

# It's Called a Forgotten War, So People Don't Pay Attention: An Interview with Bruce Cumings

**Haeyoung Kim, Bruce Cumings**

**Abstract:** Bruce Cumings, Professor Emeritus at the University of Chicago, spoke with Haeyoung Kim of the Korea Policy Institute on August 23, 2023 about the current geopolitical landscape in East Asia, prospects for U.S.-Korea relations, and intellectual interventions made over the course of his career.

**Keywords:** Bruce Cumings, Korean War, Korea peace, U.S. relations with East Asia

On August 25, 2023, Haeyoung Kim of the Korea Policy Institute (KPI) spoke with Bruce Cumings, Professor Emeritus at the University of Chicago, where he was the Gustavus F. and Ann M. Swift Distinguished Service Professor of History from 1987 until his retirement in 2022. During his long career as a historian, author, and teacher, Bruce Cumings has produced path-breaking studies on the Korean War, the Cold War, and US relations with East Asia.

His award-winning, magisterial two-volume study, *The Origins of the Korean War* (1981 and 1990), challenges conventional narratives about the Korean War, and fundamentally transformed our understanding of the region's complex and multifaceted history. Some of his

other books include *Korea's Place in the Sun: A Modern History*, *Parallax Visions: Making Sense of American-East Asian Relations*, *North Korea: Another Country*, and *The Korean War*. His writings have also appeared in the *New York Review of Books*, the *New Left Review*, and the *London Review of Books*. Extending beyond the confines of the academe, his scholarship continues to resonate and brings historical insights to bear on contemporary dynamics in East Asia. With Kim, Cumings discussed the region's current geopolitical landscape, prospects for U.S.-Korea relations, and reflected upon intellectual interventions made over the course of his career.

**Kim:** Can you reflect upon the Camp David Summit that took place on August 18, 2023, where President Joe Biden hosted South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol and Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida at the presidential retreat in Maryland? How can we make sense of this trilateral meeting in the context of, what some have characterized as, an emerging new Cold War? South Korea's President Yoon has actively joined the US and Japan in their Indo-Pacific strategy to contain China; North Korea recently invited Chinese and Russian delegations to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the Armistice agreement. The Korean Peninsula, of course, is a place where the Cold War never ended. How do these new and renewed alignments relate to previous Cold War alignments? What are your thoughts

about the current global order and its connection to a Cold War, whether previous or new?

**Cummings:** If this realignment were fixed and even permanent, it would go back to the 1950s when South Korea, Japan, and United States were facing Russia, China and North Korea, which of course resulted in the Korean War. That's not at all what I think is happening today. First of all, the South Korean and Japanese decisions to do this are really dependent on who is the incumbent in Seoul and Tokyo. President Yoon is distinguishing himself, I think, by becoming a kind of lacky of, first of all, Biden and secondly, Kishida. He is one of the more extreme right-wing presidents we've had in South Korea. Even though Korean public opinion now doesn't really support what he's doing, there isn't anything important happening right now—no big issue at the moment, but if one comes up, I can see public opinion turning against Yoon pretty quickly. And, Kishida is a weak prime minister compared to his predecessor Abe Shinzo. But even Abe faced a lot of criticism for his Cold War-like moves with the United States, expanding defense spending, doing joint military exercises that could easily be related to a possible war over Taiwan. So, I think this is a realignment in a modest way.

In the case of North Korea, they have every reason to cozy up to China and Russia because the US has the worst sanctions in the world slapped on them, and the US consistently threatens North Korea with nuclear weapons by flying B-1 bombers near their waters and also sending a nuclear-powered submarine to Busan last month. The other interest North Korea has, of course, is that China and Russia are not enforcing sanctions the way they used to. If you remember back around 2014 and 2015, China was enforcing sanctions on North Korea and seemed to be aligned with American policy toward North Korea—without ever

saying that, of course. So, this realignment actually serves North Korea's interests, at least in the short-term. I don't think it's going to last very long, because they know that Russia is not the wave of the future.

People have been comparing the recent meeting at Camp David to the Camp David Accords that brought Israel and Egypt together under Jimmy Carter. That's a farce. All this gathering amounted to was a meeting and a commitment to consult. Anybody who works in government or diplomacy knows that that's a euphemism for being able to back out of things if you don't like what's going on. They already consult anyway.

The meeting did enhance the global position of South Korea and Japan. I saw a reference in the *New York Times* to the two “powers” coming to Camp David. Ten years ago, nobody would have called South Korea a power, but South Korea is doing very well. Its importance in the world is really growing, punching above its weight, so to speak. So, I'm sure the Camp David visit enhanced President Yoon's standing in South Korea. But he barely beat a liberal in the last election and he will be out of office after the next election, because of term limits.

Relations between South Korea and Japan are really tenuous. They look good now, but all you have to do is come up with some incident, for example, the Fukushima reactor water being dumped into the Pacific, and you can get really strong demonstrations against Japan. Some historical issue like sexual slavery is also going to deeply exacerbate relations between the two. I think it's somewhat illusory to think that there's some kind of really new relationship between Japan and South Korea, even though the US certainly wants that. The US has wanted that literally since World War II ended.

