



Former Secretary of Defense William Perry visited North Korea in May of 1999 as a special envoy of President Bill Clinton. The delegation landed at P'yongyang International Airport in a "blue and white." *l-r:* Dennis Droney, Evans Revere, Chip Gregson, Ken Lieberthal, Wendy Sherman, William Perry, Ashton Carter and Philip Yun. (Photos/ Courtesy of Philip Yun and Dennis Droney)

Facing the Boogeyman

A Korean American Diplomat Recounts His Trips to North Korea

By Philip W. Yun

When it comes to North Korea—a country armed with a military of one million men, thousands of heavy artillery tubes, chemical and biological weapons, and possibly one or two nuclear devices—a little knowledge can be very dangerous.

The nightmare scenario Washington policymakers are grappling with now is not that North Korea will use a nuclear weapon on the United States, but that it will become a nuclear weapons Wal-Mart, selling its deadly wares to the highest bidder. The amount needed to weaponize a crude nuclear device could be as small as a volleyball—something easily smuggled over borders. Therefore, if North Korea's nuclear ambitions remain unchecked for too long, many believe that it would only be a matter of time before a nuclear weapon is acquired by terrorists and exploded on American soil.

When people learn of my policy work on North Korea as a Clinton appointee and of my Korean ethnicity, they always ask if North Koreans and their leader, Kim Jong Il, are as "crazy" as the media claims, and if the hype justi-

fies the worry. No doubt they have in mind past cover stories like *The Economist's* "Greetings, Earthlings," *Newsweek's* "Dr. Evil" and *Time's* "The Bigger Threat?" All these capture the particular place North Korea occupies in popular Western culture.

After Al Qaeda, according to many defense experts, North Korea's nuclear weapons program is the most pressing security threat facing the United States. Given what is at stake, it is alarming to see so many of our senior government officials—most of whom have neither been to North Korea nor ever met a North Korean—acting and justifying policy actions as if media caricatures of North Korea, its people and leader are true.

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In 1998, when I began my assignment on North Korea issues, I too thought I knew all one needed to know about the country. As a Korean American, I had been taught early in life simple “truths” about the country and its government—it was communist, totalitarian, depraved and “not to be trusted”; the country was weak, the United States was strong; and with enough pressure, the United States would put this tiny country and its leadership in their place.

I quickly realized though that things were not so black and white and that a firmer grasp of North Korea’s past and present was essential to seeing North Korea and its people in three dimensions, not one. With each round of negotiation and trip to North Korea, I picked up nuances previously not evident to me, as my preconceived notions of this peculiar country withered away. And, in the end, I embarked on a path of discovery that led to a new openness to other explanations for North Korean behavior as well as a personal journey to a family past gone-by.

North Koreans as the Boogeyman: Growing up Korean American

The idea of evil North Korean communists was ever-present in my life, though until relatively recently it was always lurking in the background. You see, my father was born in a farming village near the east coast in what is now South Korea; my mother, in what is now North Korea, specifically in Yongbyon—site of the nuclear facilities that have caused such great tension between North Korea and the United States. Like many other immigrants before and after them, my parents came to the United States to study, overcoming the unspeakable horrors of war to live their American dream. So it is somewhat ironic that their son ended up dealing intensively with North Korea from 1998 to 2001, as an official in the U.S. Department of State.

From my early childhood, my parents and their Korean friends spared no effort to instill in me such values as dedication to study and hard work, respect for elders, politeness to others and a strong sense of my Korean identity. On occasion my siblings and I would hear snippets about the Korean War and the concept of Korea as one country, which would inevitably lead to admonitions about North Korea and communism. When we were behaving badly, our baby-sitter—a favorite aunt—would threaten, “North Korean spies are going to come and take you away if you don’t listen to me!” So at my house, the boogeyman was a North Korean, who would appear in nightmares or panic attacks.

This view of North Korea was reinforced when I was 14 years old, and in Korea for the first time. Not knowing a word of Korean, I was enrolled in a public middle school where I was forced to exchange shoulder-length hair and bell-bottoms for a buzz cut and a cadet uniform. Between the lessons and boredom, I sang patriotic songs, endured anti-communist propaganda and suffered through quasi-military training. Whenever I insisted to classmates that I was American, they would warn me that North Korean

soldiers would kill me if they captured me and learned of my U.S. birth. Obviously, this was adolescent banter, but it also was serious. And it did little to assuage my early childhood anxieties.

