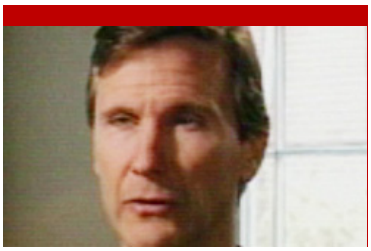
Interview John Pomfret



John Pomfret, Beijing bureau chief for *The Washington Post* from 1998-2003, was in Beijing in 1989 on assignment for the AP. In this interview, he gives his eyewitness account of the massacre, starting with the first bloody clash in the Muxidi neighborhood in west Beijing and moving down Chang'an Boulevard to Tiananmen Square itself. Pomfret was near the students when they made their last stand at the monument before finally withdrawing early in the morning of June 4th. He explains why Tiananmen became an extraordinary turning point for China and talks about "the deal" that Deng Xiaoping offered the Chinese people and its consequences to this day. This is an edited transcript of an interview conducted on Dec. 10, 2005.

Was it your sense the protest was predominantly a student phenomenon, or something that was developing from that into a popular uprising?

Well, the start is a student phenomenon, but specifically after the hunger strike began in May, then you had hundreds of thousands of people coming out in support of the students. In Chinese, the typical way of saying hello to somebody is not, "How are you doing?" It's "Have you eaten?" Add to that the fact that students in modern Chinese history are basically considered the cream of the society.

In a city at that time that had a population of 10 million to 12 million, you had a million people on the street, minimum. You had People's Liberation Army [PLA] logistics groups, journalists, people from the state-run banks, professors, engineer institute people, researchers. That was unprecedented, definitely in modern Chinese post-revolutionary history. We saw very limited worker participation. Beijing Iron and Steel, a huge factory that is located to the west of the city, some of their workers marched, but not many. When the workers began to get involved through what they called the Beijing Autonomous Workers [Federation], then the government really got nervous. That probably hastened the crackdown. You saw basically elite-level participation; you didn't have shopkeepers out on the streets marching.

What were those people protesting against?

One huge problem was inflation; the other problem was the sense that the urban economic reforms had effectively been stalled. You had a situation where the upper echelons of the Party were growing extremely wealthy, and the bottom middle rungs of society, specifically in the city, were not getting what they believed they should get. You had a huge problem with sons and daughters of high-ranking cadres enriching themselves on a two-tier pricing system. They had a state-run price and a market price, and these people would play the margin. Lots of people felt extremely upset with this idea -- that our society is supposed to be an egalitarian society, and suddenly we have these big gaps in wealth, and those people made money because they were corrupt.

A third aspect that I think is important is the idea that China would become sort of an Asian America. They believed that they could transit peaceably from a backwards Maoist country through a very quick political change into a sort of Asian democracy. The United States was an important idea to them, and I think that played a factor.

Martial law was declared late on May 19, but it wasn't until 15 days later that the army was able to make its way to [Tiananmen] Square. How did the

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citizens and the students keep the army at bay?

I think that the critical element there is not so much people power; it is the fact that within the higher echelons of the Party, they had not yet made their decision what they wanted the PLA to do. Yes, when the troops began to move towards the city, the common people did come out and did set up roadblocks, argue with them, give them food, talk to them. But I think the source of the chaos of those two weeks had to do with chaos within the Communist Party. They hadn't made up their minds exactly what they were going to do.

"The party elders … believed this was a nationwide counterrevolutionary movement..... They needed to make a bloody stand to cower their population back into submission."

You witnessed those extraordinary events of the night of June 3-4, starting in Muxidi. Can you describe that night?

I'd eaten at a friend of mine's apartment, which is one of the big apartment buildings near [Muxidi], and we had gone downstairs for a stroll after dinner. Muxidi then was a relatively small intersection leading into Beijing; now it's a massive intersection. There is a small bridge going from Muxidi west to east under which runs a fetid canal. On that bridge there were long double-decker buses that people had put there to block the movement of the military into the city. There was a martial law order that was being broadcast on speakers hanging everywhere in the city, basically telling Beijing residents to stay off the streets, and that if anything happened to them they'd be responsible for it. No one at least that I was coming into contact with was paying attention to this order. People began to move towards the intersection, strengthening those barricades.

