

Griff Witte

Speech to the Class of '66 -- Feb 26, 2011

The Nassau Club, Princeton

Good evening, and thanks to Lanny for the generous introduction. It's really an honor to be here tonight. My history with this class goes back aways. I think I was two years old the first time I marched in a P-Rade with the Great Class of '66, and I have many warm memories from the decades since of Reunions dinners at the Mounts' farm, or reveling in a victory over Harvard at the Plohns.

So I thank you for the kind invitation to be here tonight and talk a little bit about my work. If nothing else, being here helps assure my parents that I am NOT in a war zone, so I'm sure they're grateful as well.

As of about a month ago, I was fully expecting that I would be talking tonight about Afghanistan and Pakistan, since those are the two places on the map of global trouble spots that I know best. But of course now, in this period when there seems to be a new revolution in the Arab world cropping up just about every day, Afghanistan and Pakistan unfortunately seem like very old news.

I'm happy to answer any questions about the Stans a little later on, but I thought that for now I'd address a place where my information is a little fresher, which is Egypt. I've just recently returned from Cairo, where I spent two weeks covering the uprising that, as we all

know, toppled President Hosni Mubarak. It was an exhilarating period, truly one of those moments you live for as a journalist -- when you know you're watching history being made, and it's up to you to bear witness and to hopefully tell the world as much as you can of what's happening, and why. It was also a completely unexpected experience.

I became an editor a little over two years ago, and since then I don't get out to cover wars and insurrections as much as I used to.

But on January 25, I was sitting in my office in Washington when the first protesters began streaming into Tahrir Square, and I remember watching mouth agape as that unforgettable scene unfolded on CNN. I also remember thinking "oh crap," because at that moment, The Washington Post did not actually have a correspondent in Cairo.

Within 15 minutes I was out the door, on my way home to pack, and a few hours after that I was flying to Egypt.

I've covered wars in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Gaza. I've covered mass uprisings and assassinations. I've covered messy elections and vicious insurgencies. But I'm not sure any rival the story that unfolded over the past few weeks in Tahrir Square. Certainly, none are quite as hopeful, or involve so much courage on the part of so many.

I arrived in Cairo just about 24 hours after the first protests began. This was my first time ever setting foot in Egypt, and as we drove into downtown just as night fell, I could hear the demonstrators chanting the slogans that would become so familiar over the coming weeks: “The people want to bring down the regime.” And, more directly, “Mubarak must leave!”

As we pulled up at my hotel, the police -- who had been idling nearby in armored vehicles -- decided they had had enough. Suddenly, I heard the familiar boom of tear gas canisters being fired. The shells cascaded through the night sky, and fell at the feet of the protesters who, incidentally, happened to be gathered outside my hotel. I grabbed my bags and ran in before the gas could hit me.

At the front desk, the clerk was very concerned that I not get the wrong idea and think that this sort of thing happened every night at the Cairo Hilton, so she asked very tentatively, “Did you notice anything, umm, unusual outside on your way in?” “Hmmm, I said, well yes, outside there were fireworks, and a group of very nice young men who were all chanting in unison, “Welcome to Egypt!”

The truth is that the demonstrators did prove to be quite good hosts. When they had taken control of Tahrir Square three days later, they dragged the burned out hulls of police vehicles to each of the entrances to the square and used them as makeshift checkpoints. You would walk through the wreckage,

get patted down for weapons, have your passport checked and, when the protesters had assured themselves that you were not a government goon attempting to infiltrate their demonstration, they would shake your hand vigorously and actually did proclaim warmly, "Welcome to Egypt."

But that was AFTER they had taken the square. First they had to win it from the government. On Friday, January 28th, I got my first glimpse of the determination of the men and women behind this movement. All day long, they played a cat and mouse game with the police. The demonstrators would attempt to assemble, and the police would move immediately to break up the gathering, using tear gas, batons and live bullets.

For much of the day, the demonstrators had a hard time gaining any sort of critical mass, and as my translator and I drove around Cairo looking for demonstrations, there were many times when we thought the police had won. Each time, we were proven wrong when the demonstrators popped up in some new part of the city.

Ultimately, the war for Egypt's future became a battle along the majestic bridges spanning the Nile. The police were on one side, firing tear gas; the protesters on another, throwing rocks. When tear gas shells landed amid the demonstrators, instead of running away, they would run toward the canisters, pick them up and cast them into the Nile before the dreaded gas

cloud could rise. Discouraged, the police tried another tactic: They plowed their armored personnel carriers directly into the crowd, shooting down protesters as they went.

The odds for such a battle would not seem to be in the demonstrators' favor, but when I awoke the next morning, the police were gone and the protesters remained. They had won the right to occupy Tahrir Square.

