

BOWRAL BOOKS
4 April 2018

*Korea – Where the American Century
Began*

by Michael Pembroke

Introduction

Gillian and I always enjoy coming to the Southern Highlands. While we may have basalt soil at Mt Wilson and an altitude in excess of a thousand metres, it is a sleepy hollow. You have something that we do not have: a vibrant social life, of which tonight's event is a good example. Thank you for coming out in such large numbers. The last time I had a crowd this big was when I addressed the departing sixth form boys and their parents at one of Sydney's well-known schools. I told the boys not to behave like the Australian cricket team!

I cannot offer you any humour but I hope my wife will lighten the tone by reading a few extracts. The book explains the long history of the Korean peninsula; how we arrived at the current impasse; how China entered on the international stage in 1950 by coming to the rescue of North Korea; and how Washington has helped create and worsen the situation.

Some readers are more optimistic than I am. One hoped that the book would ‘transform and inform international misconception’. Another suggested that it should be on the permanent reading list for all West Point and Duntroon cadets, along with Sun Tzu’s ‘Art of War’. And a decorated old soldier thanked me for telling the ‘TRUTH’ – which he put in capitals (!) - and added that ‘only veterans can understand the futility of force for political reasons’.

My own view is that unless you know the history, you cannot see the future. And if you know the history, it will be obvious that North Korea will not denuclearise in response to sanctions, ultimatums and absolutist demands. The only prospect of denuclearisation will be if there is a guarantee of North Korea’s security and the removal of the US military threat – that means effectively a peace treaty to end the unfinished war, probably including the staged removal of US forces from South Korea.

North Korea’s core position was stated in the announcement from the office of South Korean President Moon Jae-in on 6 March. North Korea would have no reason to keep nuclear weapons, the statement said, if the ‘military threat to the North was eliminated and its security guaranteed’. This is an offer of denuclearisation on condition of a peace treaty. China has demonstrated leadership on this issue. It has urged a dual-track approach with the aim of both denuclearising the peninsula

and establishing a peace mechanism. It understands the significance and symbolism of a peace treaty

The Title

Could I return to the book and explain the title? In 1941, Henry Luce, the influential proprietor of *Time* and *Life* magazines, coined the phrase ‘the American Century’. It was part of his call for the United States ‘to exert upon the world the full impact of our influence, for such purpose as we see fit and by such means as we see fit’. This mission is still taken very seriously in Washington. Remember Madeleine Albright, the Secretary of State who famously said that ‘If we have to use force, it is because we are America. We are the indispensable nation’?

The point of the book is that the Korean conflict was the first serious misstep of the American Century... and everything changed after it. Since 1950, whether Korean War, cold war, Vietnam War, clandestine wars in Central and South America, war on terror, terrorists, drugs, tyranny or jihadists, the spiral of continuing interventions and an expanding American military has continued almost unabated. One diplomatic historian has noted sombrely: ‘Korea’s legacy is practically incalculable...in terms of the cost of the arms race, the international isolation of China, and for the impact on American political development’.

Did you know that US defence spending is more than ten times that of Russia and more than the combined total of the next seven countries including China? Or that no nation has more guns, weapons, ships and aircraft; or that no nation exports more lethal arms? Or that the Pentagon has approximately 800 foreign military bases and installations? More worrying, actually, is that the prevailing mindset in Washington DC is military. The men and women in the Pentagon, the State Department, the Congress and the White House have a ‘cast of mind that defines international reality as basically military’. As I have said in the book, it is a losing hand. But it has become the American way. It is why the two Koreas and China are sidestepping the United States.

The Division

Let me turn specifically to the historical origins of the problem. The Korean peninsula effectively became a unified kingdom in the seventh century. The book will tell you about its early history and geography but I will focus tonight on what has been described as the most anomalous period in Korea’s long history. That period commenced with the division of the peninsula in 1945. It was entirely an American initiative.