**Kim:** What about relations between North and South Korea? What room do you see for inter-

Korean dialogue? This past July 27 marked the 70th anniversary of the signing of the Korean War Armistice Agreement, and in a 2020 interview with KPI, commemorating the 70th year of the official start of the Korean War, you noted that, “there’s a hard core of career officials in Washington who don’t want summit meetings” with North Korea. At that time, your hopes for the U.S. and North Korea were not particularly high given that the diplomatic overtures in Hanoi between then President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un had fallen apart. Have your thoughts changed in the intervening three years? South Korea’s President Yoon has shown to be in lockstep with Washington. How do you see things unfolding with regard to North and South relations, and U.S.-Korea relations in the coming years?

**Cumings:** I think things have gotten much worse. When President Moon was in office, he had a thorough engagement policy with North Korea and did as much as he could, like Roh Moo-hyun and Kim Dae-jung before him. President Trump seemed to go along with that after fulminating about how he was going to destroy North Korea in the early part of his presidency. As we all know, he then met with Kim Jong Un twice and that provided a kind of umbrella for President Moon to do what he could to engage North Korea. It all collapsed when Trump walked out of the second meeting in Hanoi. It took a lot for Kim Jong Un to come to these meetings. He is basically all powerful, but he still has to worry that he's going to engage in something like this and it's going to blow up in his face politically. And that's what happened in Hanoi when Trump and his entourage just decided they were leaving because North Korea was recalcitrant on giving up its nuclear weapons. They didn't even stay for lunch, which had been laid out I'm sure with great care, and they just walked out. It's a terrible insult in any culture, but especially in Korean culture. It's been downhill since then.

As for the people in Washington who don't support engagement with North Korea, they've always been there, except for a few years in the 1990s. After Jimmy Carter intervened in June 1994 to avoid what might have been a nuclear war, meeting with Kim Il Sung and getting Clinton to back off from a plan for a preemptive strike on the plutonium facility in North Korea, within a couple of months the plutonium was frozen and it stayed frozen for eight years until 2002. That was a great victory. North Korea didn't have any uranium or plutonium with which to make a bomb during that period. By 1998, when Kim Dae-jung came in as president of South Korea, the momentum for engagement really doubled and tripled. Pretty soon you had the two Kims meeting, Kim Jong-il and Kim Dae-jung, in June 2000. Kim Dae-jung was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his “sunshine policy” towards North Korea. The US was at the time on the verge of buying out North Korea's missiles, too. This gets no attention: I wrote an op-ed piece in the *New York Times* with Meredith Woo calling attention to it in 2006 and I got not one single email or anything about it.

If you look at the *New York Times* on March 6th, 2001, Michael Gordon has a very detailed two-page analysis of the rupture of the missile deal by George W. Bush. I was at Stanford for a year at an institute and so I happened to have lunch that day with William Perry, who was a big part of the engagement with North Korea, especially in 1998 and 1999. I have great respect for Mr. Perry who has really done all he can to try and engage with North Korea and keep North Korea from having nuclear weapons—and from a nuclear war on the peninsula. He told me that everything in Michael Gordon's article was true and that the Bush administration just destroyed that agreement, with John Bolton in the lead. That happened in 2003. Ever since, North Korea has been building up a very formidable nuclear and ICBM arsenal, and every US president, including liberals like Obama, has sent B-1

bombers to scare North Korea about dropping nuclear weapons on them. As I understand it, the American war plan has about 80 or 90 targets in North Korea to hit with nuclear weapons. If there's a war that's called genocide, it's a holocaust. Anybody sitting in Pyongyang knowing this will want the only deterrent that there is for nuclear weapons, which is your own nuclear weapons.

Kurt Campbell, who is the leading Asia advisor to Biden, and Matthew Pottinger, who was in the Trump administration, are both hardliners, even though Kurt Campbell works for Democrats. It's because the Democrats gave him his first job. If the Republicans had given him his first job, he'd be in a Republican administration. He came to the University of Chicago when he was out of office a number of years ago at the invitation of John Mearsheimer. There was a huge turnout, and I was sitting in the back as I got there late. In the course of his lecture, he said if there's a new war in Korea, there will be "a magnificent symphony of death in the valleys of North Korea."

I just sat there steaming. I was so angry that I couldn't ask a question or counter him. Few Americans realize that we already had that in the Korean War. We had that magnificent symphony of death of maybe 3 million people in the North alone. Then, during the Trump administration, a friend of mine asked Matthew Pottinger at some meeting why the US wasn't engaging North Korea. He said, you have to understand that in secret meetings among the top leadership, the North still talks about invading the South and taking it over. I thought to myself, here's what happens when a person with no experience comes into an important office in the State Department and says something that could have been said literally since 1946. General John R. Hodge during the American occupation in March 1946 warned about the possibility of a North Korean invasion. If you have the idea that all the North

Koreans really want is to find a way to take over the South militarily, then of course engagement goes out the window.

So, I don't think there's going to be any progress during the Biden administration. Maybe in a second Biden administration there could be some different people. Biden also won't have to run for office again. Maybe like Bill Clinton's second administration, we can look for some breakthroughs in our policy toward North Korea. I doubt it.

