

## THE TIANANMEN SQUARE STORY ACCORDING CBS

Streissguth FRIDAY, MAY 30



Iconic June 5, 1989, photo of a protestor standing in front of tanks at Tiananmen Square. He was pulled away by bystanders. (Jeff Widener/Associated Press)

**The weary Chinese protesters sensed the end was near.** Network had only broadcast coming out of Beijing during height of protests. After seven weeks of anti-government demonstrations in Tiananmen Square, a stench hung over their damp tents and flaccid banners. Only the "Goddess of Liberty," a makeshift statue erected by students just days earlier, still gleamed, rallying the hopeful. But the government was fast losing patience with the massive uprising.

By June 3, it had imposed martial law and ordered soldiers to points around Beijing where they prepared to advance. Warnings crackled from loudspeakers surrounding the square, imploring the occupiers to go home. In the early morning of June 4, tanks rumbled into Tiananmen, followed by soldiers wielding guns and clubs. Students hurled bricks and molotov cocktails, but their resistance was like paper.

As the military rampaged, CBS News correspondent Richard Roth narrated the scene over a cellphone to the network's New York headquarters. The shadows of a side street protected him until a soldier lunged at his cameraman, Derek Williams, and heaved his camera into the street. Roth, still clutching the phone, guns thundering in the background, described their dash to a safer position. Then the line died. A dial tone filled the control room in New York while an engineer there cried out for a response.

## AN INSIDER'S ACCOUNT.

NPR's China correspondent Louisa Lim will describe the history and horror at Tiananmen Square and its legacy in a program Tuesday by the Smithsonian Associates. Lim will also sign her book "The People's Republic of Amnesia." Admission is \$25 for non members. 6:45-8:15 p.m. at S. Dillon Ripley Centre, 1100 Jefferson Dr. SW. The producer who had dispatched Roth, Peter Schweitzer, heard the aborted report from CBS's Beijing office. "I'm listening to it go around the world, and I think, 'I just sent my friend into harm's way, and he's been killed.' "

After a tense night in army custody, Roth and Williams surfaced unscathed, but 2,000 to 3,000 people died in Beijing at the hands of their military, many shot in the back trying to flee. The horror of a government attacking its people would resurface decades later during the [Arab Spring](#) and then, more recently, in [Syria](#) and [Kiev](#). But this was 1989, 25 years ago. When it was all over, that uprising crumbled into oblivion.

It was a monumental drama that played out on televisions around the world. In America, millions turned to "CBS Evening News" to follow the Chinese awakening and subsequent crackdown: Anchored by Dan Rather and produced by Tom Bettag, it was the only show of its kind originating from Beijing during the height of the protests.



CBS Evening News anchor Dan Rather, left, with executive producer Tom Bettag in Tiananmen Square about a week into the protests. (Courtesy of Tom Bettag). Tiananmen was the biggest story yet of the post-Vietnam War era.

It would prove to be a redemptive chapter in the history of CBS and a celebration of broadcast television news before the spectacular rise of cable news during the Persian Gulf War less than two years later.

**Pouring coffee in his Georgetown rowhouse,** Tom Bettag, executive producer of "CBS Evening News" from 1986 to 1991 and now a producer for NBC News, recalled that the network's triumph at Tiananmen Square came on the heels of much-publicized budget cuts in the CBS news division, declining viewership and a series of astonishing stories involving Rather.

One of those stories unfolded Sept. 11, 1987, when the network's live coverage of the U.S. Open tennis tournament ran into the scheduled start of the "Evening News,"

originating that day in Miami. Angry, Rather disappeared from the anchor desk, and the network went to black. After six minutes of limbo, he reappeared and introduced the news, but media critics howled. Bettag searched for explanations to save the show's reputation, but he could come up with none. "I just didn't know where to go from there," he remarked. "And Dan said, 'Well, can you put one foot in front of the other?' And I said, 'Well, sure. I just don't know where we are going.' And he said, 'Well, it doesn't make a difference. We just keep putting one foot in front of the other.' "

More controversy swirled around Rather: The same year, Rather and Bettag picketed with striking writers outside news headquarters, and, [in early 1988](#), Rather sparred with Vice President George Bush on live television, the anchor peppering the presidential hopeful with questions about Iran-contra while Bush needled Rather about Miami.

