

# BOOK REVIEW: 'Eating with the Enemy'

By Doug Bandow

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EATING WITH THE ENEMY: HOW I WAGED PEACE WITH NORTH KOREA FROM MY BBQ SHACK IN HACKENSACK

By Robert Egan with Kurt Pitzer

St. Martin's Press, \$25.99/386 pages

Dealing with North Korea is one of Washington's most disagreeable tasks. The country is isolated; its political system is opaque; its government is truculent. The United States does not maintain diplomatic relations with the so-called Democratic People's Republic of Korea. Because of Pyongyang, Northeast Asia is one of the world's most dangerous regions.

Establishing normal relations with North Korea might not bring regional peace. However, such contacts would yield some insights into an otherwise closed society. With American diplomats unwilling to engage in diplomacy, a working-class restaurateur in New Jersey stepped into the void. Bobby Egan (with the assistance of writer Kurt Pitzer) tells the curiously engaging tale of how he became friends with members of the North Korean U.N. delegation and ended up visiting North Korea. Mr. Egan is an unlikely international ambassador. A high school dropout who abused drugs and committed petty crimes, he eventually righted his life and established a BBQ joint called Cubby's. He met some Vietnamese diplomats and got involved in the issue of left-behind POWs. The relationship between Mr. Egan and the North Koreans zigged and zagged. The latter apparently believed that Mr. Egan was an intelligence officer. The DPRK mission staff used him to help with practical issues, such as buying gifts for North Korean dignitaries. But Mr. Egan also had his own agenda. For instance, he decided that the North needed public exposure, so he cadged free tickets to take his newfound friends to New Jersey Nets and New York Giants games.

No surprise, the FBI took an interest in his activities. He worked with them as a quasi-informant, even helping collect DNA samples for some bizarre purpose. Nevertheless, his relationship with the feds always was difficult. For instance, they were horrified at the thought that he would take a North Korean hunting, as if an armed DPRK diplomat would wreak havoc upon a helpless America. Over time, he developed a close friendship with Han Song-ryol, counselor and then U.N. ambassador. It's an improbably madcap story. After Mr. Egan hires a limousine for game night, his wife reasonably points out: "Why can't they pay for it themselves? If they can afford a nuclear program, they can afford a limo."

"The North Koreans invited him to Pyongyang in 1994. He stayed at the same hotel and visited many of the same spots that I did when I went two years before. But he was given a Kim Il-sung button, a major honor denied me (the North Koreans were upset at my evident disdain for the ubiquitous "icons" of the Kims). They also stuck him with sodium pentothal, or "truth serum," in an attempt to find out who he really worked for. (Thankfully, I avoided this process).

Mr. Egan's most interesting activities were his attempts to play informal ambassador, resolving disputes between the DPRK and United States. He seems shocked that "the Clinton Administration didn't want me to be part of the conversation about North Korea." He appears befuddled that U.S. officials were unimpressed by Pyongyang's offer help hunt down Osama bin Laden. Unfortunately, Mr. Egan's abundant moral fervor was not matched by geopolitical understanding. There's a good policy argument for opening diplomatic relations with and eliminating economic sanctions against North Korea. But it is a case that must take into account the nature of the DPRK regime. There may be none worse on earth. A half-million or more people perished in a famine in the late 1990s. The regime

remains a Stalinist police state. None of its neighbors, including China, favors a North Korea with an abundant nuclear arsenal and continent-spanning missiles.

Mr. Egan ignores the reality of the regime with which he is dealing, even though he acknowledges that his North Korean friend, Ambassador Han, went through some form of re-education after returning home for the first time. Mr. Egan's individual relationships with North Korean officials cannot overcome the larger political issues with North Korea. Nevertheless, Mr. Egan thinks he played a major role in the release of a U.S. helicopter pilot shot down over North Korea, the participation of North Korea in the 1996 Olympics and the provision of private food aid to the North. He even worries that by toasting the DPRK's nuclear test with North Korean diplomats that he was "responsible for encouraging [Ambassador] Han to move forward" with nuclear weapons. The idea that "Dear Leader" Kim Jong-il made decisions in Pyongyang about his nation's nuclear program based on the opinion of a New Jersey restaurateur rather charming, but it is easy to mistake causation for correlation.

Perhaps Mr. Egan's craziest adventure was his trip to the DPRK with a Pennsylvania state senator to bring home the U.S.S. Pueblo, the intelligence ship seized by North Korea in 1968. The crew was eventually released, but the ship remains a tourist attraction highlighting the evils of American imperialism.

A decision to return the ship could only come from the Dear Leader, and the North would do so only in return for a substantial concession. After all, the Pueblo is Pyongyang's most important symbol of American humiliation. Mr. Egan's belief that the North Korean regime would hand the ship over to a couple of American unknowns exhibits blinding naivete.

After Mr. Egan and his companion showed up in Pyongyang, they only got to visit the Pueblo as tourists – after paying the normal admission fee! "I fumed all the way back to New York," he writes, and for a time he refused to talk to Mr. Han, who, he decided, "was just like any other commie. They were all alike - a one-way street." Mr. Egan eventually got over his disappointment, and the book ends with Mr. Han returning to Pyongyang. Mr. Egan feels good about his accomplishments, as well he should. The most important message of "Eating with the Enemy" is not that average citizens can easily surmount international political barriers. They cannot. But private people can reach beyond international politics to form enduring human relationships. As did Bobby Egan.

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