**Kim:** Your critique of US policy toward the Korean peninsula has been charged with being too sympathetic to the North Korean regime. Your work has also been banned in South Korea. Volume 1 of your Korean War study was first translated and published in Korea in 1986, five years after it was released in the U.S., and then quickly banned by the Chun Doo-hwan military regime for being anti-American and anti-Korean. In regard to the Korean peninsula, why does critiquing the U.S. seem to be bound up with accusations of being a North Korean sympathizer? How can that be avoided? Your book *North Korea: Another Country* was quite critical of the regime, and yet it was still criticized for being anti-US and pro-North. What does that say about the state of US discourse about the two Koreas?

**Cummings:** In the case of my first volume being translated in a pirated edition in South Korea, that was at a time when Chun Doo-hwan was the most unpopular president in Korean history, after Kwangju. It was a feather in my cap to be blacklisted, somewhat like Nixon's enemies list back in the early seventies. I was against the Chun dictatorship, but being blacklisted didn't affect me at all. I think it did, of course, affect Koreans who may have picked up the book and read it because it was forbidden. Maybe the authorities got hold of them. I don't know, but it certainly could have happened.



At that time in the mid-eighties, I was called by Chun's people *ch'inbuk* (pro-North Korean), *panhan* (anti-Korean), and *panmi* (anti-American)—which I always thought was kind of funny because I'm as American as apple pie. My family goes back to 1630. If you're living in America any much before that, you're a Native American. Being anti-Korean is ridiculous. They even put out the line in the mid-eighties that I said the South started the Korean War, and I never even wrote about the outbreak of the Korean War by the mid-eighties. My book that dealt with that didn't come out until 1990.

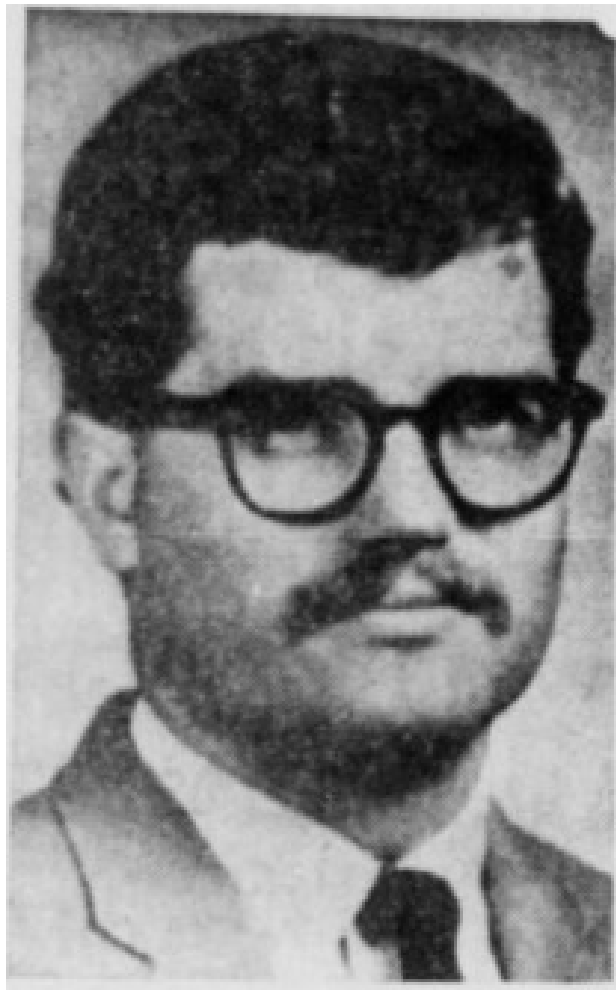


Image from a *Southern Illinoisan* article announcing that Bruce Cumings had been named a Peace Corps volunteer to Korea

(Source: *Southern Illinoisan*, October 12, 1967).

What young people need to understand is that they will say anything about you just to warn people away from your work. What is so ironic about it is, particularly when you have a very unpopular figure like Chun, it just makes people want to read the book. Book banning just enhances the sales of books. When I was in college, D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* was banned, yet we got hold of it and read it voraciously, then a few years later it was published in the US and not banned. It's just a losing proposition to ban books unless you do it across the board time and again, permanently, like North Korea or China under Xi Jinping.

As for being pro-North, I have a very deep abiding belief that as an American, I am tangentially or indirectly responsible for the division of Korea, which was done solely by three Americans on August 10th and 11th 1945, 24 hours after Nagasaki was obliterated. I don't ever want to contribute to the division between North and South, so I've tried to be as objective as I can in using primary materials to look at the record of South Korea and North Korea and the US. Many of your readers may not know that we've had North Korean primary documents in a captured archive from the Korean War since 1977, when they were declassified. I just don't want to contribute anymore to the division and the killing in Korea.



Bruce Cumings (left) on one of his trips to North Korea in the 1980s (Source: *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, February 27, 2019).

The second thing is that I learned not to read criticism of my work except for a handful of people whose views I respect. As for the others, I don't care what they think if they haven't done the research and can't refute my arguments. Labeling people is a way to tell everyone that you can't refute the person's arguments, so you label. It's a way of not being able to deal with the truth. We used to dismiss this as an *ad hominem* argument, but American discourse is so debased these days that I haven't seen that phrase in a long time, and most Americans probably don't know what it means; we have a former president who spends most of his time engaging in *ad hominem* attacks.

