

## **THE U.S. MEDIA AND THE KOREAN PENINSULA : WHAT TIME IS IT THERE ANYWAY?**

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Journalists tend to be a cynical bunch and that extends to their own work. But we like to think people are reading our stories. In our heart of hearts, we hope we have some impact, at least once in a while. But when it comes to the Korean peninsula, I sometimes wonder if we shouldn't just put down our pens and turn off our computers. A Korean-American assistant of mine just spent a few months in Los Angeles, which of course has a huge Korean population. When she would tell people she is from Korea, they would ask: North or South?

When the Korean War broke out, most Americans were equally in the dark about Korea. A July 10th, 1950, article in *Time* documented some typical reaction. No sooner had President Truman announced his support of Korea, the article relates, than a Dallas citizen was on the telephone, calling his local newspaper for information about the place. Were the people Indian or Japanese? What time was it there? Where was Korea, anyway?

Craig Coleman carried out an informal survey of 2,000 Americans done between 1988 and 1997, only 15 percent of the respondents could name the president of South Korea. Most couldn't even hazard a guess. Many just wrote down the name Kim and took their chances. For the latter years of the survey, Kim Young Sam was president so that wasn't a bad strategy. Only 16 percent of the same survey group could name the head of North Korea. Some confused the leaders of North and South Korea.(1) Coleman gives the U.S. media fairly poor marks for its coverage of the peninsula over the last 50 years or so, more for neglecting it than getting things wrong.

The U.S. media may not have paid enough attention to the peninsula over the years. But they have probably had more impact in shaping U.S. perceptions of North and South Korea than, say, perceptions of France. Millions of Americans have visited France, drink French wines, eat French food. Information about the country and its culture are readily available. France still counts in the world, although perhaps not as much as the French would like to think. The Korean peninsula, by contrast, seems remote, its language intimidating. I would hazard a guess that soju doesn't have the appeal of a good Bordeaux for most Americans. Few Americans have been to Korea or been affected by it in their daily lives. That was true even during the Korean War. That a bloody three-year conflict on the peninsula could somehow become the "Forgotten War" says something about the salience of Korea in the American mindset. Television can sometimes create a distorted shorthand for certain countries, particularly when coverage is scant. While Americans weren't reading much about Korea in their local papers, they were probably watching the long-running U.S. television program M.A.S.H. about the antics of a mobile U.S. medical unit during the Korean War. Until recently, scenes of riot police battling students stood for South Korea in the mind of many Americans. That was part of the story of South Korea, but it wasn't the whole story and it created the impression that the place was in constant turmoil. In the 1990s, North Korea and its missiles and nukes started to generate more coverage, particularly when it began to look as if those weapons might one day threaten America. It is easy to forgive the average American for thinking that the

entire peninsula is permanently poised on the brink of war. Since the latest nuclear crisis broke in October 2002, every twist and turn in the story is illustrated with television footage of white-coated scientists peering into cooling ponds in Yongbyon, the 1998 Taepodong missile launch and goose-stepping troops marching across Kim Il Sung square.

There are plenty of opinion polls and studies on how South Koreans view the United States but unfortunately, far fewer surveys of U.S. opinion on South and North Korea. Again, the peninsula seems to fall between the cracks. However, the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press did an interesting survey in May 2003 as part of its global attitudes project.(2) The survey highlighted growing international public concern about North Korea. Some 38 percent of Americans saw the North Korean government as a great danger to Asia, while 39 percent of Australians and 37 percent of Germans were also very worried about the regime. Fewer South Koreans agreed. Only 28 percent saw Pyongyang as a great danger. Does this reflect the impact of U.S. media coverage, which certainly focuses on the threat represented by North Korea more than the South Korean press does? To answer that question, I would like to talk a little about how the U.S. media covers North and South Korea and how that has shaped some of the more recent perceptions of the peninsula. I'll focus on the North, because covering the world's most secretive state presents some special problems. Coverage of North Korea is also closely tied to U.S. views of South Korea. Indeed, the U.S. view of South Korea is in many ways the flip side of its perception of the North. Covering North Korea presents obstacles not encountered in any other country. Access is the most obvious problem, and lack of it has a profound effect on the news Americans read. No U.S. news agency has a bureau in Pyongyang. North Korea has allowed in a trickle of journalists over the past few years but American journalists are essentially banned.

