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Nuclear Showdown

Gordon G. Chang

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About the Book

Asia expert Gordon Chang follows up his controversial success, *The Coming Collapse of China*, with the first book to discuss the full extent of the North Korean nuclear threat, its origins, international implications, and solutions.

The United States is the mightiest nation in history, yet for six decades one of the world's weakest states has challenged the superpower and kept it at bay. Today, that country also threatens to change the course of human events with an act of unimaginable devastation. *Nuclear Showdown* analyses the failed society that has become the gravest threat to America and international order: North Korea. Chang's insightful book reveals the full horror of the crisis threatening to turn Asia into the world's next battleground.

How can North Korea be stopped? No one seems to have an answer. For more than half a century, policymakers have failed when it comes to subjugating Kim Il Sung and his son, Kim Jong Il. *Nuclear Showdown* proposes a solution that can defuse the standoff once and for all.

About the Author

Gordon G. Chang lived and worked in China and Hong Kong for almost two decades, most recently in Shanghai, as counsel to the American law firm Paul, Weiss. His writings on China and North Korea have appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, the *International Herald Tribune*, *The Weekly Standard*, and the *South China Morning Post*. He has spoken at Columbia, Cornell, Georgetown, Princeton, and other universities, and at the Heritage Foundation, the Cato Institute, RAND, the American Enterprise Institute, the Council on Foreign Relations, and other institutions. He has given briefings at the National Intelligence Council, the Central Intelligence Agency, the State Department, and the Pentagon. Chang has appeared before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission and has delivered to the commission a report on the future of China's economy. He has appeared on CNN, CNBC, and Bloomberg Television.

He has spoken in Beijing, Shanghai, Hong Kong, Seoul, Singapore, Tokyo, The Hague, Vancouver, and Taipei. He has served two terms as a trustee of Cornell University.

Also by Gordon G. Chang

The Coming Collapse of China

Nuclear Showdown

North Korea Takes on the World

Gordon G. Chang



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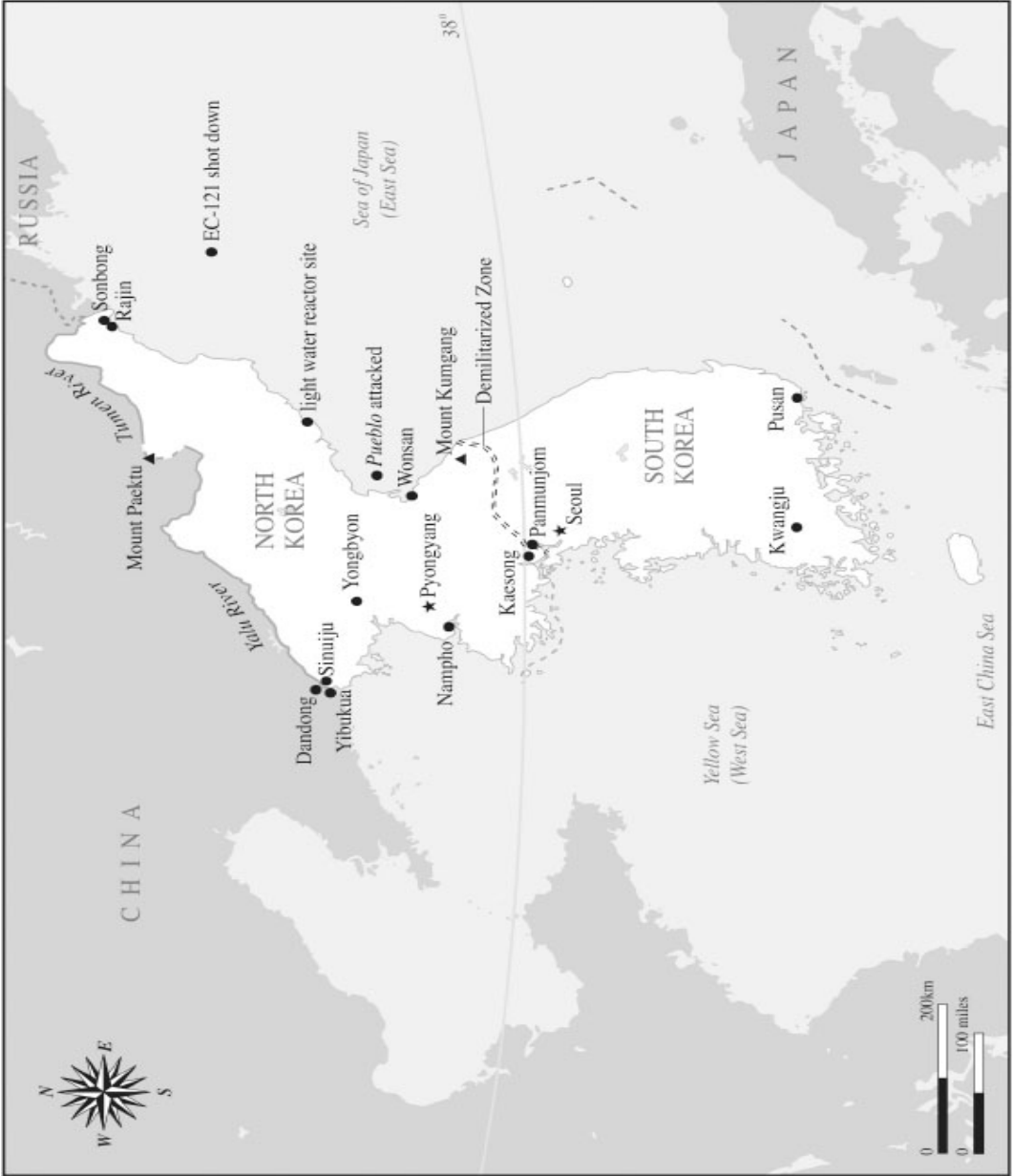
To Lydia—

