

Behind the North Korean Crisis

U.S. propagandists and the mainstream media present foreign crises, like the current one with North Korea, as black-and-white morality plays with Official Washington behaving wisely and the adversaries as crazy. But the reality is always more complex, as Christine Hong told Dennis J. Bernstein.

By Dennis J. Bernstein

In early March, the U.S. and South Korea launched an expanded set of war games on the Korean Peninsula, prompting concerns in some circles that the military exercises might touch off an escalation of tensions with North Korea.

Christine Hong, a professor at the University of California at Santa Cruz, worried that the U.S. “was lurching towards war” since “the military exercises that the U.S. and South Korea just launched are not defensive exercises” but rather appear to promote a “regime change” strategy.

Those military pressures have, indeed, led to threats of escalation from North Korea’s young leader, Kim Jong Un, and have set the Korean security situation at “hair-trigger dangerous,” Professor Hong said in the following interview with Dennis J. Bernstein.

DB: There’s a lot of disinformation and patriotic reporting coming out of the U.S. Why don’t you tell us what is going on right now. What is the situation and how dangerous is it?

CH: You put your finger on it. All we see is media reporting that singularly ascribes blame to North Korea, which is portrayed as a kind of unquestionable evil, so what the U.S. is doing in response to the supposed provocation seems eminently justified. I think we are in a crisis point. It doesn’t feel dissimilar to the kind of media rhetoric that surrounded the run-up to the U.S. invasion in Iraq. During that time also, there was a steady drumbeat to war.

If we were to look at the facts, what do those facts tell us? I will give one example of the inverted logic that is operative, coming out of the media and U.S. administration. In a recent Pentagon press conference, [Defense Secretary] Chuck Hagel was asked whether or not the U.S. sending D2 stealth bombers from Missouri to fly and conduct a sortie over South Korea and drop what the DOD calls inert munitions in a simulated run against North Korea could be understood as provocative. He said no, they can’t be understood as provocative. And it was dutifully reported as such.

What we have is a huge informational landscape in which the average person who

listens to these reports can't make heads or tails of what is happening. What has happened since Kim Jong Un has come into his leadership position in North Korea is that the U.S. has had a policy of regime change.

We tend to think of regime change operations and initiatives as a signature or hallmark policy of the Bush administration. But we have seen under President Barak Obama a persistence of the U.S. policy of getting rid of those powers it finds uncooperative around the world. To clarify what I mean, after Kim Jong Il passed away [in December 2011], the U.S. and South Korea launched the biggest and longest set of war exercises they ever conducted. And for the first time it openly exercised O Plan 5029, which is a U.S. war plan that essentially simulates regime collapse in North Korea. It also envisions U.S. forces occupying North Korea.

What is routine during these war exercises, which are ongoing right now, as we speak, is they simulate nuclear strikes against North Korea. These workings are a combination of simulated computer-assisted activity as well as live fire drills. Last year, the first year of Kim Jong Un's leadership, a South Korean official was asked about the O Plan 5029 and why he was exercising this regime collapse scenario. He said the death of Kim Jong Il makes the situation ripe to exercise precisely this kind of war plan.

It's almost impossible for us in the United States to imagine Mexico and the historic foe of the U.S., Russia, conducting joint exercises that simulate an invasion of the United States and a foreign occupation of the United States. That is precisely what North Korea has been enduring for several decades.

DB: For some time now, the press has been stenographers for the State Department. There is no independent reporting about this. You don't see it in either the conservative or the liberal press. We do not understand the level and intensity of the so-called war games that happen offshore of North Korea. You made a dramatic point about imagining if North Korea wanted to conduct war games off the coast of the United States. The press plays a key role here in fanning the flames of a dangerous situation. How dangerous do you perceive the situation is now?

CH: I think that it's hair-trigger dangerous. There are many reasons for this. Even the commanding general of the U.S. armed forces in Korea, James Thurman, said that even the smallest miscalculation could lead to catastrophic consequences. Even though many blame North Korea, I think everyone realizes this is a very volatile situation that has gone entirely unreported in the U.S. media.

China has stepped up its military presence. You have a situation where China is

amassing its forces along the North Korea-China border, sending military vehicles to this area, conducting controlled flights over this area. It's also conducted its own live fire drills in the West Sea. So you have a situation which is eerily reminiscent of the Korean War, in which you can envision alliances like the U.S. and South Korea, with China in some echo that slips into a relationship with North Korea.

