feeling as we watched the scenes in Tienanmen Square, until the Chinese Government cut the international television links. Here was a giant society stirring against a regime that was suddenly, amazingly, vulnerable.

How did it happen? Why did people by the millions break their constraints and voice demands for change?

Just 10 years ago Deng Xiaoping crushed the Democracy Wall movement with no difficulty. He sent Wei Jingsheng, the most important of the young campaigners for democracy, into brutal imprisonment. There was no perceptible resistance, inside China or outside.

The United States was so intent on improving its relations with China that, to its shame, it said nothing. Mr. Deng saw that as proof that the world does not care if China crushes dissent. In 1987, urging a crackdown on student unrest, he told high party officials: "We put Wei Jingsheng behind bars, didn't we? Did that damage China's reputation?"

Today the world does care about tyranny in China, and China has to care what the world thinks. It is no longer the Middle Kingdom, isolated and self-sufficient. Mr. Deng opened China up, made it part of the international community. The

country's plans rely on foreign investment and expertise, and hence on foreign confidence.

The opening to the world also had profound effects on the Chinese people. They began to see foreign visitors in large numbers for the first time since the 1949 revolution, and Chinese from Hong Kong and overseas. On radio and television they were exposed to a variety of ideas, including the idea of democracy.

It is evident now that modern communications, the instantaneous awareness of what is happening around the world, work to spread the idea of democracy. People in China or the Soviet Union or elsewhere may not agree on exactly how to define it, but they know they want more control of their own lives. That is why Chinese demonstrators had a model of the Statue of Liberty.

The economic changes started by Mr. Deng were a liberating force themselves. When peasants were allowed to make their own decisions on what to grow, when city dwellers found the goods of a modern society on sale at free markets, the idea of political choice quite naturally followed.

But Mr. Deng's liberal views in economics did not extend to politics. He kept a tight lid on expression, cracking down on dissent in the press and on campuses. One of the main demands of the demonstrators has been for freedom of the press.

Political rigidity was accompanied by corruption: a dangerous combination in any society. Peasants had to sell a portion of their crops to the Government at low prices; they were supposed to be able to buy fertilizer and fuel at fixed prices, too, but they found that local officials were selling those supplies on the free market. The children of high party figures got privileges - a subject of bitter complaint in the demonstrations.

In recent years, in addition to those reasons for political unease, there has come an inflation severe enough to be destabilizing. Farmers turning in their crops have received not money but "white slips" - promises to pay at some unspecified future time.

Those were some of the elements working for discontent in China when the protests started last month. But it still took enormous courage for the students to challenge authority so boldly, to walk through lines of police and soldiers as they first did in Beijing on April 27.

"The students are speaking for me," a distinguished Chinese visitor here said the other day. "They are saying what has been inside my head for years but I have not had the courage to express."

The Government could probably have ended the protests early on by making modest reforms. But it temporized for weeks and then rejected any concessions. That strategy only toughened the demonstrators' demands. More and more called on Deng Ziaoping to go. A banner hung from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences last week said "Dump the Politburo."

The result is that the protests, while still peaceful, have become a frontal political confrontation. People on both sides worry about chaos - a deep concern after the turbulence of the Cultural Revolution.

Now the Government threatens to end the protests by force. Whether troops will carry out such orders is uncertain. If they do - if totalitarian order is restored - it will be a dubious victory. For the legitimacy of the Government will henceforth be in question, in the world and in China.

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