This was almost thirty years ago, and I treated it all as a game then—my Korean heritage, North Korean communists and the tragedy of a divided Peninsula. Of course, as I became an adult, each came to have its own place in my life. Still, the persistent message about North Korean “wickedness” from my friends, relatives and parents had had its cumulative effect. My first brush with North Korea as a U.S. government official did little to change my views.

A Crack in the Facade: My First Encounter with North Koreans

In August of 1998, the State Department assigned me to the team for government-to-government talks in New York. In those days, representatives of the United States and North Korea met from time to time to discuss disagreements over the Agreed Framework, a broad outline designed to end the North’s nuclear weapon and long-range missile programs that had been concluded between the U.S. and North Korea in 1994. I was nervous because I was not sure how the North Koreans would react to me, how my American colleagues would view me in this context, or even how my childhood fears might come into play. In fact, my first personal interaction with North Koreans was not what I had expected.

When the North Korean negotiating team entered the top floor of the U.S. Mission to the United Nations, they were stiff and somewhat uncomfortable in gait. Though dressed stylishly in contemporary clothing, there was a 1970s patina about their appearance—perhaps it was the coifed haircuts or the large, Roy Orbison-style glasses. In fact, they were painfully shy and awkward, careful not to draw attention, reserved and understated. And each one had a small red lapel pin with a portrait of either Kim Il Sung, North Korea’s first leader who had died in 1994, or his son, Kim Jong Il, who succeeded him.



Robert Carlin and Philip Yun standing in Kim Il Sung Square.

Earlier, some of us in the U.S. delegation were warned not to ask for one of those pins because the North Koreans would be sure to take offense. Depending on rank and status in the Communist Party, the pin differed in color, shape and size. So the pin was not a keepsake, souvenir or campaign button, but like a medal, it was worn proudly, with reverence, for it had the image of one of their supreme leaders. There were stories of fights breaking out between North Korean and South Korean workers when a South Korean laborer, in plain view, flippantly threw a newspaper with a front-page picture of Kim Jong Il into the trash.

At that time, Kim Jong Il was a mystery—very few people had met him in person. He eschewed public events; sightings of him were rare. Newspapers described Kim as a hard drinking dilettante, profligate and careless, with a penchant for pretty women, gourmet foods and expensive French wine. Those who met him said he was a big movie buff and an avid CNN watcher. Kim also had a reputation for being partial to the bold, if not ruthless, move—Kim purportedly masterminded the bombing of a South Korean passenger jet in the mid-1980s, as a way to disrupt the 1988 Seoul Olympics.

In his own country, by contrast, Kim was the supreme leader, blessed by the divine right of heaven. From what little we did know, Kim was a fact of life in North Korea dominating every aspect of North Korean life, and an indispensable key to understanding the country. Within North Korea, he was credited for everything considered to be positive and right—grand or simple—from the creation of the state to the invention of a rice-planting machine.

“I was startled to learn that ordinary North Koreans are just as afraid of Americans as I had been of North Koreans growing up.”

Upon shaking hands with each of the North Korean delegates, I was immediately asked if I was Korean. “My parents were,” I replied. Upon hearing this, my counterpart stopped the conversation and sought out someone else. I was puzzled since diplomats usually make efforts to poke around for information during breaks. Later I was told that the North Koreans likely thought I was a spy. I was an anomaly to be wary of—it was hard for them to place me as an American because in their eyes I was Korean. It took time to establish a degree of personal rapport, but this mutual uneasiness would continue.

The talks in New York did not go particularly well. The North Koreans cancelled prearranged meetings, strung out negotiations and conceded very little. We did our best to be civil; and when this failed, we pushed back and did

so firmly. Some table thumping took place. To top it off, in the midst of these talks, North Korea test launched a three-stage missile over Japan. Yet for me, there was a petty bit of gamesmanship about their entire approach. The myth of an omnipotent North Korean built up over the years had been deflated.

On to P'yongyang: A Place to See to be Believed

Traveling to North Korea's capital P'yongyang for the first time gave me a sense of how isolated the country truly was. I had read much about North Korea, but nothing prepared me for what I saw.