The other much more important thing I think is that this country still suffers from the shadow of McCarthyism. You had a three-year period, basically 1950 to 1953, when McCarthy was dominant in the way that Trump is dominant now. Hardly anybody would openly criticize McCarthy even though lots of people had contempt for him. Then in 1954, rather belatedly, the news media started criticizing him, leading to his downfall and his censure by the Senate. Then he drank himself to death and died in 1957. But, the shadow of McCarthyism comes down to the present.

I remember when I was protesting the Vietnam War, one of my professors told me that if you people, you students, keep doing this, you're going to rouse up the right wing like in the early fifties. I can perfectly understand what he was saying, even though a completely different era had come to pass where radicals were debating with liberals and nobody was paying any attention to conservatives like, say, Barry Goldwater, in the late sixties. I never complained about my career because I've been very happy and very fortunate to teach at one of the great universities in the world, but I am constantly sniped at by people who ought to

know better, accusing me of this, that and the other. It is just a form of McCarthyism. I don't ever get that at the University of Chicago, having taught there since 1987. Nobody ever asked me about my politics in Chicago.

The first thing people wanted to talk about at the University of Washington, where I spent 10 years, was my politics or what they thought was my politics. Washington was the only university to have three faculty testify against Asia scholar Owen Lattimore in the McCarthy inquisition, insinuating that he was a communist; most faculty elsewhere who testified did so in support of Lattimore. The influence of those three people was still strong when I arrived at the University of Washington in 1977. It's a fascinating and daunting story. The point is that McCarthyism was still alive and well at this university.

**Kim:** Speaking of the academe's connection to Washington, you have written about the ways in which area studies programs in the US have been complicit with the National Security state. In your 1997 piece, "Boundary Displacement: Area Studies and International Studies During and After the Cold War" in the *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, you observe how Cold War dynamics shaped particular fields by determining what was important to study and how funding streams in the US were directed. If you could, how would you update this piece for the current moment? In what ways does the relationship between the government and academy persist to this day?

**Cumings:** This particular issue is both important and very involved. That article came out, as you said, in 1997. After September 11th, I think the CIA branched out with enormous funding into academe in ways that might have surpassed the very cozy relations the CIA had with academe in the fifties and sixties.

In another article, I made the point that

anthropology and psychology as disciplines were particularly implicated by CIA involvement after 9/11. With anthropologists, you got a general condemnation of CIA money going into anthropology even though there was a tremendous official interest in understanding the myriad ethnic groups in the Middle East—Kurds, Yazidis, Iraqis, Iranians. The anthropologists fought back at their national meetings.

Psychology was much worse. Two psychologists who were not at all prominent scholars were employed at Guantanamo to tutor American torturers on how to waterboard detainees—those who were gathered up in a war who have no rights under any international convention and are sitting in Guantanamo. One of the most notable cases, I think, was where a detainee was water boarded 160 times. There was just an article in the *New York Times* last week about another guy who was waterboarded many times. There were secret torture sites around the world, so-called black sites. Dick Cheney, then vice president, had said right after 9/11 that we need to go to the “dark side.” And there was a debate in this country about whether torture is worth anything. Now the US faces people who have been there for upwards of 20 years that they can't bring to trial even in a military court because whatever confessions they've made happened under torture of various kinds.

They were even consulting Chinese Communist manuals from the Korean War on how to use sleeplessness to get people to talk. I've read a lot about this because my father and my aunt were in the CIA—my aunt, her whole career, my father, for one year in the fifties. From the time I was in third grade, when my father was at Langley, I was very interested in all of this and the same kinds of things that my father was involved with, which were so-called enhanced interrogation techniques back in 1950 and 1951. They were directed against Nazi spies who went over to the US after World

War II and were being infiltrated into Eastern Europe and were being rolled up by the Soviets all the time. And they were trying to figure out who was a real agent of the United States among these Germans and who was a double agent.

They subjected them to beatings and sleeplessness and various kinds of tortures. My father quit. He never told me why he quit until he was nearly on his deathbed, but the reason was he just couldn't stomach what was going on. He was a Germanics PhD from the University of Chicago and fluent in German, and he just couldn't countenance going to these safe houses around Maryland and Virginia to see these would-be spies tortured.

After 9/11 there was a lot of turmoil in the psychology discipline about people doing intelligence work, especially these two guys. But they were paid something like \$80 million, which is what most academics in the psychology discipline wouldn't make in their entire lifetimes. It wouldn't even come close. My impression is that also in political science, there were many, many people brought in to consult about how to deal with terrorism. I don't know of any at the University of Chicago.

I've been fortunate to teach at a university where I think the vast majority of faculty would not secretly work for the CIA. I got my PhD at Columbia in the late sixties--early seventies, and I would say almost a dozen of the professors I knew there in various disciplines were going down to Langley and consulting with the CIA. So, it's always been an interest of mine. I haven't done any primary research on the question since 9/11, but I've read a lot in the *New York Times* and other journals and newspapers that have covered this very important and controversial issue. It's my impression that the CIA did the same thing they did during the Korean War. They just plowed a lot of money into academia.