Sometime after 8:00 p.m., soldiers began to attempt to break through the barricades. People began to throw rocks and hurl abuse at the soldiers. Those soldiers then disappeared. Then armored personnel carriers [APCs] came out and began to ram the buses. Somebody threw some sort of gasoline-soaked rug into the buses, and the buses illuminated with fire. Then, sometime after 9:30 p.m., you had more soldiers out there and live fire began. The fires on the buses were blazing, and I could hear the sound of the APCs ramming into the buses and pushing them out of the way. I could also hear a roar from the soldiers, and then at a certain point they broke through.

Was anyone hit near you?

I saw people falling, I did not know if they were hit or if they had stumbled, because there was so much commotion and so much chaos that I was not sure one way or the other.

Did you witness people in the apartment houses around [Muxidi] shouting abuse down at the soldiers and the soldiers firing at the apartment blocks?

I never saw it. I know there were people hit in those apartment blocks, but I have no idea whether that was a purposeful act or whether it was just some boys from the countryside who did not know how to shoot straight.

How long did it take you to get a sense that it was lethal force?

When they began to shoot, I really didn't know what it was. I had never seen live fire before, and I thought they might have just been dummy bullets, something to scare people. Then people in the crowd began to shout, like a telephone game, that it was live fire. The group of people I was with, they were Chinese people, began, began to run. I basically hit the dirt and snuggled up against a curb. While the shooting was happening, I could see people behind me falling. I could hear the crack of gunfire very close. It wasn't a whizz; it was a crack. It was extremely close. It was kind of like a firecracker going off by your ear.

I stayed there for what seemed about 10 minutes until it seemed like there was not that much shooting up in our direction. I [got] on my bike, and I began to ride via alleyways parallel to the invasion route as the PLA went from west to east along Chang'an Boulevard [Boulevard of Eternal Peace]. In several intersections I would come down the alleyways to see what was happening on the street. I did that at the intersection of Xi Dan Boulevard, which is the major intersection before you get to Tiananmen Square from the west. There was a lot of shooting there.

I was sneaking down the street with a group of middle-aged women, several teenagers, some other people in their 20s, onlookers who wanted to see what was happening to their city. In between Muxidi and Xi Dan, people were bringing people up alleyways. I saw people on the backs of three-wheeled pedicabs being bicycled to health stations and to hospitals. You had doctors outside involved in mouth to mouth resuscitation with red faces from, you know, stained from blood. The health stations were overflowing with casualties. Beijing's biggest military hospital couldn't deal with all the casualties, there were so many people shot.

So the army had to really fight its way along from Muxidi to Tiananmen?

A big problem for the military [was] that there was a barricade that was used up and down Chang'an Boulevard. Over the course of the demonstrations, specifically after martial law, the people came in and moved those barricades to block the tanks. Those things would get caught up in the tank treads and literally stop tanks. Once that happened, then people could jump onto the tanks. In a couple of cases, officers were yanked out of the tanks, were beaten and killed by protesters. The PLA, of course, prominently displayed a photograph of [an] officer stripped naked with his hat jauntily placed on his head after he had been disemboweled by protesters.

You did go all the way to Tiananmen Square. What did you witness there?

I got into the square by cycling around the Forbidden City and going to the square from the northeast, where [the students] had arranged the Goddess of Democracy, their takeoff on the Statue of Liberty. I walked through the tents to the Monument to the People's Heroes, which is a big obelisk in the center of the square. Around that obelisk were what seemed to be several hundred -- definitely not more than 1,000 -- students, a few foreigners, some professors perhaps, teachers, older people, the workers from the Beijing Autonomous Workers Union [sic]. It was unclear whether they were still in their headquarters, which was on the northwest corner of the square, or whether they had been dispersed.

Most of the people, I would think 90 to 98 percent, were from out of town. Most of the people from Beijing had long [since] left the square and gone back home. Mothers had come down literally to drag their sons and daughters home in the runup to the crackdown. There was a lot of shooting. A lot of young people were running towards the military, being shot or falling, and then running away. Fellows on these flatbed pedicabs were bicycling into that area to try to pick up wounded people; some of them were shot as well. There was an extremely chaotic situation. There was a lot of smoke, the lights were on, on the square. And there was this continual announcement of: "Under the martial-law regulations, no one should be on the street. If you stay on the street, you will be responsible for what happens to you." This sort of continual bass beat, sort of, of that evening was that these announcements were happening at all times.

Can you evoke the moment when you were aware of the military on the two sides of you?

