

Donald Oberdorfer

"Promoting Religious Freedom in North Korea": Donald Oberdorfer Oral Testimony

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MR. OBERDORFER: Thank you, Mr. Chairman and members of the Commission. I appear here not as an expert on North Korea or Korea in general but as one who's had considerable engagement with that country over a long period of time from the days when I was a lieutenant in the U.S. Army in 1953, a correspondent for the Washington Post in Northeast Asia, 17 years of covering diplomacy, and then the author of a book, which you referred to.

I basically have three points to make. The first is I don't have any reason to doubt the testimony that you heard this morning from these three people. I have no first-hand knowledge but I have no doubt in my mind that North Korea is one of the most serious human rights violators in the world. The system they've set up there has other priorities and one of the things that it does is to push down anybody who might disagree in any form or fashion with the government.

The second point very simply is I believe that the United States should always stick up for human rights. That's part of our heritage. It's part of what we are or who we are and it's something that we all believe in. The observance of human rights, including the right and ability to practice religion as one sees fit, is part of the American story and I think we should do that. And I think that meetings such as the one you've had today help to advance that by opening up information.

The third point is I do not believe the United States can usefully impose its views by compulsion about human rights on other countries. As a practical matter, one of the best things that could happen in Korea and in North Korea is the opening of the North Korean government and society to influences from the outside world. It is, as we all know, one of the most isolated countries in the world.

Recently the South Korean government, under President Kim Dae Jung, undertook a greater emphasis and degree of activity in engagement with the North than had ever been the case before. As part of my book process I studied the relationship between North and South since the early 1970s. That was what the book was all about. And some other

presidents have tried it, going back to Park Chung Hee, in fact, but no one with the determination of Kim Dae Jung and in the last year or so he has begun to get some results.

The openings are small, in a sense. The door's opening a crack. We learned with the former Soviet Union that in a dark room if you open a door or a window to the outside just a crack it can have enormous effects.

I think it's important for the United States to engage with North Korea and it's important that there not be put up obstacles to this engagement.

During the last years we're all very familiar with the dangers that exist on the Korean Peninsula. It is still, even with Afghanistan and India and Pakistan, one of the most dangerous places on the face of the earth. There are literally close to 2 million troops on side or another of a very narrow dividing line, including 37,000 American troops. This is one place in the world where if anything happens militarily of a substantial nature, the United States is going to be instantly involved.

In 1994 we came very close, much closer than people realize, than most people realize, to having a war with North Korea, which would have had horrific consequences not only in North Korea but in South Korea and in many, many thousands of being killed, military and civilian. So we've got to be careful how we deal with North Korea but we must deal with North Korea. That's the way to improve things there.

I was primarily a journalist, as you know, but I've been something of an historian in that I've written three books of contemporary history--one about the Vietnam War, Tet!, one about the end of the Cold War called "The Turn," and this one about Korea.

It's clear to me in connection with Vietnam, in connection with the Cold War, that the lack of contact, the lack of understanding, the lack of some kind of process whereby people could get a better sense of one another was a major contributing factor to those two tragedies; that is to say Vietnam and the Cold War. I don't mean to say that it was all a misunderstanding. That's not so. But it was so that a great deal of blood, treasure, energy, tragedy could have been averted had we known the Vietnamese better, had they known us better, had we known the Russians better, had they known us better, and I think the same is true with North Korea.

So I would say it's important for the United States to let North Koreans and the world know how we stand about human rights, including religious rights, but I think it is also very important that we continue and promote the dialogue. And I would warn against anything that would be a condition or precondition to further U.S. engagement with North Korea. Human rights should be used to improve the situation of people as best we can but not as an issue to prevent, to reduce or cut off official contacts or relationships between our two countries. Thank you very much.

CHAIRMAN YOUNG: Mr. Oberdorfer, thank you very much for that.