**Kim:** As a student at Columbia, you were an anti-war activist. You have also been a supporter of democratization in South Korea and of Korea peace. Most recently, you gave the keynote address at the Korea Peace Action events in DC, commemorating the 70th anniversary of the signing of the Korean War Armistice Agreement. Where do you see Korea peace and reunification efforts going? What do you think would be most effective and necessary for the movement to do?

**Cumings:** I think organizations like Women Cross DMZ have been a major breakthrough in what citizens can do to try to promote a new Korea policy in the US. That was a very courageous and notable event when they actually did cross the DMZ from North Korea to South Korea. It's important that the North Koreans let them do this. It signaled an opening to engagement.

As an anti-war protestor in a situation where nobody knew my name, let alone my views, I would just be going from Columbia down Broadway with a few thousand people marching to Times Square to oppose the war. I was very conscious of how things like that are only valued and only make a difference when they're really voluminous, when masses of people take part. That's what was happening then. That along with the North Vietnamese and the Vietcong basically defeating the US during the Tet Offensive in 1968. You can see from early 1968, the US was going to lose the war, but Nixon prolonged it for five bloody years. It led to protests not just on the elite campuses like Harvard or Chicago or Columbia, but also places like Kent State University, where four students were killed during a rally. This led to strikes on every campus, virtually every campus in the country.



**Bruce Cumings giving a lecture at a "40th Anniversary of the Korean War" event in Tokyo in 1990 (Source: Hankyoreh, August 23, 2009).**

The problem with trying to change policy on Korea is that most Americans can't find North Korea on a map. There was a test of this during the Trump administration, and a majority of Americans couldn't locate North Korea. I actually have run into college-educated people who think that Korea is in Southeast Asia rather than Northeast Asia. The level of ignorance is terrible. Even worse is when people have a little bit of knowledge, which almost always means they are castigating North Korea in every possible way.

Let's consider our 78-year history with Korea. Just 78-years ago and a few weeks from now, 25,000 American combat troops marched into South Korea and set up a three-year occupation. They were trying to keep Kim Il Sung and his friends from taking over the whole peninsula. Here we are 78 years later, and Kim's grandson is in total power and he's got A-bombs and ICBMs. I don't know of a more catastrophic policy failure in recent American history than that one. Just a disaster. I'm not too optimistic about how this is going to be



turned around. It certainly won't happen as long as the US continues to threaten North Korea with nuclear weapons.

The point of my talk on the 70th anniversary in Washington, DC was about the Armistice under a nuclear shadow, that the US threatened North Korea with nuclear weapons all during and after the Korean War and installed tactical nuclear weapons in the South in 1958 and didn't take them out until 1991. If you're the leader of North Korea and there are hundreds of bombs just 100 to 200 miles south of Pyongyang—A-bombs—what are you going to do about it? Of course, they're foaming at the mouth to get their own deterrent. I'm sure people who defend American policy toward North Korea would say, well, we've deterred them for 70 years. But, we've deterred them while creating a situation that would have flabbergasted Dwight Eisenhower and John Foster Dulles and other leaders who made the armistice in 1953. It would have flabbergasted them that we have a small power that we couldn't defeat with conventional weapons in the fifties and now it's armed to the teeth with nuclear weapons.

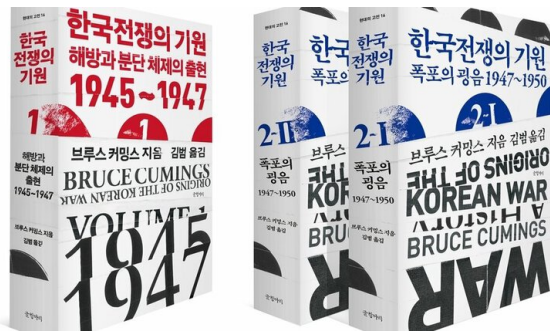
Noam Chomsky says in a recent book that the world faces two world-historical crises right now. One is climate change and the other is nuclear war. What is so terrible about them both is that they both can bring about the extinction of the human race in the world. We've had fires all over the world this summer. Many people don't understand that if there were 80 or 90 nuclear weapons dropped on North Korea plus whatever they could potentially drop, you would have a cloud of debris, fire debris, all kinds of debris up in the atmosphere that would circle the globe and might lead to nuclear winter, blocking the sun so that for a couple of years few crops would be grown in the world. Noam, I think, sees this in terms of the relationship between the US, China and Russia. The same thing could happen with North Korea. So, one has to be

very serious about the situation in Korea, which is just super, super dangerous.

At the recent event in Washington, Siegfried Hecker participated from Stanford. He's a physicist who has been to North Korea many times. The North Koreans actually showed him their metalized plutonium around 2006 to demonstrate that they had a serious nuclear deterrent. He said at the meeting we're one bad decision away from a nuclear war in Korea, and bad decisions lead to wars all the time, like the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Was that a smart decision? I don't think so.

**Kim:** Complete translations of your two-volume study on the origins of the Korean War have recently been published in Korea. Given that 33 years have passed since their initial publication, this re-release speaks to the tremendous impact your work continues to have and its enduring importance. You note in your work that asking who started the Korean War is not the right question as it undermines how the two Koreas, the US, the Soviet Union and China were all responsible for the war. What are the right questions to ask to move us closer to making progress towards peace on the peninsula?