Getting into North Korea doesn't guarantee access to the things you want to write about. Journalists are kept on a very short leash. Your hosts want you to visit a short list of places such as the Juche Tower and Kim Il Sung's birthplace. But it is almost impossible to interview government officials and any contact with locals is strictly supervised. What this means is that

ordinary journalism is impossible. That is why pieces written in North Korea are so often fairly superficial travelogues, full of impressions but few facts. These pieces say in effect, isn't North Korea weird and wacky? Well, it is, but we know that already. I'm not sure we are helping Americans understand North Korea by reinforcing that image. Still, it is hard to blame the journalists. What would you write about the United States if you could only visit the Washington Monument or Mt. Rushmore and interview park wardens about American foreign policy? Foreign correspondents have been forced to do pretty much that in North Korea.

When a journalist does get in, it is usually with some kind of diplomatic delegation or on one of the rare occasions when the North Koreans actually want visitors, such as the 2002 Arirang Festival. That was the elaborate mass games staged by the North Koreans to offset South Korea's hosting of the World Cup that year. A fantastic spectacle, by the way. Pyongyang allowed in some journalists for the event but then got skittish about allowing them to cover it. I asked to interview somebody -- anybody -- who had been involved with organizing the games. I was refused. The games aren't a story of course unless you can say something about the people behind it, not just your political minder. In North Korea, you don't get to interview Oz, Dorothy or even the Tin Man. And the Munchkins don't know anything.

So part of the problem is North Korea's clunky PR machine. On my first visit, I was with an Italian journalist from the left-wing Manifesto newspaper. He wasn't pro-North Korea by any means but he wasn't going out of his way to write a negative story. He wanted to write about the members of the North Korean soccer team who had beaten Italy to get the quarterfinals of the World Cup in 1966, one of the great soccer upsets of all time. It was a great story for an Italian audience and politically neutral. The North Koreans were noncommittal. But on the last day of our visit we got back to the Koryo Hotel in downtown Pyongyang and found that one of the members of the 1966 team had been there that afternoon, for an interview with an Italian journalist from some other publication. The Manifesto reporter ended up writing a biting sarcastic piece. Instead of throwing the odd bone to foreign journalists, which would generate some less-negative coverage, North Korea prefers to shoot itself in the foot. At least partly

because of these difficulties in covering North Korea, the Western media has had a tendency to both demonize and ridicule the Dear Leader. He is the public face of North Korea and, let's face it, he does lend himself to parody. The hairstyle, the platform shoes, the khaki jump suit that seems to accentuate his bulging waistline. Wacky dictators sell newspapers, and magazines. But demonization, and ridicule, can be dangerous. At its worst, dehumanizing the other side helps to lay the groundwork for war. It's often bad journalism, or at least not very serious journalism. Again, I'm not sure if the media is entirely to blame for this. It was U.S. President George Bush who set the tone when he situated North Korea on his Axis of Evil along with Iraq and Iran in his 2002 State of the Union speech. It is Bush, and now Condoleezza Rice, who keep reminding us that Kim is a tyrant. As the Chinese and others have pointed out, this has not been helpful. But it is coming from the highest levels of the U.S. government so journalists need to report it.

I think there has been a tendency to neglect the normal rules of Western-style journalism when it comes to North Korea. It's just about impossible to confirm anything so somehow anything goes. I think we saw that with coverage of the famous missing portraits at the end of last year. A few portraits of the Dear Leader suddenly seemed to be coming down in Pyongyang, triggering speculation that the regime was unraveling. Nobody really knew what the removal of the portraits meant, or even how many portraits had been removed. But it was more likely a deliberate move sanctioned by Kim Jong Il, possibly to improve his international image. Yet on this thin reed were hung entire stories about Kim losing control as defecting generals poured across the border and anti-regime graffiti sprung up around the country.

I suspect this story was manipulated by people who would like to see the regime collapse. When sources are defectors and refugees, or second-hand reports from North Korea, this isn't hard to do. It is very difficult to verify defector testimony. North Koreans who have left their country have provided some of the best information about it that we have. But you can't go to North Korea and check what they tell you. An example of this arose in 2004 when the BBC ran a documentary alleging that North Korea was using political prisoners as guinea pigs in chemical

weapons tests. We had the same information the BBC had and decided it could not be adequately verified. So, with great reluctance, we killed our story. Thanks to the BBC, the issue is now part of the human rights agenda on North Korea. Even the Simon Wiesenthal Center in L.A., which works to preserve the memory of the Holocaust, has gotten involved. But if the story is wrong, it will discredit all the other defector testimony on human rights abuses going on in North Korea. This problem has become worse in the past few years as a result of the Japanese and Korean media's practice of paying defectors for interviews. Paying for interviews creates an incentive to pad, or create, stories that will boost your own market value. We now have defectors who refuse to talk to us if we aren't willing to pay. We also have a growing market for video footage of North Korea, particularly sensitive military locations and prison camps. A Japanese television station reportedly paid over \$200,000 for footage of public executions in North Korea. I think the footage was authentic. But when that kind of money is up for grabs, you have to wonder if somebody isn't going to be tempted to produce fakes. That wouldn't be hard to do in China. Bad news about evil North Korea sells.