It was November of 1998. We were going to P'yongyang to outline U.S. concerns over an underground worksite called Kumchangni. Not unexpectedly, there was evidence that North Korea might be reneging on the Agreed Framework. If we fumbled in dealing with this issue, we believed, the United States might have to risk war again to stop North Korea from producing nuclear material.

My colleagues and I boarded a modest-sized U.S. military jet in Seoul for a seven-hour trip. We stopped in Yakota Airbase in Japan for refueling, and flew through Japanese, then Russian airspace before finally entering North Korean airspace enroute to P'yongyang. A direct flight between Seoul and P'yongyang would normally take one hour, but North Korea would not permit us to over fly the DMZ for security reasons.

As we began our descent into P'yongyang, I saw the country's desolate, barren and jagged wintertime topography. This was a shock because my mother told me about the azaleas that bloom by the thousands on the hills and mountains near Yongbyon as well as the rice paddies that surrounded the farming villages of her hometown. Instead there were desolate, brown foothills and peaks, with few trees, virtually no animals or people in sight and little evidence of commercial activity.

While the economies of the two Koreas were at roughly the same level in the 1960s (with North Korea even slightly more prosperous in the early 1970s), the end of Soviet and Chinese subsidies in the late 1980s badly undercut North Korea's centrally planned economy. Since then, North Korea's infrastructure has deteriorated almost beyond repair. Power shortages are chronic as is long-term malnutrition for a citizenry that now depends on massive international food aid. If a picture can tell a thousand words, one need only look at recent satellite photographs of the Korean Peninsula at night: South Korea is bathed in light suggesting frenetic activity, while North Korea reflects the stillness of virtual darkness.

My first impression of P'yongyang was a distant land frozen in time. The city was oddly quaint—like a scene from an old film. Residents wore styles of clothing common in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s; cars—to the extent there were any—were either extremely old or very new Mercedes. The architecture was mid-century with a concrete communist sterility.

The atmosphere was both chilling and surreal. There was what has been characterized by others as a strange Orwellian quality to the place, a flatness that pervades. Of course, we had to assume that our activities were being monitored, so we took great care about what we said and what we wrote at all times, and I found that this added to the sense of confinement and isolation that we felt while there.

Because of the lack of gasoline, the vast network of roads at the time was void of automobiles and buses, and the cityscape, of commercial billboard advertising—no Coca-colas or McDonald's golden arches. There was no information from the outside world available to the everyday citizen. No international mail or media. In our hotel rooms, radios were tuned to one station; the TV had two. Program content was a barrage of revolutionary propaganda with zealous announcers in military garb or traditional Korean dress praising at all times the Communist Revolution, Kim Jong Il and his father, Kim Il Sung.

Like Seoul, P'yongyang has its share of high-rises. One building of particular note looms over the city's skyline—like a scene out of a B-movie—a dark, giant pyramid-like structure encompassing several city blocks. It was intended to be the largest structure on the Korean Peninsula and a source of civic pride and bragging rights for North Korea. After the concrete was poured, however, and the frame completed to a height of several hundred feet, engineers discovered that a design flaw prevented, among other things, the installation of functioning elevators. The site was then abandoned, but never torn down. What is left upon closer inspection is a dilapidated pile of metal and concrete, standing like a haunted house. For the last 15 years or so, it has towered over the cityscape as a monument to the colossal failure of the North Korean economy, where food is scarce, energy intermittent and the hardship constant.

Since my last visit three years ago, P'yongyang apparently has come back to life, with an economic hustle and bustle more in line with a city its size; nonetheless, this initial trip taught me that North Korea's intense isolation and the resultant lack of knowledge of the outside world are ways its leadership manipulates the population to maintain control, and that it would be extremely hard to counter this grip with even more isolation.

A Potemkin Village

I visited P'yongyang a second time with a team to determine if it would be appropriate for former Secretary of Defense William Perry to travel to North Korea. In late 1998, President Clinton had asked Dr. Perry to conduct a review of U.S. policy toward North Korea. As part of this review, Dr. Perry wanted to meet with North Korean officials to share early findings.



North Korea is a country of slogans and posters. The slogans urge self-reliance, unity and sacrifice.

Between the talks about trip logistics and substance, I was able to take another look around P'yongyang. From this trip and subsequent visits, I came to see the city as a hollow shell constructed of North Korea's distrust and phobias.