Maybe not always in the past,
but today and forever

History is the sum total of things that could have been avoided.

— Konrad Adenauer,
first West German chancellor





Note on Romanization of Korean Names

Koreans have their own alphabet, Hangul, which has twenty-four letters, ten of them vowels. Unfortunately, there is more than one way to romanize their widely praised language. In general, this book uses a simplified version of the McCune-Reischauer system. It also adopts the Korean practice of placing the surname first.

Nonetheless, there are many exceptions to these general practices in the pages that follow. First, on the belief that everyone has the right to romanize his or her own name, I have used such preferred romanizations whenever possible. Therefore, South Korea's first president is referred to as Syngman Rhee, its most famous autocrat as Park Chung Hee, and its most important dissident as Kim Dae Jung. Second, North Korean names are romanized in the manner used by Pyongyang's official Korean Central News Agency. Third, this book generally displays people's names as they are found in the sources I used when I did not know their preferred romanizations.

Foreword to the Paperback Edition

The World Trembles Before Kim Jong Il

A nuclear test by North Korea will go a long way toward emboldening anti-American states around the world to acquire nuclear weapons. There is a long line of candidate states.

—Kim Myong Chol, North Korea’s “unofficial spokesman”

On July 5, 2006, North Korea broke a long self-imposed moratorium and launched a Taepodong-2 long-range missile. Then in the following October, it detonated a nuclear device for the first time.

Both tests were failures. The missile blew up about forty seconds into its flight. The bomb was a “fizzle,” releasing about one-eighth of its expected explosive power. We have known for a long time that Kim Jong Il’s militant state possessed these weapons. So, in one sense, we should be relieved. Today, his instruments of global destruction do not look so menacing.

The danger Kim poses is not so much that he will kill millions with dud weapons—he is unlikely to start hostilities unless he feels he is in extreme jeopardy—but that he will merchandise crucial nuclear technologies. His diplomats promised not to do so soon after the October test, but Pyongyang has broken every agreement it has ever made about its nuclear program. Moreover, recent evidence suggests the North is helping the Islamic Republic of Iran build its own weapons: European and other Western intelligence sources say Kim’s nuclear technicians have

helped train their Iranian counterparts. Perhaps as many as ten Iranians were present in North Korea to witness the July missile tests, and it appears that Iranians observed the October detonation as well. Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is not just an “odd guy” as President Bush once called him; he is a fiery leader holding millennial views—and he is proceeding full speed to develop nuclear weapons of his own.

