

SHOULD WE BE AFRAID OF NORTH KOREA?

BY DAVID
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NORTH KOREA AROUSED ALARM around the world one year ago when it conducted its first nuclear bomb test. Now officials in North Korea—which President George W. Bush has called part of the world's "Axis of Evil"—pledge that they will cease their nuclear activity. What is this country like inside? We asked Contributing Editor David Wallechinsky to find out.

FOR THE PAST FIVE YEARS, I have written an annual article for PARADE about the worst dictators in power. Every year, North Korean leader Kim Jong-il has ranked first or second. Now I would finally see his country for myself. Since it is difficult, if not almost impossible, for

A REPORTER GOES INSIDE A COUNTRY RUN BY ONE OF THE WORLD'S MOST OPPRESSIVE DICTATORS.

journalists to gain a visa to enter, I applied as the vice president of the International Society of Olympic Historians (which I am). With me on the trip were my two sons and three friends.

Throughout our five-day stay in North Korea, my group was accompanied at all times outside our hotel by three guides

who would not allow any of us to walk on the street. I've traveled to many countries with repressive regimes, including Spain under Franco and later Burma, but this was the first time I was not allowed to wander around or talk with the locals.

A NATION RULED BY A CULT OF PERSONALITY

The leaders of North Korea have developed the world's most advanced personality cult. On the streets, every person I saw was wearing a pin with the smiling face of Kim Il-sung, the late father of the current dictator, Kim Jong-il. Images of the two Kims are everywhere: on billboards, in subways and in every classroom and home.

A huge bronze statue (in photo at left) looms over the city of Pyongyang, the capital of North Korea. It is of Kim Il-sung, who also is known as "The Great Leader" and "The President for Eternity." When I visited, I watched as schoolchildren put flowers in front of his statue and bowed in reverence. In fact, the two most popular flowers in the country are called the Kimilsungia and the Kimjongilia.

One of the guides summed up North Korean life when he said, "We have many rules and regulations, and it is very important to follow them...although we don't always know why." The three guides were young, likable and intelligent, but they had been strongly influenced by their schooling, which taught them that Kim Il-sung was responsible for inventing everything that shapes their lives and that both he and his son were all-knowing and all-powerful. One of the guides continued

THE NUCLEAR THREAT TO THE U.S.

In an encouraging move, North Korea agreed last month to disable its nuclear facilities and to give a full disclosure of its weapons capabilities in exchange for foreign aid and better relations with the U.S. However, this pact won't completely disarm the nation, because it does not explicitly address North Korea's existing plutonium supply. That is large enough to make six to eight bombs, according to Siegfried Hecker, a nuclear expert and part of a recent delegation that went to North Korea to confirm the reactor shutdown. He says, "The greatest threat posed by North Korea to the U.S. is the potential export of its plutonium to other nations or groups." It's thought that North Korea has provided nuclear technologies to Syria; there's also speculation that it is giving nuclear assistance to Iran. For now, though, North Korea seems to be focused more on getting validation and support from the global community and less on flexing its military muscle.

—Daryl Chen

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explained to me that although soccer is the most popular sport in North Korea, he preferred basketball, because Koreans are a short race and Kim Jong-il says "playing basketball will make us taller." (Reports say that 7-year-old North Korean boys are 8 inches shorter than their South Korean counterparts.)

Leadership via a cult of personality goes back for centuries in North Korea. Says Bruce Cumings, professor of history at the University of Chicago and author of several books on the country: "The North Korean people have only known monarchy, brutal Japanese rule and autocracy—but never democracy."

THE MOST ISOLATED PEOPLE IN THE WORLD

To retain a strong hold, Kim Jong-il has sequestered his citizens from the world. Cell phones are illegal—mine was confiscated on arrival and returned to me when I left the country. Regular people cannot access the Internet, and newspapers consist of state propaganda. Radios and TVs receive only government channels (security forces enter homes to make sure this is so). "North Korea is the most isolated country in the world," says Selig Harrison, director of the Center for International Policy's Asia program, who has been to North Korea 10 times. "But since the thaw in relations with South Korea seven years ago and the recent decision to admit foreign tour groups, some outside influences have begun to filter in."

We were told repeatedly that all of the nation's problems, including the need to maintain a huge army, were caused by the United States. North Korea's troops are said to be a million strong, but if what I saw of them was any indication, they're not too formidable. The soldiers did not look fit, and some looked underfed. In addition,

most experts believe that the country lacks the military power needed to attack another country. "Its missile and nuclear forces are defensive, not offensive," says Harrison.

The soldiers' appearance highlights another big problem in North Korea—widespread poverty. In the mid-to-late 1990s, the nation's fi-



Some of its troops on the march (top); current leader Kim Jong-il.

THE ARMY IN NORTH KOREA IS SAID TO BE A MILLION STRONG.

nances hit rock-bottom, resulting in a famine that reportedly killed hundreds of thousands, if not millions of people. While some observers predicted the economy would collapse entirely, it has since recovered, thanks to an increase in trade and a return of foreign subsidies.


On our outings, the bus driver always took us on the same streets, where the buildings were clean and lights shined through curtains. But between them, I could glimpse ramshackle neighborhoods. Even the jeeps the soldiers drove seemed at least 15 years old. And I knew that what we were being shown was the best the country had to offer.

To me, the real symbol of the country is the enormous unfinished pyramid-hotel with a crane on top that has dominated the Pyongyang landscape for 15 years (construction on it stopped in 1992).

This eyesore is too poorly built to be finished, but it will never be taken down, because Kim Jong-il believes he'll lose face if it is demolished.

TOO OPPRESSED TO BE ENEMIES?

During my trip, I was well aware of the darker parts of the country that our guides did not show us, like its nuclear weapons facilities and the prison camps where an estimated 250,000 North Koreans currently are being held for dubious reasons. As hostile as Kim Jong-il's government has been to ours, I look at his people as victims rather than aggressors. However, there are signs that their extreme isolation might be lifting. As shown by its signing of the nuclear-disablement agreement and its desire for economic growth, North Korea is shedding some of its Cold War antagonism and trying to establish more positive relationships with other nations.

"North Korea is an incredibly tough, resilient country," says Jonathan Pollack, professor of Asian and Pacific studies at the Naval War College. "Now the leaders understand how far behind they lag, but they fear opening up too much." When the time comes and the North Koreans are fully exposed to ideas from the rest of the world, I can't help but hope that they'll become aware of alternatives to the propaganda and speak out for change on their own. 

QUICK FACTS

North Korea, also known as the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, occupies the northern half of the Korean peninsula.

With a population of about 23 million, it has half as many people as South Korea.

Korea was split in two after World War II and was a Cold War battleground during the Korean Civil War from 1950 to 1953, which killed millions of Koreans and 33,741 Americans.

Kim Il-sung was a guerrilla leader who evaded capture while fighting against the Japanese. He took power when North Korea gained independence in 1948 and kept it until his death in 1994. Kim Jong-il, his son and successor, has ruled ever since.