P'yongyang, as the capital, is intended to be a monumental city, and like Washington, DC, its purpose is to impress. In many ways it succeeds. I saw a huge bronze-colored, 75-foot statue of Kim Il Sung and similarly large images of Kim Jong Il. There were massive marble and concrete monuments and memorials urging the people and the Communist Party to victory. But there was also a "Potemkin Village" quality to the city.

Airport and major train stations had huge mechanical arrival and departure boards, whirring in constant action announcing planes and trains that often did not exist. There were bright storefronts along broad boulevards, but no wares. Huge neon lights with revolutionary slogans blazed along known car routes only when high-level foreigners were paying a visit.

I was reminded of a well-known story about the first-ever visit to Seoul by a North Korean diplomatic delegation in the early 1970s. Even then, Seoul was a metropolis teeming with staggering amounts of vehicular traffic, noise and an impressive skyline. During this trip, one of the North Korean officials is reported to have complimented his South Korean host for the logistic prowess the government had exercised to arrange for the streets to be so full of people and cars. Without missing a beat the South Korean official allegedly quipped, the cars and the people were not so hard; it was the skyscrapers that were really tough.

Much is also made of North Korea's million-man army, which the North touts regularly to foreigners and citizens alike. Many are familiar with stock photos and film clips of North Korean military parades with brigades of men marching in locked, goose-step. Yet, when I visited the DMZ, passed through checkpoints in P'yongyang, and drove by honor guard posts, I was stunned to see how small North Korea's soldiers were—many were less than 5 feet 5 inches tall and very thin. (By comparison, South Korean soldiers serving on the DMZ are required to be at least 5 feet 10 inches tall and 175 pounds.) This seemed to confirm that the years of famine had taken their toll and

made me wonder if the physical condition of North Korea's soldiers might not have an impact on the country's military machine.

Why this deception? In short, I concluded that North Korea has one massive inferiority complex—justified by what it sees as a hostile outside world, exacerbated by the collapse of communism elsewhere. North Korea's history can be summed up as a never-ending search for security. For hundreds of years until the mid-20th century, China, Japan or Russia battled each other for control of this strategic location. During the first half of the 1900s, Japan colonized the Korean Peninsula and tried to assimilate Koreans. Korean culture was suppressed—eventually including even the nation's unique customs, given names and language. My mother and father, for example, can still speak Japanese and still remember their Japanese moniker.



Members of the Perry Mission visiting the People's Assembly in P'yongyang in 1999. A giant statue of Kim Il Sung stands at center stage.

When I was growing up, my parents reminded me that before the two Koreas, there was one Korea, and that it had a distinct culture spanning 5000 years. Koreans are fiercely proud of their distinctive history and identity; many died during those millennia to preserve a unique way of life. Like many families in both Koreas, we have a genealogical record that documents my membership in a specific Yun clan which traces its ancestry for some 38 generations.

This staunch dedication to identity and autonomy is embodied in the North Korean ideology of self-reliance, known as *juch'e*. This doctrine espouses that there is no higher calling for North Koreans than the preservation of the state from outside domination (which also includes the "liberation" of South Korea). North Korea sees itself as weak among powerful states seeking to destroy it. When challenges such as being included in an "axis of evil" and being cited as the object of a "preemption doctrine" are compounded by the stress brought to bear on North Korea's conventional military readiness by the extraordinary prowess demonstrated by the United States in the Iraqi war, the regime's desire to acquire nuclear weapons becomes intelligible.

With a people in an intense psychological state of war for over 50 years, North Korean nationalism and *juch'e* are manifested in unusual ways. For example, every citizen works the fields for needed food; this includes city office workers. I saw Party cadres lead "urban planters" to a central square, behind huge red banners and banging drums, to buses heading for the rice paddies. As idyllic as this was in a way, the darker side is that children in outer provinces at times were forced to clear rocks from roads or to carry out similar backbreaking tasks. After learning about this required physical labor, I understood why virtually every North Korean hand I shook was rough, leathery and firm.

Against this backdrop of obsessive security and isolation, it is easier to recognize how North Korea's operating philosophy—the "ends justify the means"—came about and how the leadership has used extreme methods to extract great sacrifice from a tolerant public. One million people or more died during the early to mid-1990s from famine, yet the regime continues; its citizens accept these casualties, like triage, as a reality of war.