Unfortunately, the international community has not been able to muster the courage to stop Kim. Beijing, although embarrassed by North Korea’s defiance, has still refused to support tough measures against Pyongyang. As a result, the United Nations Security Council passed only slap-on-the-wrist resolutions after both the missile and nuke tests. Not surprisingly, the North Korean leader has ignored them. In December 2006, Pyongyang’s negotiators even refused to talk about their nuclear arsenal at Beijing-sponsored talks held to disarm the North. By now it is clear that Kim has no intention of ever giving up his most deadly weapons. After all, his diplomats currently call their country “a proud nuclear state.”

The Iranians, of course, have taken their cue from the indecisive and weak response to Kim Jong Il. Unimpressed by the U.N.’s ineffective actions against North Korea, they now see a big green light for them to build their own atomic arsenal. Tehran’s recent contempt for global opinion, if not a direct result of the international community’s irresolute dealings with Kim, can at least be traced back to them.

If the world’s greatest powers cannot stop a destitute regime from spreading history’s most dangerous technologies, the existing international system will fail. Everything, therefore, is now at stake.

January 2007

Foreword

North Korea Takes the World Backward

On the nuclear issue, it is five minutes to midnight.

—**Lawrence Eagleburger, former secretary of state**

“If we lose, I will destroy the world,” said Kim Jong Il, supreme leader of North Korea. His renegade country publicly acknowledges that it possesses nuclear weapons, and he has repeatedly threatened to turn our planet into a battlefield. Will he change the course of human events with an act of unimaginable devastation?

The Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, as North Koreans call their homeland, already has enough plutonium for between seven to ten nuclear devices. Analysts argue about the size of the DPRK’s stockpile, but the exact number of weapons today is almost beside the point. It is one thing to have a handful of them, it’s yet another to build the industrial capacity to accumulate an arsenal. North Korea, a country that cannot feed its people, is gearing up to make nuclear weapons on an assembly-line basis by reprocessing plutonium and, it appears, enriching uranium.

At the same time, the diminutive Kim Jong Il casts his shadow from his capital city of Pyongyang across the Pacific Ocean and onto the continental United States. The unbalanced autocrat already possesses long-range missiles that can reach the fringes of the American homeland. In a few years—probably as early as the beginning of the next decade—no city in North America will be safe from Kim’s warheads of mass destruction.

Even today, all humanity is at risk. In 2003 a North Korean diplomat told an American envoy that his destitute country might “transfer” its weapons to others, thereby threatening to make itself the world’s “nuclear Kmart.” American intelligence believes Kim has already sold processed uranium to Pakistan, so the merchandising of completed weapons is all too possible. Who wants to live in a world where anyone with cash and a pickup truck can incinerate a city?

Yet the North Korean threat goes well beyond a single horrible detonation. Kim’s Korea was the first—and so far only—nation to withdraw from the nuclear nonproliferation treaty. The DPRK, however, has paid no price for destabilizing world order. On the contrary, a frightened international community has rushed to provide material assistance to the North Korean regime as if small gifts would miraculously constrain Kim Jong Il’s menacing behavior. Unfortunately, other leaders of rogue states have taken note of the ineffectual, if not feeble, reaction to Pyongyang’s direct challenge. As a result, within a decade the world could see the creation of new—and hostile—nuclear powers as the global nonproliferation regime falls apart. The best period in human history could soon be followed by the worst. The stakes could not be larger.

Unfortunately, no one knows how to deal with North Korea. Neither friend nor foe has had much influence on the fanatical and militaristic state, not even the mightiest nation in history. The United States was able to defeat the Soviet Union in a worldwide struggle spanning decades, but for more than a half century Washington has been bedeviled and even humbled by Pyongyang. Kim, unlike anyone else in recent times, has shown Americans the limits of their power.

The United States had better figure this one out fast because geopolitical trends are working against its vital interests. China, Pyongyang’s “blood” ally, is gaining

strength and succeeding in reducing American influence in Asia and elsewhere. South Korea, nominally Washington's partner, is asserting itself and moving quickly into China's and North Korea's camp. Tokyo was headed in that direction as well but stopped short at just about the last moment due to ordinary citizens' outrage over Pyongyang's kidnapping of a thirteen-year-old Japanese schoolgirl. Russia, the other great power with an interest in the Korean peninsula, is adjusting to a China-centric world and beginning to acknowledge Beijing's primacy. Nowhere is the erosion of American influence so visible as the place it counts most: emerging Asia. If the United States cannot protect its vital interests against a small adversary—and so far it's not been able to do so—who will ally with Washington in the future?