And here's what can happen when you stray from the bad-news script. On March 1 this year, the L.A. Times ran a story on its front page headlined "North Korea Without the Rancor."<sup>(3)</sup> It was written by Barbara Demick, the paper's Seoul bureau chief, based on an interview with a North Korean 'businessman' she interviewed in Beijing. He of course presented a pro-North Korean view of the North, dismissing criticism about human right and the famine that killed millions in the 1990s: "Is there any country where there is a 100 percent guarantee of human rights? Certainly not the United States. There is a question of what is a political prisoner. Maybe these people are not political prisoners but social agitators." Another gem: "We Asians are traditional people," he said. "We prefer to have a benevolent father leader." Some of his other comments weren't so far off the mark: "There's never been one positive article about North Korea, not one. We're portrayed as monsters, inhuman, Dracula with horns on our head." "There is love (in North Korea). There is hate. There is fighting. There is charity. . . . People

marry. They divorce. They make children," he said. "People are just trying to live a normal life."

This article unleashed a firestorm of criticism on the web. Demick was compared to Walter Duranty, the *New York Times* reporter who wrote glowing pieces about the Soviet Union in the 1930s, when millions were dying from a government-provoked famine. She pointed out to her critics that she had done plenty of critical pieces on North Korea. Her story also mentioned the very critical U.S. State Department report on human rights in North Korea. This didn't satisfy her detractors. In the *Daily Standard*, Hugh Hewitt said this: "That the totality of Demick's work demonstrates is that neither she nor her editors are in a hurry to detail the horrific nature of the North Korean regime. In fact, they work to smooth over that shocking picture, even to the extent of providing a front-page apologia."<sup>(4)</sup> This is nonsense. For full disclosure, I should say before going any further that Barbara Demick is a good friend. She is a very professional journalist who has done plenty of pieces on the appalling human rights situation inside North Korea. She is not a North Korean sympathizer by any stretch of the imagination. Her piece was clearly an attempt to provide a rare glimpse of a North Korean defending the indefensible, in person. Equally wrong-headed is the comparison to Duranty. He got into the Soviet Union. The evidence suggests he deliberately covered up what is now seen as one of Stalin's greatest crimes. The Pulitzer Prize he won for his work has become controversial. The most charitable take on Duranty is that he was credulous. What really offended the bloggers, I think, is that Barbara veered from the demonization script. North Korea has political prison camps and one of the worst human rights records in the world. But we know that now. As more information about human rights abuses comes out, Barbara and other western journalists -- including myself -- will write about it. But every story doesn't have to be about how North Korea is a gulag run by a man with bad hair who starves his people. That just turns North Korea into a one-dimensional cartoon. It doesn't increase our understanding of the place.

After North Korea announced it had unloaded 8,000 more fuel rods, we decided to write about how South Koreans see the threat from their northern neighbors. It is a story we have done

before but with the temperature rising so fast, we decided it was worth taking another look at. As I scrambled to find a fresh way to churn out 3 or 4 pages on this in two days, I remembered somebody once said journalism is like making sausage and you don't necessarily want to look behind the scenes. This was probably a good example of that dictum.

We decided to go up to Ilsan [South Korea], which is very close to the DMZ, to see if people there felt the terror of living in the shadow of the North Korean bomb. I thought that with the rumors of an impending nuclear test and the unloading of more plutonium-bearing fuel rods, people might be getting sweaty palms. But nobody was particularly concerned. A realtor up there told us it wasn't affecting apartment prices, so what's to worry about? He was sure the North Koreans wouldn't drop a nuke on Ilsan because "We're one race." Seoul should keep sending aid to Pyongyang. The United States, he said, is threatening 'us', meaning both South and North Koreans.