The Perry Envoy: The North Korean Generation Gap

When former Secretary of Defense William Perry went to North Korea in May of 1999, it was big news. As special envoy of the U.S. president, Dr. Perry was the highest-ranking U.S. official ever to travel to North Korea up to that time. For Dr. Perry and his deputy, Ambassador Wendy Sherman, it was an opportunity to talk to North Korean officials directly. For the North Korean government, it was the first opportunity to show senior U.S. officials what North Korea was all about.

We landed at P'yongyang International Airport. Instead of flying in a small nondescript military jet, we flew into P'yongyang in a "blue and white." Commercially, this jet

would hold as many as 35 people, but this particular model was designed to take 10 people with ample working space. It was a plane befitting the representative of the U.S. president, and “United States of America” was emblazoned on the fuselage in huge letters along with the official seal of the U.S. president. As we made the long taxi to the terminal, I saw farmers in nearby fields along the runway breaking ground, gawking at the gleaming plane as it passed by.

This trip revealed to many of us the existence of a generational divide in North Korea and put to rest any notions I had of a monolithic leadership. Youth usually connotes freedom. But the North's leaders in waiting—now in their late 40s, and 50s—are more isolated than their elders ever were, promising to be all the more hostile to the West.

Most of the North's top leaders we saw were older than North Korea itself. Virtually all had revolutionary credentials as soldiers in the Korean War and World War II. Many had long-standing relationships with counterparts in China and former Soviet bloc countries. They subscribe completely to an independent, self-reliant North Korea for now. But through a sense of history, they also can be pragmatic. By contrast, the leadership in waiting has had relatively little international contact, coming of age late in the cold war and in isolation.

North Korea's incessant propaganda machine has worked wonders, instilling in this generation notions of a weak Western character and an outside world intent on destroying their country. This generation has yet to make its mark—unlike their peers in South Korea who were largely responsible for the transition to prosperity and democracy. It is readily understandable that these privileged few feel compelled to prove themselves.

During the Perry visit, we went to a bare, but cavernous building that was home to the People's Army, where we met a North Korean senior colonel (equivalent to a U.S. one-star general) who served as our host for a meeting with the military in P'yongyang. An intense man in his mid-50s, the officer made it quite clear that his presence was not of his choosing. There were the usual polemics—no outside interference, a single Korea and the recognition of North Korean military might. This was to be expected; after all we were the enemy on his home turf. But what was unforgettable was the palpable disdain this senior colonel had for our entire group, particularly for me and our Korean American translator. He even went so far as to refer to his country's ability to attack our hometowns, if provoked.

The senior colonel's contemptuous manner substantiated stories I had heard of North Korean military officers and party officials—just below the top tier—being much more aggressive than their superiors. For this group, 50 years of communist ranting arguably have evolved into a form of fundamentalism, North Korean style—the idea of a unified Korea turned to sacred aspiration and armed conflict.

This commitment to the idea of “one Korea” reminded me of an uncle, who once was a high-ranking officer in the South Korean military. Once in a while he would declare unabashedly that another South-North war to the finish was unavoidable and that if the price for unification was hundreds of thousands of deaths, then so be it. To be sure, my uncle's beliefs are Far Right, even by South Korean standards, but the sentiment exists in both countries.

It is sobering to consider that in this modern era, the mid-generation ready to assume power could very well be more reactionary, and that a policy focused on regime change might not generate the results intended.

Fear of Foreigners and Strangers: Generosity, Too

I did not truly appreciate the everyday North Korean's fear and distrust of foreigners until the Perry visit. Of course, subsequent visits and negotiations only served to further highlight this characteristic.

I was startled to learn that ordinary North Koreans are just as wary of Americans as I had been of North Koreans growing up. There are many books, posters and stories about “evil” Americans coming to invade North Korea, and a guide mentioned that children were taught early on to fear Americans. On one tour, our group saw elementary school students—on a field trip, tiny backpacks and all—stealing concerned looks at us, not sure what to make of us.

This apprehension was illustrated in other ways. Once, a friend and I took a stroll to a P'yongyang train station. In Asia, a white Westerner is always stared at; but, the opposite seemed to be true in North Korea; here we felt a conscious effort by North Koreans not to engage, even on the most basic level, when we tried to make eye contact or to smile.

