

Chairman Mike Gallagher Opening Remarks

White Paper pro-democracy Movement Anniversary Commemoration

as prepared for delivery

11.29.23

There's an old Soviet joke:

A protester was passing out flyers in Red Square. The KGB showed up and immediately arrested him. When they looked at the flyers, they saw that they were just blank sheets of paper.

The protester said to the KGB, "How can you arrest me for passing out blank paper?"

The KGB replied, "Do you think we don't know what you were talking about?!?"

That joke, and the kernel of eternal truth it contains, became reality in China one year ago this week.

A brave man hung some banners on a bridge. 10 people burned alive in a building fire in Urumqi, rumored to be locked in their homes due to COVID lockdowns.

As Chairman Mao once said, a single spark can light a prairie fire. Suddenly, young people were in the streets. Like the Soviet dissident in the joke, they were holding blank, white paper.

There comes a point where tyranny becomes so obvious, the censorship so overbearing that slogans, arguments, and manifestos are no longer needed. All you need is a blank sheet of paper. Everyone can fill in the content, even the oppressors.

No one in China, no one watching from abroad, was at all confused about what the A4 protesters' blank sheets of paper said. Most importantly, the CCP got the message, loud and clear, as if a dissident manifesto had been published on the front page of People's daily.

Here is what Xi Jinping read on those blank pieces of paper:

The blank paper said: "We want to be masters of our own destiny...not instruments used by autocrats to carry out their wild ambitions. We want a modern lifestyle and democracy for the people. Freedom and happiness are our sole objectives." Wei Jingsheng wrote those words in his famous essay "The Fifth Modernization" at Democracy Wall, one of the first large-scale pro-freedom protests in the PRC.

The blank paper said: "Why? It's my duty?"

These words were the response of a naive, hopeful bicycle-riding protester to a foreign correspondent when he asked why he was going to Tiananmen Square in June, 1989. His words, and bicycle emojis, still circulate on Weibo in the run up to June 4th every year.

The blank paper said: “We don’t want covid tests, we want food. We don’t want Cultural Revolution, we want reform. We don’t want a dictator, we want votes. We don’t want lies, we want dignity.”

Peng Lifa, or “Bridgeman”, hung those words on a banner over Sitong Bridge in Beijing before the 20th Party Congress, an act of courage that inspired the White Paper movement. Earlier this year I nominated Peng for the Nobel Peace Prize.

The blank, white paper said all of that and more. It didn’t just echo with history. It spoke of the future. And it said it with style, in the new language of the Chinese netizen - clever, sly, ironic, and contemptuous of the CCP's thuggish, blunt power.

We don’t even know how many white paper protestors are still under intense police surveillance, harassed, and even, in many cases, in jail.

Li Kangmeng李康梦

Wu Yanan吴亚楠

Li Yi李艺

Tseyang Lhamo

Dzamkar

Dechen

Delha

Kalsang Drolma

Kamile Wayit

Xin Shang辛赏

Li Chaoran李超然

Qin Chao秦超

The CECC does great work tracking these cases and advocating for their release.

The Soviet dissident Alexander Solzhenitsyn said, “To stand up for truth is nothing. For truth, you must sit in jail.”

It is easy for us here, as members of Congress, as Americans, to stand up for truth and think we are courageous, but we are not.

The real brave ones are Peng Lifa and the White Paper protesters who are sitting in jail for a simple truth, the truth was printed on their blank pieces of paper as surely as if they had held big character posters: that Chinese people want and deserve freedom.

That simple truth is what brings us here today. Chinese people, like all of us, want freedom. Chinese people, like all of us, deserve freedom.