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UPHEAVAL IN CHINA; Diplomats Say China Is Mired in Crisis It Could Have Averted

By **ROBERT PEAR** and **SPECIAL TO THE NEW YORK TIMES** MAY 21, 1989

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A former American Ambassador to China said today that the Beijing Government was making "a stupid and potentially tragic mistake" by trying to suppress demonstrations by students demanding greater democracy.

"This type of repression is totally unnecessary," said Winston Lord, the Ambassador in Beijing from November 1985 to April of this year. "The students' original demands were reasonable and could have been met. Only lately, out of sheer frustration, the demonstrators have escalated their demands, and the Government's hard-line statements have incited greater demonstrations."

"The looming confrontation could have been avoided if the authorities had met the students part way," said Mr. Lord, who has worked for nearly two decades to improve relations between the United States and China. Demands Are Understandable

American officials and other experts on China said the students' demands were understandable in view of China's opening to the West over the last 10 years.

Gaston J. Sigur, the Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian Affairs from 1986 to February of this year, said he never expected to see such an outpouring of support for democracy in China.

"But," he said, "there is a certain logical progression here, beginning in the early 1980's with the opening of the country and the sending of so many students abroad. It leads to questioning, to a popular desire to take part in the decision-making process."

The State Department estimates that 80,000 to 100,000 Chinese have studied in the United States since 1979. At present, Mr. Lord said, there are more than 30,000 Chinese students here, and most are absorbing "a keen sense of American values." 'On the Side of the Angels'

Mr. Sigur, who accompanied President Bush on a trip to China in February and is still a part-time consultant to the State Department, said, "We have to welcome the desires of the students for greater democracy and an end to official corruption."

"We ought to put ourselves on the side of the angels by supporting the students' demands for greater openness and democracy," said Mr. Sigur, who is now a professor of East Asian affairs at George Washington University. "We should note that the United States has stood for those principles since its inception. After all, the students have not been asking for a revolution. They are not saying that the Government must fall or the socialist system must be done away with. Their demands are perfectly legitimate."

A State Department official agreed with that assessment. "This is the most serious challenge the Chinese Government has faced since its inception in 1949," he said. "Its problem here is a mass demand not for revolutionary changes, but for a more responsive government. The appeal of the demands goes well beyond the students and has come at a very difficult time of transition for the Chinese leadership, which has been trying to identify a successor to Deng Xiaoping."

Chinese Urged to Avoid Violence

For the second time in 24 hours, the Bush Administration today urged the Chinese authorities to avoid violence as they tried to restore order in Beijing and other cities.

A White House official said the Administration was drafting a letter to Chinese authorities to complain about their decision to halt transmissions from Beijing by American television networks.

An Administration official said the United States had to balance its support for the students' goals with its desire to maintain friendly relations with the Chinese Government.

"We do not need to adopt a high, shrill tone on this issue," the official said. "We don't want to be too critical of the Chinese Government. We don't want to interfere in their internal affairs in ways that would have unpredictable consequences."

"On the other hand," he said, "our friendly relations with the Government have never compromised our support for the principles the demonstrators stand for. We favor greater democratization, free expression and the right of the news media to have free access."

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