North Korea was considered an "intractable" problem before, but now the challenges are even greater for the lone superpower. In an epoch it is supposed to dominate, America has been reduced to relying on China—*the other side's best friend*—to craft a solution critical to its future.

What kind of policy is that? Perhaps the only viable one. Diplomacy and engagement have not worked. Few Americans today would support a policy friendly toward a society that one former European official said is "beyond evil" and "exists in a parallel moral universe." Containment has no chance when North Korea's neighbors won't cooperate. War, the final option, could result in a million casualties by the end of the first day. The available choices, in the words of a senior official in the administration of President George W. Bush, "range from the deeply unsatisfying to the incredibly risky." Reliance on China, therefore, is the last remaining option in the minds of many analysts. The hope is that Beijing will decide to become a responsible power and impose the right solution on Pyongyang.

And do so in time. Ordinary North Koreans, oppressed for more than a half century, are beginning to remake their

country from the bottom up. Economic stagnation and failure since the 1970s left their government without the means to feed and care for many peasants, workers, and even soldiers, so abandoned Koreans had to find ways to survive. As they did so, society changed in ways undermining the regime's mechanisms of control. Kim Jong Il's rule, therefore, is under pressure from the lowest rungs of the social order. He has reacted to this societal strain by undertaking increasingly reckless geopolitical behavior to obtain assistance and support from the international community. However effective his diplomacy may be, he has not been able to stop the forces of transformation inside his borders. That means, at a minimum, Kim will be continually forced into increasingly precipitous behavior as he seeks to buttress his rule in the years ahead.

If Washington finds it difficult to solve the ongoing nuclear crisis, it's because there are too many moving parts both inside North Korea and around Northeast Asia. The struggle with Kim Jong Il is complex. In this contest, where the currents are against Washington, the critical factor is not power but finesse. And time. As Joel Wit, a former State Department official, says, "It may be too late to stop what's going on in North Korea."

Washington, despite appearances, has not yet lost this critical test of will. But if the United States runs out of the world's most precious commodity as Wit suggests, there will not be much future for the American-led international order, which has brought peace and prosperity to the world.

This is now a crisis like no other, perhaps the moment of greatest consequence for the twenty-first century.

September 2005

KU KLUX KOREA

America Creates a Renegade Nation

People that are really very weird can get into sensitive positions and have a tremendous impact on history.

—Dan Quayle, former American vice president

NORTH KOREA INSULTS us. Its very existence is an affront to our sense of decency, perhaps even to the idea of human progress. At a fundamental level it challenges our notions of politics, economics, and social theory. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea—or DPRK as it calls itself—is not only different, but abhorrent.

We abhor something we do not understand. The nation ruled from Pyongyang is seemingly impenetrable; natural and artificial barriers wall it off. Yet the biggest impediment to comprehending North Korea is its very nature: the country defies conventional characterization. We call it communist—but it hardly resembles the other four nations sharing that label. After all, communism, which claims to be the wave of the future, implies modernity. North Korea, on the other hand, is not just backward, it is essentially feudal, even medieval. Many say that the nation is Stalinist, but that's true only in the broadest sense of the term. Joseph Stalin himself would have been uncomfortable had he ever visited Pyongyang. The regime founded by Kim Il Sung is a cult possessing instruments of a nation-state, a militant clan

with embassies and weapons of mass destruction. Kim, unrestrained by normal standards of conduct, created an aberrant society of almost unimaginable cruelty. North Korea is in a category by itself.

It is, from almost any perspective, the worst country in the world. The University of Chicago's Bruce Cumings, known for nuanced views, calls the nation "repellent," and American analyst Selig Harrison, always sympathetic toward Pyongyang, admits it's "Orwellian." Even leftist Noam Chomsky notes the country is "a pretty crazy place." How could any nation go so wrong?