**Cumings:** Thank you for what you said about the translation, and I want to thank Kim Boem whom I just met last week when he was here with a group to interview me for the Historical Compilation Committee, *kuksa p'yŏnch'an wiwŏnhoe*. Mr. Kim is a wonderful person and he worked five years on that translation. My old friend, Chung Kyungmo, did the translation into Japanese years ago. I think he and his team worked about 20 years on both volumes. I can't actually think of a compliment that is higher than for these two folks to work so hard on that book. I never expected anything like this, and here it is in my retirement year, so it's a nice present.



**Complete Korean translations of *The Origins of the Korean War* (Source: Kyobo Bookstore, Accessed January 10, 2024).**

A lot of liberals, for example, in several articles over the years in the *New York Review of Books*, paid attention to one chapter of the 33 chapters I wrote in two volumes. They focused on the one called “Who Started the Korean War?” and proceeded to show that they didn’t understand what I was talking about. I tried to deconstruct this whole utterly politicized question because if you ask it, the official story in this country is North Korea started the war at Stalin’s behest. You can then wrap it up, put a ribbon on it, and that’s the story you need to know. What happened in the previous five years while the US was supporting the South? Well, we had a military government for three years and then the US supported the Syngman Rhee government for two more years. Nobody knows that. I mean, even well-informed New York Times journalists that I’ve talked to over the years were unaware that there was an American occupation of Korea. They know all about the one for Japan and the one in West Germany, but they don’t know there was an occupation, let alone what happened during that time.

So, when you probe “who started it,” the best thing is to start probing back into the origins. If you take up Clausewitz’s definition of war as an

act of violence intended to pursue political means, then the war started on little Jeju Island in April 1948, when the two sides—the two fundamental sides that fought this civil war—the people’s committees and leftists, labor unions, women’s groups in the south and north, were fighting against a regime that the US set up led by Japanese collaborators. The record is very clear in top secret documents that the US reemployed every pro-Japanese Korean that they thought would do a good job in the forces of order and in the bureaucracy and various other places, but especially in the national police and in the army, which was called a constabulary. It became the South Korean army. The US set up the Constabulary within three months after arriving in Korea, contrary to State Department policy.

The anecdote that may perhaps express this best is that a year after the occupation began, in the fall of 1946, two Korean officers who had been in the Japanese military, Park Chung-hee and Kim Jae-gyu, both graduated together as good friends in the second class of the American Military Academy. Think about that, because a few decades later, Kim Jae-gyu, by then head of the KCIA, blew President Park’s brains out in October 1979. When you probe back to the origin of violence, you get Jeju, which opens up a chain of violence through the Yōsu-Sunch’ōn Rebellion in 1948, guerrilla war in the next two years, and border fighting, which was very serious all through the summer and fall of 1949. So, you have just an escalation of violence.

I remember reading that General William Roberts, the American commander of the military advisory group that we had in Korea in the summer of 1949, informed Washington in a top-secret message that the South Koreans had started more than half of the fighting that whole summer. The first battle in May was also said to have been started by South Korean forces, as was the last in December 1949. I said to myself, anyone looking at this would call this

a civil war and know that when North Korea gets ready, North Korea will deal with these people. North Korea had tens of thousands of its soldiers fighting in the Chinese Civil War on the communist side, but they came back in fall of 1949 and 1950 and formed the crack divisions of the Korean People's Army. So, I consider it just pure politics when someone says this war has a single author, which is the communist side. It's purely political.

After my books were published, so much more information came out from Suh Dae-sook and other scholars about the 1930s, and I realized that Kim Il Sung was a much more important guerrilla than I had thought. I always knew he was important, and I said so in my books, but Suh Dae-sook's biography says something like Kim fought all through 1939 and 1940 with 40,000 Japanese forces trying to find him and bearing down on him.

I think the Korean War is one of the most mystified foreign experiences that the US has been involved with. One reason is that it's called a forgotten war, so people don't pay attention. It was in fact a never-known war, and scholars and other authors have not gone into it even remotely like the Vietnam War. David Halberstam wrote a book that I didn't much like on the Korean War. When he interviewed me, he told me that he walked into a library in Florida and they had 80 books on the Korean War and over a thousand on the Vietnam War. Of those 80 books, I'm thinking, geez, I can't even count that high myself.

**Kim:** Throughout your long career as a historian, author, and teacher, you have fundamentally changed the narrative about the Korean War, the Cold War, and US relations with East Asia. Your work has also been foundational to many subsequent studies in the field of Korean history, international history, and the political economy. Can you speak about the state of these fields when you started your

career and their evolutions? Have political conditions in the US and East Asia influenced the direction of scholarship being produced? What are your thoughts about the future of these fields?

**Cumings:** When I started out, there were about five major Korea programs, and not big ones, at Harvard, Columbia, Berkeley, Washington and Hawaii. UCLA had not gotten started, even though they have a very big Korea program now. The scholars involved in these programs were almost all army veterans from the 1950s. If you take the doyen of the field, as he saw himself—Edward Wagner at Harvard—studying Korea meant studying pre-20th century Korea, learning classical Chinese, and doing genealogies and the kinds of things he did. The problem with that is South Korean historians couldn't study the 20th century. Every decade was too controversial, so there was hardly any scholarship on the modern period. If you look at Han Woo-keun and other authors, historians who published their books that were translated into English, they have about 10 pages on the 20th century and it's all avoiding the most important problems. You would go to jail if you actually did serious primary research on the 20th century in South Korea under the dictators. You had a field that didn't exist, namely modern Korean history.