I'd gone to the Monument to the People's Heroes, the big obelisk in the middle of the square, around which there were basically the remnants of the Tiananmen movement. The lights [were] on; there was lots of noise from firing weaponry to our north. And people were extremely afraid. People were singing "The Internationale" to try to back up everyone's spirit. Then we heard this roar of male yelling, saw on the steps of the Museum of Revolution History and across the way, on the steps of the Great Hall of the People, hundreds, even thousands of soldiers, just saw the glint of their weaponry on those steps. And it was clear to everyone from that point on that we were absolutely trapped. You had the military coming in from the west with their tanks. We knew there were tanks coming in from the south of Tiananmen Gate, and now on both sides of the square you had hundreds, if not thousands, of soldiers.

What happened next was the three hunger strikers, including Hou Dejian -- he was a Taiwanese rock star -- began, unbeknownst to the students, negotiations with the military authorities for some type of a peaceable withdrawal from that square. Hou Dejian came back, and "Should we stay or should we go?" was put to a voice vote among the students there. It was clear to me that the stay votes were much, much, much stronger, but Feng Congde, who was a student leader at the time, basically said that the gos have it. They then organized themselves into a phalanx, and we walked out of the square.

Did you see evidence of them being assaulted as they went through?

No, I saw no evidence that they were hurt. We heard a report that 11 of them had been crushed by an APC, but I never saw anything like that, so I don't know whether it was true or not. But it was funny -- the route that we took, I didn't see any soldiers standing close to us. You could see them in the distance -- they were standing on the steps of the Great Hall of the People, thousands of them -- but they were not glowering over us. They kept their distance. These students walked out, some of them carrying banners from universities, and I thought it was particularly interesting, because in many cases, those people were not from those universities; they were mostly from out of town.

Why was it necessary to use lethal force?

That's a great question. This is purely conjecture, based on the *Tiananmen Papers* and things I have learned, but I think that Deng [Xiaoping] and the Party elders made the decision that, because they believed this was a nationwide counterrevolutionary movement similar to what was happening in the Soviet Union, they needed to make a bloody stand to cower their population back into submission. The Chinese had been getting increasingly unruly at all levels of society: The press had become freer; the research institutes had become much more open; there were open calls for political reform of a depth and a substance that have yet to be surpassed today.

There were some details from your articles which I found very moving -- the sense of the savagery of the assault and the response of people who felt betrayed; the government worker feeling, "This is what the government does for my patriotism? I am protecting my cities and my people from fascists," that sort of reaction to the invading army. What's the reason for that?

It's interesting. There is an expression in Chinese that says, "The calf does not fear the lion; the calf does not fear the tiger." There was a naivete about the Chinese in regards to what the People's Liberation Army could do to them, which is ironic considering that maybe 15 years ago, the society was replete with stories of state-sanctioned murder and terror.

They were caught up in an extremely romantic, idealistic pursuit, and they thought an idea somehow could shake the Communist Party. This is a party that killed more than 30 million, perhaps up to 50 million of its own people in this peacetime and still stays in power. But there was a sense of being shocked that the People's Liberation Army, the army of the people that "swam with the people like fish swimming in the sea," as they said in China, would do this to the common Beijinger.

What is so curious in all of this is that we have no clear idea of the numbers of fatalities. I have heard estimates as high as 10,000 and those that are in the middle hundreds. What do you feel is probably nearest to the truth?

That is one of the peculiarities of China, that one of the main historical events that has happened in this country in the last 50 years has never been documented, and no real research has been allowed into it. I think 10,000 is way too high. I would be comfortable with a figure somewhere under 1,000 dead. The reason is that 15, 16 years into it, if you look at the number of victims' families within and also from outside the city, there are just not that many. Perhaps they are not willing to come forward, but my sense is under 1,000. *The New York Times* did a good piece about this at the time, and I think that probably has stood the test of time. **Editor's Note:** This June 21, 1989, article, written by *Times* reporter Nicholas D. Kristof in Beijing, concluded that the "plausible" number killed were 400 to 800 civilians and about a dozen soldiers and policemen.

When I was in Beijing, just looking at people's faces, I wondered about you, the effect that the unsaid has on people. What does it do to you when an event in history can't be openly talked about?

That's a great question. History can disappear for most people, I think. I used to not think that, but I think it actually can, having lived in China and then also living in Yugoslavia for four years. For many people it can disappear; for some it can't.

