

This opinion piece by PCI Vice President, Tom Plate, appeared in the South China Morning Post on Tuesday, June 3, 2020.



Opinion

Trump and the US should focus on George Floyd rather than Hong Kong and Tiananmen Square



- The United States does not have the moral standing to lecture others on how to handle their internal divisions while America burns
- America needs to lead not by following others' questionable practices but by offering truly enlightened governance born in its own heart

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Published: 9:00am, 3 Jun, 2020



Illustration: Craig Stephens

Failure is not an option for any self-respecting superpower, but history's guarantees for nations are few. For big as well as small, survival can prove a struggle. So, while humility might not be the top-ranked virtue of prudent superpowers, internalising at least a healthy measure of it would seem wise. A singular anniversary later this week, and a series of sad events this past week in the United States and elsewhere, make this point emphatically.

On June 4, 1989, the government of the People's Republic of China came to an existential crossroads. In the wake of widespread domestic protests, its rulers unleashed Chinese military

units to suppress serious social eruption around Tiananmen Square and elsewhere in China. [Beijing's judgment](#) was that it had no other way to forestall impending civil war. The head of the government then was Deng Xiaoping, by any rational assessment the greatest Chinese leader of modern times.

Who is to say he was wrong? Many in the West and some – quietly – in China.

Even today, while celebrating historically unprecedented economic success, China is haunted by the ghost of that dark moment. Stable and just nations should not have to push the panic button of pure military force to maintain stability. The best social order is more or less of the consensual kind. However momentarily effective, brute force invariably signifies underlying failure.

Around this time every year, the international [Never-Forget-Tiananmen](#) commentariat gears up for its ritual piling on of political piety. In wailing cascades of long-form print, as well as staccato tweets and videos, it strives to keep alive the global memory of that crackdown. It's possible that this show of concern will fade this year, suddenly overtaken by ugly events at home in the US.

Throughout the West, cities from Berlin to London, and from Los Angeles to Portland have exploded into [street protests](#). In the past seven days, many Americans, sick of the sight of police officers who kill black citizens – on top of their frustration with extended Covid-19 self-confinement – have been pouring into urban centres. Not unlike those [fed-up Hongkongers](#), they are full of rage at inept and criminal law-enforcement governance.

The immediate trigger was an utterly incomprehensible police arrest in Minneapolis that was conducted with all the tender care of police-state [storm troopers](#) on amphetamines. This is not unusual in America, but in our age of video cameras everywhere, the image of a black American suffocated during an arrest came quickly to light.

Yet another black American roughhoused to his death by police. This time, the victim of deadly violence under the cover of law enforcement was a man named George Floyd. I predict that more Americans will wind up remembering that name than will ever know, or care, about Tiananmen.

America has its own, very serious internal problems, as does Hong Kong, which surely could author a most authoritative guide to contemporary [political street protest](#). Until the cruel, shocking death of George Floyd, the Hong Kong turmoil was of particular interest to the Trump administration, now on an [anti-Beijing binge](#) as US President Donald Trump musters for his re-election campaign. Political adverts have been rolled out to depict why China is so bad and America under Trump is so wonderful. That's harder to do now.

The president has told the nation's 50 governors not to be "weak" but to [get tough](#) on what he termed the "scum" protesters. Whether those simplistic thoughts originated within his own basic instincts or through chats with President Xi Jinping – whose own [red lines about Hong Kong](#) seem to me a bit Trumpian – is not known.

But the tough-guy approach is bad policy, especially for a demographically diverse country that baldly calls itself the "exceptional" and "indispensable" nation. On a moral level, America needs to lead not by following the questionable practices of others but by offering truly enlightened governance born in its own heart.

In this age of instant communication and all that clings to it, governance is anything but easy; surely governing Hong Kong is no weekend at Disneyland. For the Trump administration to plant the big feet of the outrageous US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on Hong Kong, on the

grounds that it is [no longer sufficiently separate](#) from the mainland, is quite amazing. It is like blaming the victim for the use of murderous police force.



A demonstrator is detained by riot police during an anti-government rally in Hong Kong on May 24.
Photo: Zuma Wire / DPA

The [legacy of Deng Xiaoping](#) is anything but pure. No leader can pass through the top job without dirtying her or his hands. The legendary Thomas Jefferson had slaves, and the Tiananmen decision remains a severe black mark on China's past. The great reformer Deng got many tough issues right, though. The notion of "one country, two systems" was his best, well-considered advice for handling the takeover of Hong Kong, which he preferred done with finesse. It was a marvel of the middle way – move history forward, but without tears.

American policy should reflect on that wisdom rather than intrude on an internal Chinese matter. Put bluntly, the US sticks its nose into the affairs of too many countries globally, with neither the sincere intent nor required resources to follow through. It is almost like international political consumer fraud with no lifetime guarantees.

Morally, it is vacuous. As the saying goes, "Those in glass houses should not throw stones." Dear Americans: for the foreseeable future, focus on George Floyd, not Tiananmen Square. Do something about that.

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