

"My Favourite Photograph"

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HERALD SUN SUNDAY MY FAVOURITE PHOTOGRAPH

Michael Kirby*

Like most Australians, I admire courage. Strength in the face of adversity. People who stand up for what they believe, against powerful interests. Who put self-interest second and uphold principle against all odds.

In my boyhood, Martin Luther was a favourite. He stood up for his beliefs. Martin Luther King did the same thing. He was well named at his baptism. Ghandi and Nelson Mandela are also heroes. And we have men and women in Australia who earn our admiration for their courage. In the old days, Australians won the VC for extraordinary courage under fire in time of war. Nowadays, it is more likely that Australians will be tested in the struggle for world peace, justice and human rights. The relief workers in Rwanda. The de-miners in Cambodia. The soldiers in Somalia.

I like this photograph from China because it shows that the spirit of courage is alive and well in that great country. In the next century, the most important battleground for human rights will be in our region of the world - Asia and the Pacific. No country is more important for this struggle than China, with its mixed Confucian and autocratic values. The youth who stood out against the tanks in Tiananmen Square gave little thought to his own safety. He was demonstrating the universal demand for basic human rights. His action sent a powerful signal to autocrats around the world - but also to ordinary people. Human rights are indivisible and universal. That is the message for the next millennium. The young man who sent that message is a hero. His vivid image probably lost Beijing the Olympic Games and won them for Sydney. But much more importantly, he demonstrated the courage for human rights which will eventually assert itself in China and in every corner of the world.

At the end of a century of suffering, the 1990's have seen many old assertions of human rights. The fall of the Berlin Wall. The collapse of the Soviet Union. The end of apartheid in South Africa. Free elections in Cambodia. But no image so symbolises the hope for the future as the tank and the brave student in Beijing. The tank is the symbol of force and bloodshed of the millennium we are leaving. The brave student in China is the image of hope for peace and justice for men and women everywhere in the coming millennium.

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