In the middle of those dramas, CBS's owner, corporate raider Larry Tisch, had chopped \$33 million from the news division's operating budget and shuttered bureaus around the world. For two years, Rather and Bettag dodged the memory of Miami while training one eye on the fledgling Cable News Network (CNN) and ABC's "World News Tonight" with Peter Jennings, which routinely finished No. 1 in the nightly news ratings war.

In February 1989, that war brought Rather, Jennings and NBC's Tom Brokaw to Tokyo for the funeral of Emperor Hirohito. On the way back, recently elected President Bush spent the weekend in Beijing to assuage Chinese leaders miffed that, as president, he had visited Tokyo first. Brokaw and Jennings flew home, but Rather followed Bush and beamed the news from China. "On Saturday," Bettag explained, "Bush had a formal dinner at which a Chinese dissident [Fang Lizhi] was not allowed to come, and that was a sign of things not being exactly right."

On Sunday, Rather and Bettag wandered into a crowd of university students who spoke of plans to mount anti-government demonstrations behind the cover of reform-minded Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, scheduled to visit in May. That would be the first appearance of a Soviet head of state in China since the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s. "Both of us — and I don't overdramatize this — looked at one another and said, 'Boy, if you think things are boiling up from below in the Soviet Union, you better pay attention here,' " Rather said recently, popping open a can of Dr Pepper in his New York office.

They jetted back to New York with prized intelligence and won from CBS News President David Burke the budget dollars to bring the "Evening News" to China in May. As a prelude, the "Evening News" followed Gorbachev to Cuba in April, suspecting the cash-strapped leader might cut aid to Fidel Castro. ABC's and NBC's anchors went, too.

However, virtually nothing new emerged. Said Bettag: "I remember sitting at Havana airport [with Jennings and Brokaw], and they said, 'You drag us here, and there is no story. There was no reason to come here.' And then we said, 'When Gorbachev goes to China, are you going?' And they said, 'No way.'" Rather and Bettag smelled an exclusive.

Two weeks later, a huge CBS advance team converged on Beijing to scare up sources, hire translators and produce news packages about Chinese culture and history. Award-winning correspondents Bob Simon, Barry Petersen, Susan Spencer, Bruce Morton and Asia-based John Sheahan reported. The avuncular "Sunday Morning" host, Charles Kuralt, came, too, to provide reporting and commentary.



A pro-democracy movement leader speaks in the square before the crackdown. (Peter Charlesworth/Lightrocket via Getty Images). Susan Zirinsky, a Washington-based producer, set up a makeshift headquarters with Peter Schweitzer.

Peter a Rome-based producer who had dodged bullets in hot spots around the world. "We were beautifully equipped to cover a major world event," Schweitzer explained. "Little did we know it wasn't going to be Gorbachev and the Chinese hierarchy; it was going to be Tiananmen Square."

**On April 15, with Gorbachev's visit still weeks away,** the death of Hu Yaobang, a progressive former general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party, inspired Chinese students by the thousands to speak out against corruption and other flaws in the nation's leadership. In the west, the media noted the students' outcry, but then their attention fixed on Gen. Manuel Noriega, who had stolen elections in Panama and invited a possible U.S. invasion. Rather and Bettag wound up in Burke's office twisting their ties over their China plans, but the news president quartered no indecision. He sent them on their way.

While Bettag and Rather cleared American airspace, Jennings stood before the Overseas Press Club in New York and presented the absent executive producer and anchor with an award for their Russia coverage in 1988. Jennings couldn't resist a barb,



telling the audience to watch ABC News because the club's honorees had just gone off to where the story wasn't.

Indeed, ABC and NBC would report from China, but they lacked the resources on the ground to compete with CBS. CNN with its anchor Bernard Shaw showed up, too, and delivered 24-hour coverage, but its 500,000 evening viewers seemed negligible next to Rather's 8 million-strong audience.

Rather delivered the "Evening News" by remote in Beijing from Monday, May 15, to Friday, May 19, as the crowds in Tiananmen Square ballooned to 1 million. CBS reporters sketched the nation's political climate and cultural life in reports that were like mini-documentaries, while Rather careened through the crowds spotlighting delirious hunger strikers as well as jubilant workers who had arrived to join the students. "Dan Rather was better in the field by a hundred than he was sitting behind the desk reading a teleprompter," said then-news vice president Joe Peyronnin.