The decision was made late one night in the Pentagon in the aftermath of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Two young colonels were given half an hour for the job and a map from a 1942 edition of the National Geographic magazine. Hubris was in the air. The arbitrary division of the country was not what Franklin Delano Roosevelt had contemplated. But he died in April and President Truman was a different, more conservative man, who hated the Russians. No allied power was consulted. And Korea was ignored.

One former US Foreign Service officer proffered this heartfelt description:

No division of a nation in the present world is so astonishing in its origin as the division of Korea; none is so unrelated to conditions or sentiment within the nation itself at the time the division was effected; none is to this day so unexplained; in none does blunder and planning oversight appear to have played so large a role...[and] there is no division for which the US government bears so heavy a share of the responsibility as it bears for the division of Korea.

Before 1945, a Korean war was inconceivable; after 1945, it was inevitable. It took less than five years to materialise. Washington built and funded an authoritarian right wing client state in the south. And Moscow created its own in the north. The proud leaders of both states

were intent on reunification by force. And their hostilities started well before the formal invasion in June 1950. There were attacks in both directions during 1949. Eventually Kim Il-sung, the current leader's grandfather, moved first. Stalin opportunistically supplied him with tanks but had no intention of allowing Russia to join the war.

The Truman Reaction

President Truman heard the news of the invasion at home in Missouri on a Saturday night. He impulsively concluded, without consulting his advisors, that it was the first stage in a general Soviet offensive for all Asia. It was nothing of the sort. It was a civil war; an attempt to reunify what American policy had divided.

A UN collective force was promptly authorised to repel the North Korean invasion and restore peace and security. This was entirely appropriate but the operative words were 'repel' and 'restore'. This meant nothing to the hawks in Washington, who soon perceived a strategic opportunity to diminish the size of the worldwide communist bloc. Just as certain elements in Washington called for the invasion of Iraq during the Bush era, so it was in 1950 during the Truman era that certain elements called for the invasion of North Korea. There were clarion calls to invade and impose regime change on Pyongyang. Opponents were bullied and told 'you are either with us or against us'. It has become a familiar pattern.

This collective force was the first modern ‘coalition of the willing’ but it was an American show from first to last, as they always are. Command and control was entirely American. The UN organisation was not part of the chain of command. And, in the scheme of things, while there were many valiant sacrifices, the contribution of allied countries was token. The peak number of American ground forces was in the order of 330,000 men, which was more than ninety per cent of the combined total.

The Overreach

The war should have been over after three months - when the North Korean invasion was repulsed and the mandate of the UN Security Council achieved. But Washington was not content with restoring the status quo. The proponents of regime change lost sight of the limitations inherent in the moral principle of repelling aggression. The United States overreached. It became an aggressor itself - and persuaded the UN General Assembly (not the Security Council) to pass an unsatisfactory and ambiguous resolution. In the words of our own Robert O’Neill, the official Australian historian of the war, the ‘wisdom and morality’ of crossing the 38th parallel tended to be submerged in general condemnation of North Korea.

Alistair Horne once wisely observed: ‘How different world history would have been if MacArthur had had the good sense to stop on the 38th parallel.’ But it is wrong to blame MacArthur. President Truman and the Joint Chiefs gave MacArthur his orders - secretly deciding to expand the war for ideological reasons. They never saw the irony of crossing the 38th parallel heading north, after having complained a few months earlier of North Korea crossing the parallel heading south.

Worse, there was a deliberate attempt to avoid debate on the issue. And subterfuge usually suggests guilt. Could I tell you about a few declassified cables? President Truman made his decision on 27 September. Two days later, General Marshall sent a cable to MacArthur marked ‘FOR HIS EYES ONLY’, informing him that ‘We want you to feel unhampered tactically and strategically to proceed north of 38th parallel’. It added that it is the ‘evident desire...not to be confronted with necessity of vote on passage of 38th parallel, rather to find that you have found it militarily necessary to do so’.