I think it's a very dangerous situation we are in right now. The abysmal nature of the reporting is that all you hear is jingoistic. One thing we need to understand is that U.S. and North Korean relations must be premised on peace. For over six decades, the relations have been premised on war. U.S. policy toward North Korea throughout the existence of North Korea has been one of regime change.

If you understand the basis of the relations of war, you realize that war doesn't just get conducted on the level of battles or simulated battles. It gets conducted on terrain of information. So when you think about it that way, it's easy to understand why misinformation and disinformation prevails with the reporting of U.S. and North Korean relations.

DB: Secretary of State John Kerry called North Korea's actions dangerous and reckless and he continues to be part of a policy to send the most advanced stealth fighting weaponry, as if they could name enough weapons that would back down the North Koreans.

You can't document this, but what is your take on the many countries in the world who are cheering, maybe not in the foreground, that somebody finally said, "no, you can't make believe that we are an aggressor. You can't turn us into an enemy when you are having exercises with 60,000 troops. You can't plan to invade us and expect us to just stand by." I'm sure there are many countries and leaders, many revolutionaries in this world, who are taking note.

CH: Of course. That is the other inverted reality. There is the reality of those of us who are in the U.S. and locked into the limitations of our positions here, and the rest of the world. This is classic U.S. Cold War foreign policy. So much of what goes on in our name in U.S. foreign policy is far from pretty. It is a blood-soaked history.

If you pause to think about the lived reality of those people who are unfortunate enough to be on the receiving end of U.S. foreign policy, then you realize that George Bush had that plaintive cry, "Why do they hate us?" It was a kind of soul-searching incapacity to understand the causes of anti-Americanism around the world. But as you say, if we are going to have a sensible approach to procuring any kind of common future with the rest of the world, we are going to

have to reckon with our foreign policy. And that is something that has yet to be done.

DB: I do get the feeling that the U.S. foreign policy is at least in part predicated on keeping a divide between the North and the South.

CH: Let's go back to history. You nailed it. Since the inception of something called North Korea and South Korea, the U.S. has been instrumental throughout. If you go back to 1945, you see that scarcely three days after the bombing of Nagasaki, two junior U.S. army officers, Dean Rusk and Charles Bonesteel retired to a small room armed with nothing more than a National Geographic map of the Korean peninsula, through which, in a 30-minute session, with absolutely no consultation of any Korean, divided the Korean peninsula. This division of the Korean peninsula at the 38th parallel into north and south, and the creation of a southern government, had no popular legitimacy.

North Korea had a very long anti-colonial history relative to the Japanese. What was created is a divided system in which one in three Korean families at that time were separated. So a kind of state is visited on the Koreans who were colonized by the Japanese and were not a war aggressor during WW II. What this eventually assured is that there would be a civil war of national unification that would be fought by both sides, the North and South.

That tension has hurt U.S. purposes. The U.S. claims that it is doing all these very provocation actions, the stealth bombers, etc, because it needs to give a show of support to its South Korean ally. But of course, this fundamentally misunderstands history and the fact that the U.S., from the beginning, has exploited the division for its own geopolitical advantage.

DB: What do we know about what is happening in the South? Is there a grassroots movement that includes unity and shows concern for this kind of U.S. hegemony in the region?

CH: Absolutely. The specter of a nuclear war and a U.S. nuclear strike against North Korea would not just impact those people who live above the 38th parallel. It would inevitably impact the rest of the peninsula, environmentally, and in every way. These are two countries that are very much tied through families, communities, etc. This is an unimaginable outcome.

When the South Korean people have been polled as to which country they think is the greater threat, the United States or North Korea, they point to the United States. In the South, as well as in the North, 60 years represents a full lifetime.

South Korean progressive activists have said "We had 60 years of a war system."

2013 will be the 60th anniversary of the signing of the Korean War armistice that brought the Korean War to a temporary halt, but did not end the Korean War. After six decades of a war system, they have said 2013 is the first year of Korean peace. We've had 60 years of war, and we are inaugurating a new era of peace.

Heaven forbid the U.S. continues its strategy for de-nuclearizing North Korea. North Korea believes that nuclear power is the basis of its sovereignty. Heaven forbid that the U.S., rather than finding a way of co-existing with North Korea, actually deploys nuclear power to stop nuclearization. That would be the greatest irony of all.

DB: Amazing. If you had ten minutes to advise Barak Obama about what U.S. foreign policy might be helpful, what would you say?

