

Remarks at memorial service honoring participants  
in pro-democracy demonstrations  
People's Republic of China, May-June 1989

Marsh Chapel  
Boston University  
June 25, 1989

Remarks by  
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Executive Vice President

Universities are temples and nurseries of freedom. Even when universities were first invented, in the European middle ages, they were the freest parts of a culture that was itself far freer than most people imagine--certainly far freer than the autocratic and totalitarian regimes of our own tragic century.

To control the universities, or if they cannot be controlled to disband them, is the first thought of a tyrant, for tyranny cannot long endure either the unforgiving light of reason or the unfettered exercise of intellectual freedom. That is, tyranny cannot abide the very things which universities prize and nurture.

Even if they mouth the empty jargon of materialism, tyrants know in their hearts a great truth: ideas have consequences. And the most powerful idea of all is the idea of freedom. Without it, man is but a creature of his circumstances. With it, he can--quite literally--stop a tank.

In the dark tapestry of twentieth century history, some of the brightest threads have been woven by university students and teachers. In East Berlin in 1953; in Budapest in 1956; in the American South in 1963; in Prague in 1968; in Warsaw in 1980. And now, in 1989, in Beijing, in Shanghai, and in other university centers in China.

There is very little we can say to our colleagues in China to help them in their time of testing, in their agony. There is very little we can say to our Chinese colleagues here in America to comfort them in their grief and rage. Worst of all, there is very little we here can do to sweep back the tide of terror and unreason that is now engulfing China. But we must nonetheless pledge ourselves to say and do the little we can.

We can affirm our profound admiration and respect for those who have done what we ourselves would hope to do had our places been reversed.

We can affirm our belief in the strategic importance of freedom, and remind our government of this truth.

We can affirm our welcome for students and scholars who find themselves separated from family and friends and country, and for others who in the future manage to escape.

We can affirm our conviction that, so long as the idea of freedom is not lost in the despair of China's present, the death grip of the current regime can and will be loosened and the future can be changed for the better.

We can also create occasions such as these in order to express our pride in the students and faculty members in China who have so bravely, so unforgettably reminded all of us who are part of university life everywhere in the world that the birthright of every university is freedom.

The great English historian, Lord Acton, planned but did not live to write a book whose title was to have been The History of Liberty. When some future historian takes up the compelling task of realizing Acton's splendid conception, we know--and can only hope they know--that in the history of liberty the heroes and martyrs of Tiananmen Square will have written with their courage and their blood one of its most magnificent chapters.

[Remarks by Jon Westling, Executive Vice President of Boston University, delivered at a memorial service held in the Boston University Chapel on Sunday, June 25, 1989, for the students and teachers in China who took part in the freedom movement.]