This was followed by an even more explicit and revealing message from the Joint Chiefs. It counselled MacArthur to proceed ‘without further explanation or announcement and *let action determine the matter*’ and added ‘Our government desires to avoid having to make an issue of the 38th parallel *until* we have accomplished our mission of defeating the Korean forces’.

At that stage, China had nothing to do with the war. But it had issued the clearest of warnings that it would not tolerate US-led forces on its border. On the night of 2 October, around midnight, there was drama in Beijing. The Indian ambassador, KM Panikkar, was summoned to see Zhou Enlai, who told him that the first US-led forces had crossed the 38th parallel. Zhou asked Panikkar to convey a famous message to the West. It was in these terms: ‘China cannot sit idly by and remain indifferent. We will intervene’. It had done so in past centuries; it was about to do so again; and, in the context of recent threats from President Trump, it has warned that it will do so yet again in the 21st century - if the United States attacks North Korea first.

In 1950, Washington ignored China’s message. It was blinded by disdain for an enemy it did not know or respect. The generals in the Pentagon were fond of calling the People’s Liberation Army ‘a peasant army’. And just like Trump, President Truman resorted to ridicule, referring to Mao Zedong as ‘Mousie Dung’.

Panikkar was an educated man, an Oxford graduate, and a serious historian of colonialism. In the early hours of the morning, he recorded this painful entry in his diary:

So America has knowingly elected for war, with Britain following. It is indeed a tragic decision for the Americans and the British are well aware that a military settlement of the Korean

issue will be resisted by the Chinese and that armies now concentrated on the Yalu will intervene decisively in the fight. Probably that is what the Americans, at least some of them, want. They probably feel that this is an opportunity to have a showdown with China. In any case, MacArthur's dream has come true. I only hope it does not turn out to be a nightmare.

Calamity and Rout

MacArthur's forces went deeper and deeper into the mountains, further and further north toward China. They were not aware of Mao Zedong's writings on the art of war and military strategy. No one knew of his exposition on the subject of 'luring the enemy in deep', or his telling aphorism:

Enemy advances, we retreat.

Enemy halts, we harass.

Enemy tires, we attack.

Enemy retreats, we pursue.

Unknown and undetected, over two hundred thousand Chinese soldiers crossed the Yalu River at night and remained hidden in the mountains of North Korea. They were an army of ghosts...and their mass infiltration was the largest in modern warfare. When the Chinese attacked, the resulting retreat by the US Eighth Army was the 'longest in American military history', the 'most disgraceful' and the 'most

infamous'. Reading and writing about it was a moving experience for me. Here is a small insight into the unfolding nightmare:

What followed could hardly be described as a 'withdrawal' in the military sense. In the pell-mell race to the south, battalions lost track of companies; companies lost track of platoons; divisions even lost track of regiments; and young men, separated from their units, became ever more frightened in their loneliness. Every kind of military vehicle set off down the rutted, single-track roads. And traffic control was non-existent. Jeeps, light and heavy trucks, load carriers, tankers and engineering plant shamelessly jostled with each other in their self-interested flight from the oncoming Chinese...As the withdrawal progressed, the tumult and affright became worse.

The war correspondent Reginald Thompson wrote this poignant eyewitness account from the battlefield:

Each day the rear guard columns licked their wounds and awaited the hideous night. Against this nightmare warfare, undisciplined, ill-led, ill-trained troops, even scornful of discipline as in some way infringing their rights, could find neither defence nor attack. Unaccustomed to march, and clinging to their vehicles and equipment, they offered themselves as a

sacrifice to the enemy. They were not short of courage, but of all of the arts of war.

I felt great compassion for the out-numbered American troops. But that is not the point of my story. The subsequent heavy-handed US response made things so much worse - and we are still reaping the consequences. In attempting to snuff out a small war, Washington produced instead a massive conflagration. In Congress, the Pentagon and the White House, there was much indignation and boyish talk of ‘retribution’ and ‘credibility’. Some diplomats feared nuclear war. The French Prime Minister came to London. And the British Prime Minister came to New York - to ‘get Truman’s finger off the nuclear button’. And just as some currently wonder whether Kim Jong-un or Donald Trump is the greater danger, some in 1950 thought that restraint of Washington had become more important than restraint of China.

