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Perspectives

America the Moralizer



A few days ago, I watched President George W. Bush address a gathering of students at Beijing's Tsinghua University. Mr. Bush extolled the virtues of US society, most specifically America's political and religious freedom. "A free society," he said, "trusts its citizens to seek greatness in themselves and their country." True enough.

A graduate student, who'd watched the speech in a university cafeteria, told a reporter that he thought the speech quite brilliant. "He described how America is not just about wealth, but also values." In that, Mr. Bush certainly succeeded.

Too much like a sermon

But in other ways, the president may have failed. I thought his speech sounded far too much like a sermon—Mr. Bush, the leader of the world's most sophisticated nation, telling the backward Chinese how to lead their lives. His words were sincere, but their presentation reminded of how, in a different age, the Great Khan might have rebuked an errant peasant boy.

What should Mr. Bush's advisors have done differently? In my opinion, they should have known that America's habit of moralizing is a constant irritant to most of the world. Which is not to say that the president should not have presented his message or that it won't help spur China's transition from booming capitalism controlled by an undemocratic political regime towards something a lot freer. What I objected to was how the message came across—without humility.

Which brings me to an episode we commonly refer to as the 1989 Tiananmen Square uprising. I must share with you what crossed my mind when I saw the television coverage of that incident just over twelve years ago--the similarity with something that happened in America on May 4, 1970: Kent State. The day on which National Guardsmen opened fire on protesting students, much like the Red Army did on Chinese students in Beijing 19 years later.

We all know that the scope of Tiananmen was larger than that of Kent State, and that Americans rose in indignation when their children were shot at, while the Chinese population was afraid to stand up to their government. Comparing the two events has its limitations. On the other hand, America at the time of Kent State was in its 195th year of nationhood—China at the time of Tiananmen had a mere four decades under its belt.

My point is this: how much more effective would Mr. Bush's speech have been if he'd talked about the brushes the US has had with fascism, and how his country managed to overcome them. If you're one of my American readers, do you remember the 1950s McCarthyism and the widespread human rights abuses in the South, which carried well into the 1960s? How instructive it would have been to the Chinese leadership to hear Mr. Bush talk about how and why America overcame these challenges. It's a shame he missed the opportunity.

People around the world are tired of hearing that the US is the world's freest society, even though it probably is. They want to hear not why America is best, but how it got there and manages to stay on top. If the message were presented the right way, the world would admire America for its openness and vulnerability, not just respect it for its might. September 11, one of the worst atrocities ever committed by brainless evil upon innocent civilians, provided a wonderful opening. But someone should have told Mr. Bush (just as someone should have told Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, George Bush the Elder and William Jefferson Clinton before him): moralizing others without tempering the message with humility is not only ineffective—it's unchristian. □

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