In a society where it is made to disappear, for those few for whom history cannot disappear, the weight is that much [greater]. In China, one of the most calamitous events in the last 50 years was the Great Leap Forward, during which 30 million people died. In Chinese the expression they use to describe it is "the three years of natural disasters." You are dealing with a party which refuses to confront main elements of its historical past. Tiananmen is just one of them, and actually it is

relatively small. It just so happens to be the most recent one, and the one that was live on TV.

We did this little experiment at Beida University [Beijing University, also called Peking University]. We showed the Tank Man image to four undergraduates aged 21 to 22. They would only have been 5 or 6 at the time, but it is extraordinary to me that talking to undergraduates in the university, which was really the hub of the whole thing, these relatively few years later, that that memory no longer existed. What does that tell you about China?

I lived most recently in Beijing from 1989 to 2004, and the Chinese say they were too busy in creating a new society to worry about the past. I think that's a bit of hyperbole, but on the other hand, history can be forgotten, and it has, in Beijing, been forgotten among the large percentage of the society. In a small area of green space in northeast central Beijing there is an American-style drive-in theater where, instead of driving your car there, they have cars waiting for you. It was a popular place to go, a taste of Americana on dates. I went there talking to one of the entrepreneurs for this drive-in, and I noticed these big bricks on the ground. He got down on his knees and began to pull one up and said, "Look, look, look, I got these at low price." He said, "Look at those," and they were tank treads. He bought the old Tiananmen Square bricks to pave his American-style drive-in movie theater.

The big story at the moment is China's explosive economic growth, but I feel that you can't tell that story completely without going back to 1989. It is almost as if that spurt forward was the answer to Tiananmen Square.

Yes, they're basically the yin and yang of modern Chinese history for the last 25 years. You have Tiananmen; you have the crackdown, the closing of the political door towards change. Deng and the people around him realized that you had to open another door, because if not, the society was going to explode, and the other door was to get rich and glorious. You cannot separate those two things when you look at Chinese history.

Deng, tyrant that he was, was a very smart guy. He understood that in order for China to make it in the modern world, it didn't necessarily have to be free, but it had to be rich. I think the effective deal was, "You forget about this, and we will give you a way out to make money and to have a much better life." That social contract, if you will, up to this point has worked quite well for the Communist Party and for the elites, and now the new middle class of China.

Those are the people who are now reaping the benefits. It is the unevenness of that enrichment that is so interesting.

That's the big tension now in Chinese society. I think there are basically two main interesting potential fault lines. One is the rich/poor problem, which is an enormous problem. You have gaps in wealth which rival and probably surpass the United States, with no outlet for people.

The second gap is the gap between the elite, between the people who are now stakeholders, who want to be represented and want to have their properties protected, and the Party, which is used to dealing with the society by capricious means and not by rule of law. Those two tensions will influence enormously China's move to the future.

There's not very much ideology left, is there? Even the use of the word "Communist" or the picture of Mao on every note --

It's interesting. As the society's economic program has become more like a hyper-capitalism, its commitment to political reform has diminished. The notes in the 1980s had four very important Chinese revolutionaries; now they only have one. Why have they become less pluralistic in their outward expression of who they are? But at the same time, on an economic level, they are much more like us than ever before. It is a very interesting tension, and how they resolve it will be extremely fascinating to watch, and important for the rest of the world.

Will they resolve it?

I think they will. I am optimistic, but you can say I have bought into China. I have married a Chinese woman, I have spent 10 years of my life there, so perhaps I have a weird perspective. You said something about the people who were

participating in 1989 being middle class. I would say they really weren't the middle class. I would define the middle class as property owners, as stakeholders in a society. Those people who were marching did not have a stake in society because they didn't own property.

Perhaps you can accuse me of being a materialistic American, but now in China you have, for the first time since 1949, the creation of a middle class, of property owners. Across the country, at least 100 million people own their own apartments, for better or worse. That development -- of actual property holders, of stakeholders in society -- I think will have important influence on how China moves in the future. Already you have tenant associations fighting developers. You have that type of tension happening more and more. I think China is beginning to work out a lot of its issues quite slowly. But four days ago in Southern China, between 10 to 40 people were killed by the People's Army police. So we're having bloodshed again, and it is 2005, so who knows? That is one of the great things with China: We do not know what this dragon in the East is going to do.

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