In April of 1989, thousands of Chinese citizens began protesting human rights conditions and government reform, which led to one of the most violent attacks of a government against its own people in recent history. Beginning in the spring, pro-democracy protests in Beijing's Tiananmen Square lasted for a little over a month, culminating in the June 4th massacre. The protests were largely led by students from Chinese universities and sparked by the sudden death of Hu Yaobang, a liberal reformer who had been deposed by the Chinese government after losing a power struggle with conservatives. The students created a list of seven demands they asked the Chinese government to adopt, including the freedom of press, assembly, and speech. The protests were relatively peaceful until the Chinese government ordered troops to descend upon the square on June 4th, using tear gas, tanks, and prohibited expanding bullets against the students. There are no firm statistics on the fatalities that day as the Chinese government has never released any official figures, but the death toll is believed to be anywhere from hundreds to thousands of demonstrators.

While this violence was certainly condemned by the United States, many thought that such brutality could not have been prevented by any American action. Sixty-four percent of Americans believed that even if President George H. W. Bush had spoken out earlier against the attacks, they could not have been stopped through any US intervention (LA Times Poll, June 1989). Twenty-five years later, it remains unclear if the demonstration had any lasting effect on civil rights within China.

Survey organizations have polled Americans in the aftermath of the attacks to gauge any sense of potential
improvement in the Chinese government's respect of civil rights. A Harris Poll conducted in June 1989 just days after the massacre found that 9 out of 10 Americans believed the students were right in their demands for social justice and civil rights reform. However, Americans were much more divided when it came to whether or not America should take an open stance against the Chinese government. A January 1990 CBS News/New York Times Poll found that only 42% of those polled believed that the US should publicly criticize China for their lack of human rights policy while just less than a majority, 46%, thought it was more important to avoid criticizing them in order to maintain good relations.

As of 2009, 86% of Americans believed that China is not generally respectful of human rights (PIPA/Knowledge Networks Poll, May 2009). While this is an overwhelming majority, a Committee of 100 poll conducted in 2007 asking about the first things Americans think of when asked about China found only 3% listed lack of human rights and the Tiananmen Square massacre. It appears the salience of the violent end to the demonstrations that dominated international headlines in the summer of 1989 has diminished.

These data are available at the public opinion archives at the Roper Center at the University of Connecticut. The iPOLL database permits in-depth analysis of the American public in the aggregate.

To learn more about these resources, see membership benefits.

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Sources

- Roper Center iPOLL database

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