The American Response

The American response explains much about North Korea’s continuing bitterness and distrust toward the United States. Several features are seared into the collective psyche of the people of North Korea. As the American units fled from North Korea - never to return - almost every village the soldiers went through was set on fire. Even haystacks were burned. An infantry division war diary recorded that ‘the razing of villages along our withdrawal route and destruction of food staples

became the order of the day'. The British writer Andrew Salmon said that the 'spectacle of a nation put to the torch was lurid, biblical'.

The retreat was followed by a punitive bombing campaign, including the exorbitant use of napalm – 70,000 gallons on *every* 'average good day'. Over almost three years, most of North Korea was systematically levelled – town by town. The bombing campaign was unrestrained by a sense of proportionality and not confined to military targets. Dean Rusk said that the USAF bombed 'everything that moved in North Korea, every brick standing on top of another'. Even General MacArthur said that 'If you go on indefinitely, you are perpetuating a slaughter such as I have never heard of in the history of mankind'.

Blaine Harden wrote in the Washington Post that the American people 'never really became conscious of a major war crime committed in their name'. He is right, actually. To give you one example, when PBS the American television network, broadcast a six-part documentary series on the war produced by Thames Television, it censored the footage of the bombing of Pyongyang. American viewers were kept from seeing it.

And finally there were the armistice talks. They lasted over two years and involved 575 meetings. The Chinese and North Koreans were not angels but they had an Oriental understanding of the value of compromise. The American military negotiators had none. Their moral

rectitude, combative style and unshakeable sense of right ensured an unsatisfactory outcome.

But the worst feature was that for fifteen months from May 1952 to July 1953, there was only one issue preventing a cessation of hostilities – that was whether the United States would comply with the Geneva Convention on Prisoners of War and agree to the release and repatriation of *all* Chinese and North Korean prisoners. It should have been straightforward. Instead there was humbug. Washington held out for a propaganda victory, hoping to be able to tell the world that large numbers of communist soldiers chose ‘freedom’ in preference to returning to their homes and families in a communist country.

In the meantime, the USAF ‘attacked all structures and anything that moved’ - on the theory that the Chinese and North Koreans could be encouraged to accept the American negotiating position ‘if only they were bombed enough’. One estimate of casualties during that fifteen-month period is 125,000 allied troops, half a million Chinese and North Korean troops and a vast unknown number of civilians, probably in the order of a million men, women and children.

The Aftermath

If that were not troubling enough, could I leave you with this sorry indictment. The 1953 armistice was intended to be temporary. Its purpose was to ensure the cessation of hostilities ‘until a final peaceful

settlement is achieved'. Its language expressly contemplated the subsequent negotiation and finalisation of a peace treaty to replace it. The Pyongyang regime has made numerous official demands for a peace treaty, including five times since 2012 during the leadership of Kim Jong-un. Washington, on the other hand, has consistently displayed an unwillingness to entertain even the prospect of a peace treaty. It made its position clear in 1954.

In that year, there were negotiations in Geneva to agree on the terms of a peace treaty that was supposed to follow the armistice. Washington was not interested. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles treated North Korea like a pariah. And when Chinese Foreign Minister Zhou Enlai held out his hand, Dulles refused to shake it, turned his back and walked away.

Worse was to come. In 1957 the United States sabotaged the armistice by introducing nuclear weapons on to the peninsula in knowing violation of the treaty and against the legal advice of the State Department. It should be no surprise that North Korea's resolve to build its own nuclear and missile arsenal dates from that time and in response to that provocation.

May I conclude by suggesting that the time for reconsideration of the American position on the Korean peninsula has arrived. President

Trump may be a vulgar philistine, but he may just be sufficiently mercurial to do something about it.