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CRACKDOWN IN BEIJING; One Man Can Make a Difference: This One Josted Briefly With Goliath

By JAMES BARRON JUNE 6, 1989

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It all started with a man in a white shirt who walked into the street and raised his right hand no higher than a New Yorker hailing a taxi.

Unlike so many of the pictures from China in the last few weeks, images crowded from one edge of the frame to the other, with determined demonstrators and ambivalent soldiers, this one was powerful in its simplicity: A single man stopping a column of tanks rumbling toward Tiananmen Square.

The man stood only half as tall as the lead tank. But his body language made it clear: He wanted the slow-moving column halted, and halt it did, the huge treads on the lead tank grinding to a stop just a few feet from his face.

It was a close call - the tank came perhaps a second or two of killing him - and it seemed to encapsulate many of the confrontations in recent days between the citizens and the army: the touch-and-go maneuvering, with soldiers not sure when to press on and when to retreat; the determination of the demonstrators, brave and unyielding in ways that might have been unthinkable a few weeks ago. In its quiet way, this little confrontation seemed to symbolize the fragility of the Government's position.

From the rooftop of a nearby building, where cameramen photographed the

extraordinary standoff, whatever the man said was lost in the shouts of students and the gunfire farther down the block.

Once the tanks stopped, there was a blocking game that could not have been played out more precisely with a coach calling the plays. The lead tank angled to its right, apparently hoping to drive by the man. He quick-stepped a bit to his left, once again planting himself firmly in front of the tank.

The tank nosed to the left. The student matched the move, his legs wide apart, his body once again blocking it. **Would Not Yield**

The lead tank tried to move again. As its engine accelerated, it spewed exhaust over the second tank. That vehicle gunned its engine, spewing exhaust on a third tank. And so it went, down the line. But for all the revving, the machines did not get far. The student would not get out of the way.

The lead tank came to a stop squarely on the yellow line in the street, and for a long moment the man just stood there. But then he leaped onto the tank. He bounded over the hood and leaned into the hatch, talking to the soldiers inside, perhaps pleading for them to abandon their vehicles.

After pacing back and forth on the hood of the tank, the man climbed down. A passing bicyclist stopped to chat with him. Then two other men ran into the street. One, in a dark shirt, had his hands up, as if to say, "Don't shoot."

The two grabbed the man in the white shirt by the arms and hustled him off. And then the confrontation was over. The tanks were on their way again.

The identity of the man in the white shirt was not known. Nor was it known what precisely prompted him to try to stop the tanks.

President Bush mentioned the incident at a White House news conference, saying he had been watching television and had seen "a single student standing in front of a tank and then, I might add, seeing the tank driver exercise restraint."

"I'm convinced that the forces of democracy are going to overcome these unfortunate events in Tiananmen Square," the President said.

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