The Unfortunate Peninsula

It took centuries of tragedy to produce today's Koreans, who have endured five major occupations and about nine hundred invasions during their history. Unfortunately for them, the Korean peninsula is where China, Japan, and Russia meet, and so their nation has historically been a prize for powerful neighbors. Yet as painful as its story has been, the last century and a half has been particularly harsh for "the shrimp among whales," as the people of Korea call their homeland. Perhaps it is no coincidence that this is also the period since the United States became involved in Korean affairs.

America's first contact with the Hermit Kingdom was a memorable occasion, at least for the hermits. In 1866 the *General Sherman*, a steam schooner, chugged up the Taedong River toward Pyongyang. After ignoring warnings to turn back from the locals, who were not interested in either American trade or Christian religion, the ship was torched and the crew killed and dismembered.

Despite the unpleasantness in the Taedong River, the Koreans eventually found some use for Americans. In 1882 they signed the Treaty of Amity and Commerce with Washington. This pact, their first with a Western nation, was

intended as a defensive measure to ward off Korea's more immediately threatening neighbors.

The Korean king danced with joy on the arrival of the first American envoy, but that was premature: in a few years Washington would sell out their newfound Korean friends. The Japanese and the Russians were both interested in controlling Korea, and Tokyo proposed dividing the peninsula into spheres of influence along the 38th parallel. The tsar refused. These two powers could not peacefully reconcile their expansionist ambitions. The Japanese humiliated Moscow's forces in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05, the first defeat of a European power by an Asian one in modern history. President Theodore Roosevelt brokered the peace, which confirmed Japanese control over Korea. As part of the deal, Washington secretly obtained Tokyo's assurance that it would not challenge its control of the Philippines. Roosevelt received the Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts.

An American won the award, and Korea paid the price. As a result of Roosevelt's peace, Japan occupied Korea in 1905 and annexed the place outright five years later. In obliterating the Korean nation, the Japanese brought an end to one of the longest imperial reigns in Asian history, the Choson Dynasty, founded in 1392. Japan's occupation was especially cruel: the peninsula's new masters tried to kill off the concept of Korea. They forced their subjects to take Japanese names and tried to expunge the Korean language. Japan imported Shinto, its religion, and taught a new history to schoolchildren. Millions of Korean men and women were impressed into the Japanese war effort, many taken from their homeland. Koreans had to swear loyalty to the emperor in Tokyo.

It took Japan's defeat in World War II to end the occupation. Although Japanese troops went home, Korea, which technically did not exist during the fighting, was the Second World War's big loser. The Cairo Declaration of 1943 stated that "in due course, Korea shall become free and

independent,” but events—and the Allies themselves—conspired against the Korean people. America, concerned about the casualties resulting from a potential invasion of the Japanese homeland, persuaded the Soviet Union to declare war against Tokyo, which it finally did on August 8, 1945, just seven days before the emperor capitulated. Washington slammed the door on a Soviet occupation of Japan but permitted Moscow a slice of Korea. The Red Army, without firing a shot, invaded the northern part of the Korean peninsula on August 9.

Washington had given no thought in the closing days of the war about what to do with Korea. There were no American troops there, and to avoid a Soviet takeover of the whole peninsula the United States hastily proposed its division. As August 10 became the 11th in the American capital, two junior American Army officers, consulting a *National Geographic* map, picked the 38th parallel as the border for “temporary” occupation zones. By selecting a line with historical significance, Lieutenant Colonel Dean Rusk, later to become secretary of state, and his colleague inadvertently signaled to Moscow that the United States recognized the tsar’s old claim to the northern portion of Korea. Whatever the Soviets thought, they accepted, and honored, the proposed dividing line. Korea, which had been unified for more than a millennium, was severed.

Korea’s division was an afterthought. There was no justification for the act—if any country deserved dismemberment, it was Japan. In different times, there might have been no consequence to the last-minute decision to split the peninsula into two. In the global competition developing between Moscow and Washington, however, the stopgap measure took on significance. As every business consultant knows, there is nothing as permanent as a temporary solution, and Korea proved this proposition. National elections, to be sponsored by the United Nations, were never held. Eventually each side

established its own client state. The American-backed Republic of Korea was officially proclaimed on August 15, 1948, and the Soviet-supported Democratic People's Republic of Korea was officially born less than a month later.