I dimly recognized that. I studied classical Chinese at Columbia, but I didn't need it to work on the 20th century and therefore forgot it about six months after I got out of that class. Focusing on pre-20th century Korea was, consciously or not, a way of avoiding the politics of divided Korea among other things. You didn't have to think about or write about divided Korea. An exception was Frank Baldwin, who was my advisor at Columbia, who was an historian of modern Korea. He knew Japanese and Korean and did an excellent dissertation on the March 1st independence movement. He and I became good friends, and

we used to talk all the time about what was needed in the field.

Also, this was a white man's field. There were a few Korean-Americans like Suh Dae-sook or Chong-Sik Lee. Lee was at Penn and Suh was at the University of Houston when I was getting to know him. And then he went to Hawaii to set up their Korea program in a big way. They were generally ignored. Lee collaborated with Robert Scalapino, who was probably the most right-wing East Asian political scientist in my experience. So, there just wasn't much there.

When I think about people who came to understand the Korean War very quickly, the first one is I.F. Stone with his *Hidden History of the Korean War*, a very courageous book. It took him 33 publishers to find one that would put his book out in 1952. That was Monthly Review Press, which is an independent Marxist press in New York. The other is Reginald Thompson's *Cry Korea*, also I think a 1952 book. Thompson had been all over the world. He had been a war correspondent during World War I, and he was British, so he didn't function under censorship the way the American reporters did. *Cry Korea* is a book that will actually make you cry, because it's such a devastating account of the utter violence of that war on the ground. Napalm splashed everywhere. Villages totally obliterated all over the place and virulent racism on the part of American troops toward Koreans. I remember he quoted one soldier saying, "Today, I'm going to get me a gook." And they shot grandfathers and little kids just to get a gook. It made my skin crawl when I read that book, and it was banned in South Korea for a long time. It was called an anti-Korea book, too.

When you read accounts like this, you see this was a people's war, like Vietnam, that was completely shrouded and buried in a Cold War narrative that the US was able to maintain at the height of its global power. Then you have McCarthyism at home, so anybody who wanted

seriously to learn about the war could quickly get into trouble and lose their job, which happened a lot. A professor at Yale, Samuel Moyn, was quoted recently as saying that the Korean War was the most brutal war of the 20th century, and I would say it certainly was one of the most brutal wars. When you look at what the US did in Vietnam, it's hard to say which was more brutal. But, we lost both of them. Korea was a stalemate, but let's face it—an army that defeated Germany and Japan with a lot of Soviet help in Europe could not defeat peasant armies from North Korea and China in the fifties. Then we out and lost the Vietnam War. We've had five major wars since 1945, and we only won one of them—the Persian Gulf War—and that was a pyrrhic victory because people like Cheney wanted to take that containment victory and extend it to rolling back the Saddam Hussein regime. Americans believe deeply in the efficacy of military force. You can see that in levels of gun ownership, which are higher by far than any place in the world, and yet military force doesn't usually work and hasn't worked with these five major wars.

I became interested in political economy at Swarthmore College, which was my first job. James Kurth, one of my oldest friends, introduced me to Karl Polanyi's book called *The Great Transformation*. At the same time, Franz Schurmann brought out the *Logic of World Power* in 1974, which I read at Swarthmore in 1975. Immanuel Wallerstein's book on world-systems theory came out at about the same time. These were classic, brilliant works in political economy. Meanwhile, suddenly, South Korea was on everybody's lips as a wunderkind of economic development by the mid-seventies. So, in the eighties, I wrote a lot about Korean development. Polanyi and Wallerstein also informed the theoretical basis of both Volume One and Volume Two of my *Origins*. Wallerstein talked about core countries, peripheral countries, and semi-peripheral countries with the semi-periphery playing the



role of a kind of middle class—an arena for upward and downward mobility.

If you take Japan in the colonial period and Korea and Manchuria, there was a classic Wallersteinian tripartite situation where Manchuria was spewing out soybeans to the world market and the Japanese were exporting perhaps 30% of the Korean rice crop. Koreans substituted poor Manchurian grains, like millet, which is actually quite nutritious, for white rice. Then the textile industry got going in Korea with Kim Seong-su, as very wealthy landlords moved into industry using second-rate Japanese technology in Korea, which would be profitable because you have much lower labor costs in Korea than in Japan. In the mid-thirties, Japan was the leading textile manufacturer in the world. They had the highest technology in textiles, and the British were going crazy complaining about it in the thirties.

All of this economic activity led to about 10% growth per year in Korea, Japan, and Manchuria in the late 1930s. Japan industrialized itself out of the depression. This led to tremendous social changes and population changes within Korea because jobs were open for Koreans in factories and mines in North Korea, Manchuria, and Japan.

You end up with a million Koreans in Manchuria in 1945 and more than 2 million in Japan. They're all essentially peasants who were being turned into workers of one sort or another, and they're coming mostly out of South Korea because North Korea didn't have a lot of rice agriculture with a surplus of farmers. So, 11% of the population in Korea was outside the country in 1945 and 9% was in another province, which is very important because the provincial population had been very stable for centuries in Korea.