So, who were these hundreds of thousands of people who shouted their discontent in Tahrir for the next two weeks, until Mubarak packed his bags for an extended vacation in Sharm-el-Sheikh? Well, first, they're people who had been kept silent for far too long. Almost as soon as I walked into the square each day, I would have people tapping me on the shoulder saying, "You're a journalist? Good. I have something to say. Please, write down what I say, and tell the world."

After 30 years of silence, it was as if Egyptians were letting out a collective roar. The only thing I can compare it to, really, in terms of energy, enthusiasm and overall noise level is when Tiny and Turk really get going on a class of '66 locomotive.

But truly, when you were in Tahrir Square, you couldn't get these people to shut up if you tried. Usually I didn't want to. I listened as they told me their stories -- stories of being frustrated at every turn by a

government that never had their interests at heart. I listened to older people talk about the oppression they had confronted across decades, and their hope that life would get better for their children and grandchildren. I listened to young people talk about their experiences living online in the open and egalitarian worlds of Facebook and Twitter. These young Egyptians then had to confront a real world in Egypt that was the exact opposite and only offered them bitter disappointment. I listened to educated people -- lawyers and doctors -- who could barely afford to feed their families.

Whether it was the lack of jobs, the corruption, the overall absence of freedoms, the torture meted out by the security services or the pervasive sense that the rest of the world had simply passed Egypt by, everyone had their own deep-seated reason for protesting.

Despite their hatred toward the government, make no mistake, these people were nationalists. They waved Egyptian flags. They got weepy listening to the Egyptian national anthem. And they deeply resented the rumors being spread by the Mubarak government that they were actually foreign agents, trying to destroy Egypt.

It was widely reported on state television that the Tahrir Square protesters had been put up to the task by secretive foreign elements that paid the demonstrators in, of all things, meals at Kentucky

Fried Chicken. There was a KFC franchise on the square, -- which was referred to simply as The Kentucky. Well, according to state tv, all of these protesters were busy sucking down free chicken wings at the Kentucky while Egypt's economy tanked. As you can imagine, these reports did not go over well with people who believed very strongly that they were fighting for their country's future. They took to eating very traditional Egyptian food -- the turkey and mashed potatoes of Egypt -- just to prove they were honest to God Egyptians. And a protester would occasionally come up to me to emotionally proclaim, "We want our freedom! We want our freedom! I swear we're not doing this for The Kentucky!"

Here's another thing about the protesters: They were small-d democrats. They really did want their basic freedoms, and they wanted elections. They wanted to choose their own leaders, just as we do here in the U.S. Were some of them devout Muslims? Absolutely. Many were. But of those I talked with -- and I talked with hundreds -- very few wanted Islamic law in Egypt after 30 years of emergency rule.

They were actually quite perplexed by the U.S. obsession with the Muslim Brotherhood and with Islamic extremism. I had one tell me, quite astutely, "This is the best thing that could happen to the U.S. If we have democracy, we'll have a way of airing our grievances without blowing ourselves up." I think there may be some truth to that.

Here's the last thing I'll say about the protesters of Tahrir Square: They're some of the most courageous people I've ever met. At so many points along the way, they could have turned around and gone home. When police suited in riot gear attacked them with gas and bullets. When police wearing civilian clothes stormed the square and beat them with clubs. When a brigade of horses and camels came thundering into Tahrir, their riders burnishing whips.

These people risked everything. Many of them lost everything. At no point did they flinch. And because of that, Egypt is now on a path to democracy.

I made a terrible mistake about two weeks into the Egyptian revolution. I decided that Mubarak was going to stick around for a while, and that I needed to get back home. So I left. A few days later, Mubarak fell. I missed the big day.

Fortunately, there had been a rehearsal of sorts before I flew home. One evening, as the sun set over the Egyptian museum, I was standing amid a crowd of thousands in Tahrir when someone got a call on his cell phone: According to the caller, Mubarak had just resigned, and had flown out of the country.

The person who received the call told his friends, who told their friends, and within seconds, the entire square was jumping up and down in mass jubilation. I looked up and protesters had hopped onto the tanks, where they were hugging the soldiers and exchanging

victory signs. It was a purely transcendent moment, one in which an enormous number of people all at once find out they have achieved everything they had ever wanted. This was true joy. But then the caller rang back: “Um, it was just a rumor...”

You can imagine how disappointing that was. But the protesters paused for only about a nanosecond before they continued to march and to chant their demands for freedom. They were completely undeterred.

Across the Middle East today, people are marching. And they are chanting. They are demanding their freedoms. It's a process that will take time. It will be messy. And it will be bloody. Often, as in Libya now, it will be hard to even watch. But these are people who have been quiet for decades, forced into silence by cruel and repressive regimes. Not any longer. Now these people have something to say. The least we can do is to listen.

Thanks very much.