Upon entering the train station, we were greeted by a no-nonsense aide who dutifully told us that the foreigner's waiting room was over there. She must have mistaken my partner for a Russian, and I, for a Chinese. When I explained to her in my halting Korean that we were just “sightseeing,” my statement did not register. When she told us again about the waiting room, I tried to enter into a conversation, asking if she wanted to know where we were from. She flatly replied, “no,” and quickly scurried away.

This is not to say that North Koreans were always cold to outsiders for there is generosity of spirit that endures as well. The courtesies given to invited guests are very warm, excessive in some cases; and there is always a desire to make special efforts.

During the Perry mission, we were taken to a “typical” North Korean farm outside P'yongyang. It was rice-planting season, and we saw a machine driven by one driver, assisted by three workers pushing seedlings into ankle deep mud. This was normal enough; but the 15-piece band dressed in white, standing along one dike while playing revolutionary songs, struck us as a bit strange. We were told that workers responded better when urged on by this kind of music. This supposedly was a regular occurrence, but somehow we were doubtful.

Our North Korean hosts also went out of their way for the formal banquet. It was held at a site called Magnolia Hall. The main room was as big as a hockey rink with a domed ceiling about 100 feet high, framed by shiny chrome and white lattice; and in the center, dwarfed by the size of the room, was a six-table setting for about 45 guests.

We were treated to a multi-course meal—petite portions of meticulously prepared dishes of “meat compost,” quail, Korean-style beef, vegetables and wine. Toward the end of our dinner, the hall suddenly darkened, and a Broadway-like stage unexpectedly emerged from the floor. A curtain opened to the play of a 10-piece jump-suited band again in white with matching guitars, synthesizers, drums and a disco-ball. To “My Clementine” in a rock beat, a dozen dancers dressed in ornate costumes paraded. With each change in music, the dancers’ dresses changed color. This “magic” performance continued to alternating Korean and American folk songs, including *Home on the Range* and *Arirang*, all announced by a red-lettered electronic ticker-tape billboard from above.

Many dismiss this extravagance as regime opulence or corruption. Certainly, there is an element of both; but there is also a palpable innocence, and I took our treatment in part as simply the Korean and Confucian way of being a munificent host—something of great significance to a proud people when guests are present.

And because these acts of generosity were done in times of hardship, Dr. Perry’s visit clearly had meant much to the North Korean government.

This reinforced talk that I had heard in various circles over the years that, in this new post-cold war world, North Korea’s leadership has been looking for a “counterbalance” to the Chinese, Russians, and Japanese—the idea of the United States as a benign presence helping North Korea is perhaps not as far-fetched as it might seem to be at first blush.

The Cult of Kim Jong Il

My final visit to North Korea underscored for me just how much sway Kim Jong Il holds in North Korea. It was in October 2000 when Secretary of State Madeleine Albright went to North Korea.

The secretary was visiting North Korea to continue earlier high-level discussions that had begun in September in Washington, D.C., the basis of which had been outlined by Dr. Perry the year before. The talks between Secretary Albright and Chairman Kim Jong Il would decide whether there could be sufficient progress achieved to warrant a visit to P’yongyang by President Clinton.

Secretary Albright and her staff stayed in a vast guest complex, where we set up offices. Like a Stalinist rendering of a country club, this gated compound consisted of elaborate, concrete guest houses, each with 15 to 20 bedrooms, and a large central meeting hall, facing a small lake. All houses had dining facilities, but the young U.S. Marines assigned to guard classified materials and machines, opted for their more familiar “Meals Ready to Eat” rations of beef stroganoff and spaghetti, after tasting the local fare of *kimch’i* and rice.

Kim Jong Il met with Secretary Albright the afternoon she arrived. During this first meeting, he invited her to an entertainment program specially arranged for that evening. The U.S. delegation was transported to P’yongyang’s May Day Stadium for an encore performance of the 50th anniversary celebration of the Communist Workers’ Party. The huge parking lot was empty, no cars or other vehicles were in sight; the place was dead silent. As I walked through the gangway of the stadium in dark-

ness, I could make out the green grass of a dimly lit field. Then, suddenly, a concussive wave of thunderous applause and bright fireworks erupted.