So, you have 20% either in another province or out of the country, all mobilized directly or indirectly by the economic activity, the military,

or other activities of the Japanese. We're talking about people from maybe the age of 16 to 60, so it's an even bigger slice of the population. When it was over, they all came back. One of the things I was able to try and do in my first volume was to see where those returning populations led to rebellion, people's committees, left-wing activity, labor unions, or ousting of officials who had sent them to Manchuria. All of that is political economy.

I have to say South Korea has really done so well in educating its population to a high level and in finding ways to expand into the world economy amidst very sharp competition, and to overcome backwardness over the period of about 60 years so that South Korea is a major industrial country. It's a highly educated country. Its culture is now spreading all around the world. We have roughly 2 million Korean Americans who are entering all walks of life and professions in the US and making a huge economic and cultural, and I think eventually political, impact. That's an answer to the previous question, which is that something like Women Cross DMZ is only possible by having a large number of college-educated Korean American women in this country who would form an organization like that. Korea had no constituency in the US at the time of the Korean War. There were about 10,000 Koreans in the US then, mostly originating in the first decade of the 20th century, coming as farm laborers mostly. They did well economically, but they were too small to be noticed. Apart from some liberal and leftist Koreans in the Los Angeles area, there was no constituency of Koreans who would take a different view than the US government on the Korean War. Now we have a major constituency of Korean Americans, and I think it's increasingly one that the government here has to pay attention to. I don't think they do, but they should.

**Kim:** To close, can you speak about how the

enduring legacies and impacts of the Korean War have shaped both the US and East Asia, complicating efforts to bring about a definitive end to the state of war on the Korean Peninsula? Can you also share with our readers how you imagine what lies ahead for the Korean Peninsula?

**Cumings:** At the 70th anniversary of the Armistice, Korea stands as one of the best examples in world history, of how easy it is to get into a war, and how desperately hard it is to get out. Most Americans, including many in the government, don't realize that they are trapped in matters of their own doing. In the years after World War II, the US bestrode the world like a colossus. Without giving it much thought, Americans divided Korea in 1945 and China in 1950. Most Americans are completely unaware that Taiwan exists apart from mainland China because Truman inserted the 7th fleet in the Taiwan strait right after the Korean war broke out. Yet every Chinese is aware of this, and the situation still could yield another war. John Foster Dulles, the secretary of state under Eisenhower, divided Vietnam in the mid 50s. How did that work out?

To many people, history often seems like a muddle of kings and queens, dates that are hard to remember, and events that seem to occur randomly. But it has its recurrent tendencies with predictable results. American planners in the 1940s could not conceive of the power of aroused colonial peoples. At the most fundamental level, that was their mistake. It led to the Korean War, the victory of Mao's forces in China, and the Vietnam War. After the Berlin wall fell and Soviet communism disappeared, there has been no break in Asian communism, in spite of endless speculation about China breaking apart or North Korea's "collapse."

About the future of the Korean peninsula, if you had asked me this when the year 2000 came to an end, I would've been quite optimistic about peace in Korea and the coexistence of the

South and North, with the latter being under some kind of provincial autonomy for a number of years, as Kim Dae-jung had outlined, pending eventual reunification.

Those hopes were dashed by an ignorant former alcoholic with not one important credential in foreign affairs, when the Supreme Court put him into the Oval Office. George W. Bush was then led around by the nose by Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld, resulting in the catastrophic and illegal invasion of Iraq in 2003. George F. Kennan wrote in his diary that this was one of the two worst foreign policy decisions since 1945: the other was the American invasion of North Korea in October 1950. American diplomacy with North Korea in the late 1990s fully demonstrated the virtues of engagement, and the North's readiness to reconcile with the South and the US. But this careful effort was destroyed, and destroyed quite purposely and consciously, by the Bush administration. Ultimately, this may turn out to be an even worse outcome than the debacle in Iraq, because North Korea—whose plutonium was completely frozen and under UN observation when Bush came into power—now has the capability to wreak havoc on a world scale.

The United States is fundamentally a provincial country, which had global leadership thrust upon it by the victory in World War II. The result is that foreign policy has been mostly an autonomous affair, divorced from the democratic principles of this country. Popular participation in foreign affairs did not really exist until the opposition to the Vietnam War. That was a courageous, patriotic movement—although I don't think most Americans see it that way. As we have seen, even today most Americans are ready to fight North Korea at the drop of a hat, as soon as they can find it on a map. It would also be child's play to whip up hysteria in the event of a military conflict with China.

After 1945 the US had three fundamental goals. One was to reestablish the industrial powers, which was complete by about 1970 and, by fulfilling its stated goals, was a major success. The second goal was to contain the Soviet Union short of a war, until, to everyone's surprise, it disappeared in 1991—not with a bang but a whimper. The third goal was to mold, contain, or defeat anticolonial

nationalism. It was almost a perfect failure. The Vietnamese people put a definitive end to American intervention in 1975 after a 30 years' war. But here we still are, 70 years later, with two unreconciled enemies—North Korea and China, both immeasurably stronger than they were in 1953.

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