The new arrangement was in trouble from the beginning. Each of the two states claimed to be the sole representative of the Korean people, and both of them were raring for a fight. Neither big-power sponsor stayed around long to restrain its young ward. Soviet troops were off the Korean peninsula by late 1948, and the Americans decamped by June 1949. Two jealous children were left to settle their fate in zero-sum fashion. Both sides conducted guerrilla raids and battalion-size incursions across the 38th parallel.

On June 25, 1950, Kim Il Sung, the North's leader, initiated full-scale war by sending his tanks and troops south. President Harry Truman intervened immediately to stop what he perceived to be a Soviet test of Western resolve. The United Nations, prompted by Washington, showed remarkable resolve of its own: for the first time in history a world organization decided, in the words of historian David McCullough, "to use armed force to stop armed force."

Despite the unified response of the West, Kim's reunification policy almost succeeded. The North Koreans took Seoul in less than a week and had almost the entire peninsula under their control in a little over a month. Kim's forces were then beaten back almost to the Chinese border by troops from seventeen countries under the United Nations command led by General Douglas MacArthur. Chinese "volunteers" crossed the Yalu River into North Korea beginning in late October and pushed the American-led coalition south of Seoul by the end of 1950. During the remainder of the war the United Nations forces—primarily Americans—advanced only slightly northward during a period of essentially stalemated conflict.

The fighting during the "Great Fatherland Liberation War," as the North Koreans call it, lasted for three years and one

month. Negotiations went on almost as long: they continued for two years and nineteen days. There were 158 plenary sessions before the parties could agree, and even then they only arrived at an interim arrangement, a cease-fire. To this day there has been no treaty formally ending the conflict, so the war technically continues.

Although South Korea ended up with slightly more territory than it started with, Seoul did not sign the armistice. Its leader, Syngman Rhee, wanted to keep marching northward. At the time, he looked like a warmonger. In retrospect, Rhee was right: America could have avoided more than a half century of suffering and turmoil caused by North Korea.

The failure to prevail in the early 1950s profoundly shapes Korean politics today. "Death solves all problems," Stalin once said, but in Korea it only exacerbated them. Blood spilled in war hardened differences, and a division that was seen as temporary has, with the passage of more than five decades, taken on an air of permanence. During the conflict China is thought to have lost somewhere between 900,000 and a million soldiers, including Mao Zedong's son. Almost 40,000 foreign troops fighting under the United Nations banner perished in Korea. And three million Korean civilians died along with over a half million soldiers from both halves of the peninsula.

For many Korean families the war is still a sharp memory. In the broader context of things, the conflict is another unhappy chapter in the country's turbulent history. But the conflict, as horrible as it was, became the defining moment of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and for its founder, Kim Il Sung. Where we see stalemate, North Koreans perceive victory. The North Korean state is built on lies, distortions, and untruths of all sorts, but the most important of them says that Americans started the war and that Kim Il Sung beat back the aggression.

Americans, of course, do not subscribe to the DPRK's version of history, yet Kim's fabrication, like all good ones, was formed around a tidbit of truth. The Korean was correct in believing he had dealt a setback to the United States in the war. He had, after all, managed to do something that even Uncle Joe Stalin had not accomplished: at the height of the power of the United States he had dented, if not destroyed, the aura of American military superiority. After a magnificent show of determination in Europe during the Berlin Airlift of 1948 and 1949, American resolve failed in the mountains of Korea in 1950 to 1953. Stalin got it right when he noted that the Americans, armed with "stockings, cigarettes, and other merchandise," could not subdue "little Korea." "What kind of strength is that?" he asked.

Defeating Kim Il Sung and his Chinese allies would have been expensive, time-consuming, and bloody, but the United States, with the world's strongest military, could have prevailed. Washington believed that any American escalation of the fighting would have been matched by Moscow, but that was a misconception of the highest order. Contrary to American belief, the Korean War was not authored in the Soviet capital and Kim Il Sung was not Stalin's puppet. The war was Kim's idea, to bring about reunification of his peninsula. It is true that the Korean leader sought and obtained Moscow's and Beijing's approval to start hostilities, but it was his war nonetheless. China, which had the desire to fight, did not have the capacity to defeat the United States; the Soviet Union, which had a superb army, lacked the incentive. Washington simply underestimated its ability to win.