CH: I would say that the U.S. would secure so many gains were it seriously to consider peace. Both Donald Gregg, the head of CIA in South Korea for many years and also the former U.S. ambassador to South Korea, and Franklin Graham, son of Billy Graham, and someone who actually runs a humanitarian aid organization that provides food relief in North Korea, both said, after Dennis Rodman returned from North Korea, that the message he was conveying to Obama was "Call me. We don't want war." They both stated that however irregular the form of the message, it could not be ignored.

Most U.S. presidents get a vision in their second term. In regard to North Korea, even G.W. Bush said engagement and diplomacy was the only way forward. I would only hope that Barack Obama would come to his senses about North Korea as well.

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The Whys of American Ignorance

Since the social upheavals of the Sixties, the American Establishment has sought to constrain critical thinking through a variety of techniques, from propaganda to government secrecy to the celebrated ignorance of Fox News. But there are broader societal pressures as well, notes Lawrence Davidson.

By Lawrence Davidson

In 2008, Rick Shenkman, the Editor-in-Chief of the History News Network, published a book entitled *Just How Stupid Are We? Facing the Truth about the American Voter*. In it he demonstrated, among other things, that most Americans were: (1) ignorant about major international events, (2) knew little about how their own government runs and who runs it, (3) were nonetheless willing to accept government positions and policies even though a moderate amount of critical thought suggested they were bad for the country, and (4) were readily swayed by stereotyping, simplistic solutions, irrational fears and public relations babble.

Shenkman spent 256 pages documenting these claims, using a great number of polls and surveys from very reputable sources. Indeed, in the end it is hard to argue with his data. So, what can we say about this?

One thing that can be said is that this is not an abnormal state of affairs. As has been suggested in prior analyses, ignorance of non-local affairs (often leading to inaccurate assumptions, passive acceptance of authority, and illogical actions) is, in fact, a default position for any population.

To put it another way, the majority of any population will pay little or no attention to news stories or government actions that do not appear to impact their lives or the lives of close associates. If something non-local happens that is brought to their attention by the media, they will passively accept government explanations and simplistic solutions.

The primary issue is “does it impact my life?” If it does, people will pay attention. If it appears not to, they won’t pay attention. For instance, in Shenkman’s book unfavorable comparisons are sometimes made between Americans and Europeans. Americans often are said to be much more ignorant about world geography than are Europeans.

This might be, but it is, ironically, due to an accident of geography. Americans occupy a large subcontinent isolated by two oceans. Europeans are crowded into small contiguous countries that, until recently, repeatedly invaded each other as well as possessed overseas colonies.

Under these circumstances, a knowledge of geography, as well as paying attention to what is happening on the other side of the border, has more immediate relevance to the lives of those in Toulouse or Amsterdam than is the case for someone in Pittsburgh or Topeka. If conditions were reversed, Europeans would know less geography and Americans more.

Ideology and Bureaucracy

The localism referenced above is not the only reason for widespread ignorance.

The strong adherence to ideology and work within a bureaucratic setting can also greatly narrow one's worldview and cripple one's critical abilities.

In effect, a closely adhered to ideology becomes a mental locality with limits and borders just as real as those of geography. In fact, if we consider nationalism a pervasive modern ideology, there is a direct connection between the boundaries induced in the mind and those on the ground.

Furthermore, it does not matter if the ideology is politically left or right, or for that matter, whether it is secular or religious. One's critical abilities will be suppressed in favor of standardized, formulaic answers provided by the ideology. Just so work done within a bureaucratic setting.

Bureaucracies position the worker within closely supervised departments where success equates with doing a specific job according to specific rules. Within this limited world, one learns not to think outside the box, and so, except as applied to one's task, critical thinking is discouraged and one's worldview comes to conform to that of the bureaucracy. That is why bureaucrats are so often referred to as cogs in a machine.

That American ignorance is explainable does not make it any less distressing. At the very least it often leads to embarrassment for the minority who are not ignorant. Take for example the facts that polls show over half of American adults don't know which country dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima, or that 30 percent don't know what the Holocaust was.

We might explain this as the result of faulty education; however, there are other, just as embarrassing, moments involving the well educated. Take, for instance, the employees of Fox News. Lou Dobbs (who graduated from Harvard University) is host of the Fox Business Network talk show *Lou Dobbs Tonight*. Speaking on March 23 about gun control, he and Fox political analyst Angela McGlowan (a graduate of the University of Mississippi) had the following exchange:

McGlowan: "What scares the hell out of me is that we have a president . . . that wants to take our guns, but yet he wants to attack Iran and Syria. So if they come and attack us here, we don't have the right to bear arms under this Obama administration."