Working behind the scenes, CBS producers gave depth to the coverage by procuring dozens of sources, including the wife of the former American ambassador and the very leaders of the uprising. But those same producers — in a breach of journalistic ethics that might have sparked fierce debates among media critics — gave comfort to hunger strikers and, for a short time, sheltered China's best-known dissident, Fang Lizhi.

From the first days in Beijing in April, producer Zirinsky and her people wooed Chinese student leaders, smuggling them into the Shangri-La Hotel, where CBS had set up operations, while Chinese police stood unaware outside. "I was actually accused by the government of feeding hunger strikers, which I did not do," Zirinsky said. "But they visited me all the time." The young people gave CBS exclusive interviews and pointed reporters to new contacts. Meanwhile, the movement gained international exposure while its leaders took showers and rested in CBS hotel rooms.

On May 19, with Bettag and Rather's work nearing an end, party chairman Deng Xiaoping ordered the People's Liberation Army to advance on the square from all directions. "At that point we were really scared, and believed it was entirely possible that there would be gunfire," Bettag said. "But there was no choice as a journalist but to stay there and report." As he braced for bloodshed, word arrived that citizens had lighted bonfires and piled bicycles in the streets to thwart the soldiers. When dawn broke on May 20, "CBS Evening News" took to the air and reported.

Hours after that dramatic broadcast, many Americans reclined in their living rooms to watch the season finale of "Dallas." At the same time, Chinese authorities filed into the

Shangri-La and ordered the network to shut down. While cameras followed every move, special events coordinator Lane Venardos stalled the officials and called Rather and Bettag back to the hotel.

In New York, Peyronnin ordered CBS to cut from "Dallas's" Southfork to Beijing, where viewers saw Venardos debating with the censors. Rather soon took center stage in his safari jacket, demanding to see the cease-and-desist order in writing. The Chinese officials glared at him, so Peyronnin ordered Rather to fold. The next day, television critics delighted in telling how the CBS switchboard had lighted up with calls from viewers incensed at the interruption of "Dallas." And reporters who had chided Rather over Miami now cast him as defender of the free press.



Bicycles flattened by Chinese army tanks during the final crackdown. (Peter Charlesworth/Lightrocket via Getty Images). **Fourteen days later, the Chinese government ordered the harrowing crackdown.** On June 6, the square empty, Chinese officials staged a news conference.

They denied the killings, but bodies lay on blocks of ice for all to see at Beijing University; reporters saw young victims mangled and bloodied in the streets; and students who gave interviews to CBS — their faces now obscured on the screen to protect their identity — told of colleagues shot and killed. Even Susan Zirinsky, in a hospital after slicing her finger on a doorjamb, witnessed the carnage. "There were bodies lining the hallways, injured and dead," she recounted.

Several days after the massacre, anchors with NBC and ABC appeared in Beijing after finally securing visas, but by then "CBS Evening News" had settled into first place in the ratings. "CBS has given viewers the most expansive and fascinating look into the heart of the uprising," raved The Washington Post. Its coverage, added the New York Times, signaled "a turnaround in the much-battered image of CBS News."

A new value on live foreign coverage emerged, but CBS and its fellow broadcast networks would over time consign it to CNN: When the Gulf War erupted in 1991, no television news service could keep up with its live, around-the-clock coverage.

Tiananmen soon faded from the public slate as the fall of the Soviet Union and the Gulf War grabbed headlines and as America's hunger for inexpensive Chinese imports dampened outrage over the military crackdown. But Rather and Bettag's Asian gambit cannot be erased. They gave broadcast news its last golden day.

Michael Streissguth is a professor in the Department of Communication and Film Studies at Le Moyne College in Syracuse, N.Y.

[http://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/magazine/how-cbs-scooped-the-world-on-the-tiananmen-square-story/2014/05/29/a20a9e84-bfef-11e3-b195-dd0c1174052c\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/magazine/how-cbs-scooped-the-world-on-the-tiananmen-square-story/2014/05/29/a20a9e84-bfef-11e3-b195-dd0c1174052c_story.html)