When I entered the seating area, there were some 200,000 North Koreans, all in white shirts, black ties and suits, giving an adoring standing ovation for their “Dear Leader” who had entered moments before with Secretary Albright. We then bore witness to a lengthy “halftime spectacular,” rivaling anything one would see in the Super Bowl—unbelievable in its scale, with at least ten thousand performers including acrobats, musicians and dancers. The entire section of the stadium across from us turned into a massive flashcard screen of humanity; tens of thousands of people did their part to create various placard images, including those of a hammer, sickle, and missile, to the tune of revolutionary songs.



P’yongyang is a modern capital city with its share of high-rises. In its zeal to lay claim to having the most prominent skyline on the Korean Peninsula, however, North Korea made a blunder on a colossal scale when it began the construction of the pyramid-shaped 105-story Yu-kyong Hotel. Construction of this hotel began in the 1980s, but work on it had to be interrupted when engineers uncovered several serious design flaws. Eventually, the project was abandoned altogether, leaving behind a dilapidated pile of metal and concrete that eerily resembles a haunted house.

On the final evening of our trip, Chairman Kim Jong Il and Secretary Albright dined again; this time with the entire U.S. delegation and our counterparts. The banquet was in the same hall in which Dr. Perry's dinner had been held. Fifteen minutes after we arrived, Kim Jong Il entered the room, with a gaggle of television and film cameras documenting his every move. Kim was short in stature, well fed, and dressed in a gray jumpsuit with pointy black shoes. He was comfortable and confident and very much used to being in public, at center stage.

We were feted to a lavish meal and plied with bottles of wine. While exchanging small talk with the North Korean officials at my table, I noticed that they always had one eye on the head table, watching the "Dear Leader's" every move. Some commented what an honor it was to be in his presence. When Kim Jong Il downed one glass of wine "shot style," the North Korean guests, probably 100 strong, all broke out in another standing ovation. To this day, I can't be sure if it was from awe or fear; but it probably was both.

It had been a memorable 48 hours, with Kim Jong Il and the cast of thousands. And, I did meet Kim Jong Il. At the end of the dinner that last evening, Kim Jong Il and other officials lined up to shake the hands of departing guests. I was introduced to Kim by his number two, Vice Marshal Jo Myong Rok, who I had escorted a month earlier during his visit to the United States. When I grabbed Kim Jong Il's hand, it was smooth; his stare, blank. What then became evident to me was that Kim saw himself as the equal of any world leader; belittling him would accomplish nothing. There also seemed to be no doubt that the millions of Communist Party faithful—like those in the May Day Stadium and in attendance at the dinner—would sacrifice themselves for him.

As repugnant as it might be, I became convinced that the U.S. has little choice but to deal with North Korea as it is, not as we would wish it to be.

The North Korean "Never Give Up" Mentality

It would be easy to dismiss the cult of Kim Jong Il as fatuous and one that would breakdown under greater pressure. This would be a grave miscalculation. North Korea has prepared itself as best it can for war, relying on a "porcupine defense"—if you attack, you will get hurt. In a conflict, a U.S. victory would be at a bloody cost, notwithstanding any decline in North Korea's current manpower or conventional forces.

Evidence of this defense strategy is everywhere, as I saw on my final trip to P'yongyang. This time I did not fly as I had done the previous times, but instead I traveled by land through the DMZ.

In preparation for the secretary of state's trip, some Americans were permitted to travel to P'yongyang through the DMZ—a rare opportunity which I took. Escorted by U.S. military personnel, we entered the South door of one of those baby-blue huts and presented our

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passports to a North Korean functionary waiting at the North door. We then stepped through that door into North Korea's side of the DMZ, as soldiers from both sides glared intently at each other.

On the road to P'yongyang, I saw the landscape change from barren, almost moon-like to lush and green. There were also camouflaged artillery pieces, though of World War II and Korean War vintage, massive bunkers, fortifications and tanks. I chuckled to myself—in humor and discomfort—when I looked back from the direction in which we were headed and saw a North Korean highway sign written in Korean that said something like "Seoul: 75 kilometers."

I also saw clear indications of military preparedness while on a P'yongyang subway. Taking the only escalator down to the platform 200 hundred meters below the surface, I experienced vertigo. Experts often refer to North Korea as a country of "tunnelers," citing large passages built under the DMZ for an invasion that are wide enough for troops to pass through at a rate of 70,000 men per hour. North Korea had been completely leveled during the Korean War. To protect itself from future bombings, it has a system of underground structures that presumably are intended to provide protection for a large population below the surface. My glimpse of the subway attested to this potential, and I thought about other subterranean sites and their content. I was incredulous at the sheer force of will it would take to live in this kind of environment.

