

# The Tiananmen Myth and the Price of a Passive Press, by Jay Williams

## Columbia Journalism Review

---

President Clinton's precedent-setting visit to China filled the front pages of American newspapers and led the evening television news for many days this summer. The stories focused on his controversial decision to attend a welcoming ceremony in Tiananmen Square, despite the stain of what reporters called the massacre of Chinese students there on June 4, 1989.

Over the last decade, many American reporters and editors have accepted a mythical version of that warm, bloody night. They repeated it often before and during Clinton's trip. On the day the president arrived in Beijing, a *Baltimore Sun* headline (June 27, page 1A) referred to "Tiananmen, where Chinese students died." A *USA Today* article (June 26, page 7A) called Tiananmen the place "where pro-democracy demonstrators were gunned down." *The Wall Street Journal* (June 26, page A10) described "the Tiananmen Square massacre" where armed troops ordered to clear demonstrators from the square killed "hundreds or more." *The New York Post* (June 25, page 22) said the square was "the site of the student slaughter."

The problem is this: as far as can be determined from the available evidence, no one died that night in Tiananmen Square.

A few people may have been killed by random shooting on streets near the square, but all verified eyewitness accounts say that the students who remained in the square when troops arrived were allowed to leave peacefully. Hundreds of people, most of them workers and passersby, did die that night, but in a different place and under different circumstances.

The Chinese government estimates more than 300 fatalities. Western estimates are somewhat higher. Many victims were shot by soldiers on stretches of Chang'an Jie, the Avenue of Eternal Peace, about a mile west of the square, and in scattered confrontations in other parts of the city, where, it should be added, a few soldiers were beaten or burned to death by angry workers.

The resilient tale of an early morning Tiananmen massacre stems from several false eyewitness accounts in the confused hours and days after the crackdown. Human rights experts George Black and Robin Munro, both outspoken critics of the Chinese government, trace many of the rumor's roots in their 1993 book, *Black Hands of Beijing: Lives of Defiance in China's Democracy Movement*. Probably the most widely disseminated account appeared first in the Hong Kong press: a Qinghua University student described machine guns mowing down students in front of the Monument to the People's Heroes in the middle of the square. *The New York Times* gave this version prominent display on June 12, just a week after the event, but no evidence was ever found to confirm the account or verify the existence of the alleged witness. *Times* reporter Nicholas Kristof challenged the report the next day, in an article that ran on the bottom of an inside page; the myth lived on. Student leader Wu'er Kaixi said he had seen 200 students cut down by gunfire, but it was later proven that he left the square several hours before the events he described allegedly occurred. Most of the hundreds of foreign journalists that night, including me, were in other parts of the city or were removed from the square so that they could not witness the final chapter of the student story. Those who tried to remain close filed dramatic accounts that, in some cases, buttressed the myth of a student massacre.

For example, CBS correspondent Richard Roth's story of being arrested and removed from the scene refers to "powerful bursts of automatic weapons, raging gunfire for a minute and a half that lasts as long as a nightmare." Black and Munro quote a Chinese eyewitness who says the gunfire

was from army commandos shooting out the student loudspeakers at the top of the monument. A BBC reporter watching from a high floor of the Beijing Hotel said he saw soldiers shooting at students at the monument in the center of the square. But as the many journalists who tried to watch the action from that relatively safe vantage point can attest, the middle of the square is not visible from the hotel.

A common response to this corrective analysis is: So what? The Chinese army killed many innocent people that night. Who cares exactly where the atrocities took place? That is an understandable, and emotionally satisfying, reaction. Many of us feel bile rising in our throats at any attempt to justify what the Chinese leadership and a few army commanders did that night.

But consider what is lost by not giving an accurate account of what happened, and what such sloppiness says to Chinese who are trying to improve their press organs by studying ours. The problem is not so much putting the murders in the wrong place, but suggesting that most of the victims were students. Black and Munro say “what took place was the slaughter not of students but of ordinary workers and residents — precisely the target that the Chinese government had intended.” They argue that the government was out to suppress a rebellion of workers, who were much more numerous and had much more to be angry about than the students. This was the larger story that most of us overlooked or underplayed.

It is hard to find a journalist who has not contributed to the misimpression. Rereading my own stories published after Tiananmen, I found several references to the “Tiananmen massacre.” At the time, I considered this space-saving shorthand. I assumed the reader would know that I meant the massacre that occurred in Beijing after the Tiananmen demonstrations. But my fuzziness helped keep the falsehood alive. Given enough time, such rumors can grow even larger and more distorted. When a journalist as careful and well-informed as Tim Russert, NBC’s Washington bureau chief, can fall prey to the most feverish versions of the fable, the sad consequences of reportorial laziness become clear. On May 31 on *Meet the Press*, Russert referred to “tens of thousands” of deaths in Tiananmen Square.

The facts of Tiananmen have been known for a long time. When Clinton visited the square this June, both *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* explained that no one died there during the 1989 crackdown. But these were short explanations at the end of long articles. I doubt that they did much to kill the myth.

Not only has the error made the American press’s frequent pleas for the truth about Tiananmen seem shallow, but it has allowed the bloody-minded regime responsible for the June 4 murders to divert attention from what happened. There was a massacre that morning. Journalists have to be precise about where it happened and who were its victims, or readers and viewers will never be able to understand what it meant.