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BOOK REVIEW: Remembering a Korean statesman

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KOREA BETRAYED: KIM DAE JUNG AND SUNSHINE

By Donald Kirk

Palgrave Macmillan, \$80, 251 pages

Reviewed by Doug Bandow

The Republic of Korea, once impoverished and authoritarian, has emerged as a major player on the world stage. South Korea enjoys one of the world's largest and most innovative economies and has made the difficult transition from military dictatorship to stable democracy.

One of the most important personalities in shaping modern Korea is Kim Dae Jung, known as DJ to friend and foe alike. Kim rose to prominence as an opposition political activist. Elected ROK president, he held the first summit with a North Korean leader, but left office under fire for corruption. Observes longtime Asia hand Donald Kirk: "No other Korean leader had inspired such hope yet encountered such disappointment in fulfilling his vision for a peaceful, reunited country."

Kim fought dictatorship in the South, but his "Sunshine" policy towards North Korea ended up strengthening an even-worse dictator. Writes Mr. Kirk: "In the spirit of faux reconciliation, the South unwittingly promoted the ambitions of a mortal foe that relied on the largesse of others to achieve its ambitions."

Kim began his political career after Japan's defeat in World War II against Rhee Syngman, an authoritarian strongman supported by the United States, which occupied the southern half of the peninsula. Then came the North Korean invasion that ravaged both Koreas. Contends Mr. Kirk: "In the hothouse of emotions and ideas and politicking of wartime Busan, DJ formed the worldview that was to infuse his career - and turn his crusade for democracy into a campaign of apology for the North Korean regime that his political enemies were fighting."

For years, DJ campaigned against autocratic South Korean regimes. He sometimes tasted political success, only to have the fruit of victory snatched away.

For instance, Kim ran a strong race for president in 1971, and might have won a fair election, against Park Chung Hee, who had seized power in a coup. Kim's party also did surprisingly well in National Assembly elections. Writes Mr. Kirk: "DJ was the most visible of numerous foes whom Park's regime wanted to silence. Fast losing patience, Park was plotting how to get rid of them, and the 1971 presidential election was the final 'open' campaign of his rule."

Kim settled in Japan, where he set up an opposition organization. Kidnapped by the Korean Central Intelligence Agency, he was saved from likely killing at sea by pressure from Washington. Back in the ROK, Kim was tried, sentenced to death and then sent into exile in America. Along the way, Park was assassinated and another military dictator, Chun Doo Hwan, emerged.

Kim became the international symbol of opposition to autocracy in South Korea. Popular protests brought the Chun dictatorship to an end in 1987. A presidential election was held, but the division between Kim and Kim Young Sam, a more conservative dissident, led to the election of a former general, Roh Tae Woo. Five years later Kim Young Sam defeated DJ, having merged his party with that of Roh.

However, Kim Dae Jung's stock rose with the Asian economic crisis, helping him narrowly win the presidency in 1997. Nevertheless, North Korea became DJ's landmark issue. Writes Mr. Kirk, Kim "sensed his greatest opportunity for national power - and for the Nobel Peace Prize - lay in reconciliation with North Korea." Reducing tensions on the Korean Peninsula obviously was a worthwhile objective, and Kim convinced the Kim Jong-il regime to open a dialogue and host a bilateral summit in Pyongyang.

But Kim sacrificed substance for symbols. Reports Mr. Kirk: "Far from retaliating with

sanctions for the missile and submarine incidents, undeterred in the pursuit of Sunshine, South Korea reaffirmed its commitment to 70 percent of the \$5 billion cost of building the nuclear power reactors in the North. The South was more anxious than ever to pursue economic ties as the best antidote to North Korean threats. The venture into North-South tourism by the Hyundai Group, with the full backing of the governments of North and South Korea, came to signify the opening of the North to a range of opportunities."

Alas, most of the opportunities were stillborn. Everything from cross-border family visits to humanitarian aid was turned to the North's advantage, with no apparent impact on Pyongyang's hostile military posture. Nor did North Korea reform within. Observes Mr. Kirk: "While more North Koreans clamored to escape, refugees reported starvation, famine, executions and persecution as they had for years."

Kim's international reputation was fortified by receipt of the Nobel Peace Prize, but he lost domestic popularity as his presidency wound down in disappointment. The North remained unreconciled. South Koreans learned that Hyundai had essentially bought the summit by paying North Korea \$100 million. Kim's associates and three sons ended up in the dock for corruption.

Finally, dark clouds replaced his Sunshine policy. President Lee Myung Bak, elected in 2007, ended unconditional aid to the North, much to Pyongyang's irritation.

Out of office and increasingly enfeebled by illness, Kim found "the challenge now was to preserve and promote his legacy," writes Mr. Kirk. To do so, Kim pushed for continuing dialogue with the North and, sadly for the one-time human rights crusader, underplayed the DPRK's extraordinary brutality. Kim denied that Kim Jong-il was "cruel as they say," causing Mr. Kirk to note that "With that off-hand remark, DJ swept away the horrors of a gulag to which analysts believed 200,000 prisoners were regularly consigned, new arrivals replacing those starved or diseased or tortured to death or executed."

Kim died last year, and President Lee ordered a state funeral. Tens of thousands of mourners turned out to remember the good about a tireless activist for democracy at home.

As Don Kirk details, Kim's presidency was a tragic disappointment. But the latter's life of struggle was essential to South Korea's move to freedom. That the Republic of Korea now lives up to its name is owing in no small part to Kim's unceasing political activity. "Korea Betrayed" helps us better understand the manifold gifts and flaws of this extraordinary statesman.

Doug Bandow, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, is the author of "Tripwire: Korea and U.S. Foreign Policy in a Changed World" (Cato Institute, 1996) and co-author of "The Korean Conundrum: America's Troubled Relations with North and South Korea" (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

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