So our story basically said that South Korea's faith in the good intentions of its heavily armed neighbors is still prevalent throughout most of South Korea, even as the nuclear crisis worsens. We noted that South Korea's Foreign Minister Ban Ki Moon had said he was "extremely concerned" but that the gloom had not filtered down to ordinary South Koreans. If you'll forgive me from quoting from *Time* again, here's what we said: "The startling disconnect between official views of the danger that Kim Jong Il's despotic government poses to the world and the sanguine attitudes of South Koreans is making it desperately hard for diplomats from Washington and Seoul to forge a common strategy for defusing the crisis. After years of regarding their northern neighbors as bitter enemies, the prosperous, democratic South now holds a benign view of the hunger-wracked police state. To southerners, North Koreans may be brothers from another planet (as the International Crisis Group put it (5)), but they are brothers just the same, impoverished relations deserving help, not international censure and isolation. Many South Koreans -- including some government officials -- are more worried that Washington could respond to a Pyongyang provocation with military action, plunging the peninsula into war."



The South Korean point of view is extraordinarily difficult for the rest of the world to understand. After every new North Korea provocation, my editors call up and say: Is the South Korean position finally going to shift now? Are they going to wake and stop cravenly appeasing those North Korean blackmailers? Or words to that effect. And I say, no, it is a little more complicated than that.

It is complicated and we inevitably have to simplify. But for foreign correspondents here, this is one of the most intriguing -- and troubling -- aspects of South Korea today. It is also central to the way South Korea is seen in the United States and particularly Washington. Do we explain the South Korea point of view well? Judging from the growing frustration with Seoul in Washington, we are getting across the message that South Korea has done a 180-degree change of direction on North Korea. Are we simplifying and missing nuances? Sure, that's what the media sausage-grinder does. But I'm not sure if it is fair to blame the media for what more than one person has described as growing anti-Korean sentiment in Washington. South Korean government officials seem to be unable to make a convincing case for their policies. How do you maintain an alliance when you see your alliance partner as the main threat? How can you say a nuclear North Korea is intolerable but in the same breath say that war is unthinkable? How can you condemn the Japanese for ignoring human rights abuses committed by their grandfather's generation when you are ignoring the human rights abuses being perpetrated by your "brothers" next door?

Should the U.S. media ignore some of the more eyebrow-raising surveys of public opinion in South Korea? According to a recent poll by the *Munhwa Ilbo* newspaper and the Korea Society Opinion Institute, nearly one in two Koreans say he or she would support North Korea if the U.S. launches a military strike against it without South Korean consent.(6) In a poll conducted last year, 39 percent of respondents said the biggest threat to South Korean national security is the U.S., while 33 percent said they feared North Korea most.(7) I put these polls into the story we wrote last week and I know I'll be told there were problems with the polling techniques, that somehow they distorted public opinion. But you go up to a place like Ilsan and

this is exactly what people tell you. We actually cut out some of the most over-the-top stuff, just to be on the safe side. You remember the realtor? His colleague told us -- and this was a man in his 50s -- "I am relieved that North Korea has nuclear bombs. Why should the U.S. have nuclear bombs and not North Korea?"

I think the U.S. media is covering the Korean peninsula more thoroughly and sometimes more thoughtfully than it has in the past. But we have to be careful not to let the frustration of covering the place get in the way of accuracy. We need to try to avoid oversimplifying or caricaturing a country that is complex and not actually inhabited by beings from another planet. And as we cover the North, I think we have to go out of our way to understand the point of view of South Koreans, who after all know the North Koreans best. Why should the United States have nuclear bombs and not North Korea? Well, that is actually quite an interesting question, and one that the U.S. media doesn't look at very closely. A lot of countries are asking why the United States and the other official nuclear powers have been so slow to get rid of their own nuclear arsenals, as they promised to do under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). The NPT review meeting going on right now in New York has stumbled over this very question. And I have heard this question raised recently by a not-at-all-woolly-headed U.S. Korea expert. But if there are problems with U.S. nuclear policy, I don't see how it follows that the world should want nuclear weapons in the hands of a tin-pot dictator who deals in drugs, counterfeit dollars and human lives. Whoops, did I just demonize Kim again?

#### NOTES

- 1) Craig Coleman, *American Image of Korea?* (Seoul: Hollym, 1997), pp. 112-13.
- 2) See <http://people-press.org/reports/display.php3?ReportID=185>.
- 3) Barbara Demick, "North Korea Without the Rancor?" *L.A. Times*, March 3, 2005.
- 4) "Seeing the Good in North Korea; the Los Angeles Times look at North Korea, without Rancor," *The Daily Standard*, March 16, 2005.

- 5) See <http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=3173&l=1>.
- 6) *Munhwa Ilbo* and Korea Society Opinion Institute, May 12, 2005.
- 7) *Research & Research*, January 2004.

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