The West floundered many times during the Cold War, but, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, most of those mistakes no longer mattered. Yet it is still too early to predict that the Allies will escape the consequences of their misadventure in Korea five decades ago. The war has yet to be concluded by treaty, Pyongyang still poses a major threat

to world security, and despite appearances of cooperation today, the contest between the two Koreas continues because Kim Jong Il has yet to give up his family's goal of ruling the entire peninsula.

It is too harsh to call the West's involvement in the Korean War a defeat, but it has many of defeat's trappings. Americans, for example, are embarrassed by the conflict and sometimes call it the Forgotten War. In 2003 *Time* picked eighty days that changed the world in its eighty years of publication. Not one event from the Korean War was considered worthy enough to be selected. The debut of *Star Wars* made the grade in *Time's* list, but none of the moments of a real war. From the American perspective of the twenty-first century, more than four million people died for nothing.

Yet as much as Americans may want to forget, no person in North Korea does. By now, the people of the United States should have learned the value of listening to those who wish them harm. They neglected terrorist incidents until the morning of September 11; as pundits say, Islamic militants were at war with them but they were not at war with the militants. Perhaps Americans had an excuse for being out of touch with al-Qaeda then, but that is not the case with the DPRK now. Pyongyang publicly threatens to incinerate the United States every so often.

So what's North Korea's beef with America? Kim Il Sung, in his closed nation, was able to build a mythology upon the foundation of the Korean War, and it is hatred of the United States, the basis of that mythology, that sustains the regime today. The Kim family continues to call America the enemy, and America remains unaware.

God under Glass

At least we can't accuse David Letterman of forgetting about North Korea. "Are you familiar with Kim Jong Il?" he

asked one night. “Maybe you remember his father, Men Ta Lee II.” The current ruler’s father was born near Pyongyang to Christian and middle-class parents on the day the *Titanic* sank, April 15, 1912. Then, the little boy was known as Kim Song Ju—he later appropriated the name of a legendary Korean patriot, Kim Il Sung. His family moved to the Manchurian region of China when he was seven, and he stayed there during most of his formative years.

Kim got involved in revolutionary politics early. He joined the Chinese Communist Party in 1931 and in the following year organized a small band of guerrillas fighting the hated Japanese in what has been described as the longest engagement of the Second World War, the battle for control of Manchuria. Aided by a strong sense of destiny, he distinguished himself in various raids and skirmishes, becoming more than just a nuisance to the enemy. In late 1940 he retreated from Manchuria into the Soviet Union and was pressed into the Red Army, becoming a captain. Captain Kim spent the rest of World War II cooling his heels in Siberia: Moscow had not yet joined the war against Japan and did not want the Korean guerrillas on its soil to rile Tokyo.

In the heat of Cold War politics, Kim Il Sung was portrayed in the West as Stalin’s stooge, but that is far from true. He was not part of Moscow’s last-minute invasion of northern Korea at the end of the Second World War, and he even had trouble entering the Soviet zone of occupation after Japan’s defeat a few days later. Kim had to worm his way into the country on a Soviet steamer, eventually arriving at the port of Wonsan on September 19, 1945, with his communist band of brothers, which by then numbered about sixty. He made up for lost time, however, outmaneuvering rivals and consolidating power within less than a year with some political support of the Soviets and the wholehearted devotion of his fellow guerrillas from the Manchurian

campaign. Once in power Kim began to refer to himself as the Great Leader.

But Kim was greater than Great. Like a pharaoh, he was God. Christianity had strong roots in the northern portion of the peninsula, which meant Kim had competition. And so the North Korean leader, no stranger to the tale of Christ, simply deified himself. Kim even appropriated elements of emperor worship from the Japanese. In a few years after the end of the Second World War, Hirohito went from a god to a mortal in Japan and Kim made the reverse trip in Korea.