Dobbs: "We're told by Homeland Security that there are already agents of Al Qaeda here working in this country. Why in the world would you not want to make certain that all American citizens were armed and prepared?"

Despite education, ignorance plus ideology leading to stupidity doesn't come in any starker form than this. Suffice it to say that nothing the President has

proposed in the way of gun control takes away the vast majority of weapons owned by Americans, that the President's actions point to the fact that he does not want to attack Syria or Iran, and that neither country has the capacity to "come and attack us here."

Finally, while there may be a handful of Americans who sympathize with Al Qaeda, they cannot accurately be described as "agents" of some central organization that dictates their actions.

Did the fact that Dobbs and McGlowan were speaking nonsense make any difference to the majority of those listening to them? Probably not. Their regular listeners may well be too ignorant to know that this surreal episode has no basis in reality. Their ignorance will cause them not to fact-check Dobbs's and McGlowan's remarks. They might very well rationalize away countervailing facts if they happen to come across them. And, by doing so, keep everything comfortably simple, which counts for more than the messy, often complicated truth.

Unfortunately, one can multiply this scenario many times. There are millions of Americans, most of whom are quite literate, who believe the United Nations is an evil organization bent on destroying U.S. sovereignty. Indeed, in 2005, George W. Bush actually appointed one of them, John Bolton (a graduate of Yale University), as U.S. ambassador to the United Nations.

Likewise, so paranoid are gun enthusiasts (whose level of education varies widely) that any really effective government supervision of the U.S. gun trade would be seen as a giant step toward dictatorship. Therefore, the National Rifle Association, working its influence on Congress, has for years successfully restricted the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives from using computers to create a central database of gun transactions.

And, last but certainly not least, there is the unending war against teaching evolution in U.S. schools. This Christian fundamentalist effort often enjoys temporary success in large sections of the country and is ultimately held at bay only by court decisions reflecting (to date) a solid sense of reality on this subject. By the way, evolution is a scientific theory that has as much evidence to back it up as does gravity.

Teaching Critical Thinking?

As troubling as this apparently perennial problem of ignorance is, it is equally frustrating to listen to repeated schemes to teach critical thinking through the public schools. Of course, the habit of asking critical questions can be taught. However, if you do not have a knowledge base from which to consider a situation,

it is hard think critically about it.

So ignorance often precludes effective critical thinking even if the technique is acquired. In any case, public school systems have always had two primary purposes and critical thinking is not one of them. The schools are designed to prepare students for the marketplace and to make them loyal citizens.

The marketplace is most often a top-down, authoritarian world and loyalty comes from myth-making and emotional bonds. In both cases, really effective critical thinking might well be incompatible with the desired end.

Recently, a suggestion has been made to forget about the schools as a place to learn critical thinking. According to Dennis Bartels's article "Critical Thinking Is Best Taught Outside the Classroom" appearing in *Scientific American* online, schools can't teach critical thinking because they are too busy teaching to standardized tests.

Of course, there was a time when schools were not so strongly mandated to teach this way and there is no evidence that at that time they taught critical thinking. In any case, Bartels believes that people learn critical thinking in informal settings such as museums and by watching the *Daily Show with Jon Stewart*.

He concludes that "people must acquire this skill somewhere. Our society depends on them being able to make critical decisions." If that were only true it would make this an easier problem to solve.

It may very well be that (consciously or unconsciously) societies organize themselves to hold critical thinking to a minimum. That means to tolerate it to the point needed to get through day-to-day existence and to tackle those aspects of one's profession that might require narrowly focused critical thought.

But beyond that, we get into dangerous, de-stabilizing waters. Societies, be they democratic or not, are not going to encourage critical thinking about prevailing ideologies or government policies. And, if it is the case that most people don't think of anything critically unless it falls into that local arena in which their lives are lived out, all the better.

Under such conditions people can be relied upon to stay passive about events outside their local venue until the government decides it is time to rouse them up in some propagandistic manner.

The truth is that people who are consistently active as critical thinkers are not going to be popular, either with the government or their neighbors. They are called gadflies. You know, people like Socrates, who is probably the best-known

critical thinker in Western history. And, at least the well educated among us know what happened to him.

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