This intensity and ready sacrifice may well be cultural as well as political. North Korea's leadership comes mostly from Hamgyong, the farthest north of the country's provinces. For hundreds of years, Korean kings sent "troublemakers" to this part of the country. Just as the United States has its stereotypes of Texans and New Yorkers, so too does Korea. When asked about the people from Hamgyong and North Korea, the unanimous reply of my relatives was that they were abrasive, stubborn and emotional, underscored by a "never give up" and an "if I am to die, I will take you with me" mentality.

The practical effect of this mindset, when mixed with North Korean insecurity and the communist penchant for secrets, is a certain predictability in the pattern of negotiations—a rigid dance, full of bluster. A close friend and experienced North Korea watcher taught me that this dance has a defined beginning, middle and end; there can be no shortcuts. North Korean negotiators must demonstrate to higher-ups that nothing is left on the table, which usually means using every form of tactical diversion to irritate. If one manages to endure the entire "ritual" and

show flexibility at the right time, an in-kind response is usually forthcoming. Whenever I was about to lose patience, I reminded myself that in most countries failure might mean an unfavorable review; but in North Korea failure was probably met with a harsher result.

To the people of North Korea and its leadership, weakness of any kind invites repeated intimidation—so a “push” usually leads to a harder “push in return.” My father's best friend was from Hamgyong, and my father described him as “typically North Korean.” I have childhood memories of intense arguments between them about seemingly insignificant things, going on endlessly. My father would eventually let his friend have the last word, always; otherwise they would be up the entire night.

Ironically, the lessons my father gained from his friend tracked my own experiences in North Korea. When dealing with North Koreans, keep your eye on the ball—in the end substance is what matters, not how you got there—and forget trying to teach North Koreans a lesson; it is a waste of time.

Getting Beyond the Stereotypes

Unexpectedly, I came away from my time in government with details of my parents' past, stories about their families, childhood and war experiences that I might not have learned otherwise. I heard, among many instances, how my mother escaped from pursuing communists by riding on top of a refugee train and how my father, separated from his family, could not be present when my grandmother passed away—essentially, these are stories about myself.

I also walked away less encumbered from long-carried baggage about North Korea that I had accumulated during my earlier life. I eventually came to see North Koreans not as the demons of boyhood, but as a destitute and intensely proud people struggling to protect themselves from the ravishes of what they see as an increasingly hostile world. Unfortunately, these paranoid North Korean views make the country's brutal leadership armed with nuclear weapons an imminent danger to the United States and our friends.

As many have said, North Korea is the land of lousy policy choices. And the prospect of a peaceful resolution of the North Korean nuclear crisis is not in sight yet. Still, I continue to cling to the hope that our common humanity will show us the way to a solution. I go back to a modest dinner that we hosted for our North Korean counterparts now almost four years ago.

It came at the very end of the Perry mission. We were anxious to get home to report on what had transpired, and frankly, more than a bit tired of North Korean stonewalling. At the end of the farewell dinner, Dr. Perry sought to close our trip on a positive note. He made gracious remarks about what he had experienced during the visit, and then asked all the team members to give their own impromptu impressions of North Korea. When my turn came, I could only think of the following story:

Just prior to my departure for North Korea, I had a phone conversation with my mother about my grandfather who had lived in Seoul since the end of World War II. My grandfather had had a stroke a few years earlier that left him bedridden, but with a mind still as lucid as ever. My mother told me how excited my grandfather was about my trips to P'yongyang and how he would reminisce about the days that had passed. And then with eyes welling up, my grandfather said that if the world were different, and he were given the chance, he thought he could get up and walk all the way to P'yongyang, some 200 kilometers away. Now to my amazement, I was in that city. I closed my story saying that we, Americans, understood the importance of “Korea” to both those in the North and the South, and it was in the spirit of peace and respect that we had come to P'yongyang.

After the dinner, a young North Korean official approached me. He was shy and awkward in his manner, and did not want his compatriots to know what he was saying to me. But he shook my hand softly and said, “If this is how Americans really feel, then much can be done.” □



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Philip Yun with his parents, Jeung Soon Yun and Prof. Seung-Soo Yun, in San Francisco, 2003.