God in the human form of Kim Il Sung not only liberated Korea but also defeated the Japanese everywhere else in the Second World War—to this day North Koreans are stunned to learn that America had any role in stopping Japan. Then he beat back the American invasion that launched the Korean War. Kim also claimed to control the weather, arrange bountiful harvests, and, exposing a deficiency in Einstein's Theory of Relativity, transcend both time and space. "We were told that he crossed the river on a bridge of leaves and then he threw pine cones and they turned into grenades," says Ahn Hyeok, a North Korean and former political prisoner. "We heard this over and over, and we really believed that. So naturally we idolized him." By accepting Kim's claims, North Koreans disproved Machiavelli's belief that it is better to be feared than loved and proved Hitler's notion that big lies are better than small ones.

Kim Il Sung didn't know much about Marx or Hegel, but he understood the psychology of the Korean people, who were more in tune to medieval times than modern ones. For an ignorant, traditional, and abused citizenry, he harnessed the powerful force of nationalism, retained elements of Korean feudal and Confucian society, and employed Leninist and Stalinist techniques of social mobilization and control. Like Hitler, he knew how to manipulate imagery and stir emotions. The society he created, while unfamiliar to the rest of us, made perfect sense to Koreans of that time

because it fit in with their conception of the world. The charismatic Kim Il Sung exploited his people so well they did not feel oppressed.

But of course they were. Kim, with an obsessive thoroughness, built the most repressive totalitarian system in world history. Probably no one else ever had exercised such control over others, at least on a national scale. His overlapping security organizations were efficient, ubiquitous, and ruthless. The entire population was broken down into fifty-one categories and each person assigned a reliability rating. In Kim's system, every Korean, at least figuratively and often literally, was a soldier, an informer, and a part of the state. Lives were carefully scripted and people continually mobilized. There was no place for the individual in a mass society. The regime had, in the words of one Washington analyst, "an astonishing capacity for coercion." Parris Chang, now a legislator in newly democratized Taiwan, lived through the worst of his island's own dictatorship, so he knows something about oppressive societies. He first visited North Korea in 1985. "People asked me 'What's North Korea like?' I said, 'It's 1984.' "

It was always 1984 in Kim's Ku Klux Korea. He could hold his extremist society together only by keeping it apart from the rest of the world. That was possible because throughout the history of the Korean people, one foreign army or another marched through their fields. Moreover, it was not hard for Kim to convince the Koreans, who thought they were the origin of humanity anyway, that things were better at home than anywhere else. "I didn't know anything about the outside," says Lee Hye Lee, who eventually fled. "I thought North Korea was the best place in the whole world, a paradise." One of the Korean War's legacies for the North was the virtually impassable DMZ, the Demilitarized Zone, separating Kim's domain from the South, the Brand X version of Korea. That barrier suited Kim's isolationist policies just fine.

The war also provided Kim Il Sung with what every autocrat needs: a foreign enemy to keep his own people in line. Pyongyang means “level ground,” and that is exactly what the capital of North Korea was by the end of the conflict in 1953. In fact, Kim was left with few cities by the time of the armistice—North Koreans were living in caves. The United States dropped more than four times the tonnage of bombs on Korea than on Japan in World War II. In particularly regrettable acts, American planes destroyed massive irrigation dams holding water for three-quarters of the North’s food production. Bruce Cumings, the academic, says that America bears primary responsibility for turning the DPRK into “a garrison state,” a military-led nation, because of “our truly terrible destruction” of Kim’s society during the war. Although that judgment sounds harsh—aggressors should not be relieved of responsibility for their own acts—Kim did solidify his rule after the cease-fire by demonizing the United States and by devoting excessive amounts of his nation’s resources to the Korean People’s Army. Perhaps no other nation in modern history has remained on a war footing as long as North Korea.

Kim remilitarized quickly because he was able to free his country from the constraints of gravity, at least in an economic sense: he managed to receive aid from both Moscow and Beijing, which competed for Pyongyang’s affections in their tussle for leadership of the communist world. Kim was so successful in begging that he turned short-term tactical success into long-term strategic failure: North Korea became hooked on the heroin of outside assistance.

This dependency seems to run counter to Kim’s own *Juche* philosophy, introduced within two years after the end of the Korean War. *Juche* literally means “master of one’s self” or self-reliance, but the term was not intended to be fully understandable, at least by non-Koreans. In the world of *Juche* the state is an organism with the leader being the