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Benjamin Young
ben.r.young@dsu.edu

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Before "Fire and Fury": The Role of Anger and Fear in U.S.–North Korea Relations, 1968–1994

Benjamin R. Young*

Dakota State University, Madison, South Dakota, USA

Since the beginning of the Korean War, the North Korean and U.S. governments have been involved in emotional warfare. From North Korea's stated "eternal hatred" of the U.S. imperialists to Washington's demonization of Pyongyang as an insidious Soviet pawn, emotions have been at the heart of this hostile bilateral relationship. Using three case studies (the 1968 Pueblo incident, the 1976 axe murder incident, and the 1994 nuclear crisis), I examine the ways in which the two sides have elicited emotional responses from their populations for their respective political goals. By portraying the U.S. as the source of all evilness in its state-run media, the North Korean regime halted internal criticisms and consolidated their political power. Meanwhile, the U.S. media saw North Korea's aggression as a symbol of Communist treachery and Soviet imperialism.

Keywords: North Korea, Pueblo, nuclear, Kim Il Sung, emotions

Introduction

Amidst increased tensions between the United States and North Korea in August 2017, U.S. President Donald Trump told reporters at his golf resort, "North Korea best not make any more threats to the United States. They will be met with fire and the fury like the world has never seen."[1] This warning to North Korea included the highly emotive language, "fire and fury," and signaled this tense diplomatic relationship as one fraught with the emotions of anger and fear. Unconsciously, Donald Trump evoked a longstanding tradition of emotional warfare between the United States and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (hereafter DPRK, official title of North Korea). In this article, I examine the emotional role of anger and fear in U.S.–North

* E-mail: byoun3@gmail.com

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Korea relations. I argue that the nearly seventy–year fraught relationship between Washington and Pyongyang cannot be resolved with leader-level summits nor photo-ops of the respective leaderships. Rather, the U.S.–DPRK relationship is a deeply rooted conflict built upon decades of emotional hostility and thus rapprochement requires gradual trust building by both sides. Using three case studies, the 1968 Pueblo crisis, the 1976 axe murder incident, and the 1994 nuclear crisis, I will explore how deeply anti-American and anti-DPRK sentiments run within the consciousness of the American and North Korean populations.

Despite the stark differences in their political systems, the American and North Korean populations both exhibited similar emotional responses to the 1968 Pueblo crisis, the 1976 axe murder incident, and the 1994 nuclear crisis. Although directed in different directions, both American and North Korean societies felt anger and fear in response to these three conflicts and often expressed frustrations in surprisingly similar ways. The origins of this emotional warfare derive from the Korean War, when U.S. armed forces stopped Kim Il Sung from unifying the Peninsula under his communist rule. In this article, I borrow Neta C. Crowford's definition of emotions as "the inner states that individuals describe to others as feelings, and those feelings may be associated with biological, cognitive, and behavioral states and changes."[2]

In addition to the DPRK, the U.S. government has had long-standing hostilities with Iran and Cuba. Washington's policies towards Iran, Cuba, and North Korea are often quite similar and invoke similar emotional responses of anger and fear.[3] Isolation, sanctions, and economic blockades are all part of how Washington deals with these regimes. However, the key differentiator is that Pyongyang developed a sophisticated nuclear arsenal and the two sides previously fought a brutal three–year long war. Thus, there is a historical precedent for military conflict between the U.S. and North Korea. In addition, the Korean War concluded with only an armistice and military skirmishes have broken out in the past between the two sides. Thus, there is a heightened level of danger and violence that could result from the unfinished Korean War.

The division of the Korean Peninsula reverberated emotionally in two ways. First, North Koreans deeply resented U.S. intervention in dividing the Korean nation and the brutal U.S. air bombing campaign that nearly wiped out the country's entire infrastructure.[4] Second, many Americans disliked sending troops over to East Asia a mere five years after the end of World War II and subsequently establishing a permanent military presence in South Korea. The trauma and unfinished nature of the Korean War made emotions a touchstone of U.S.–North Korea relations.[5] As Emma Hutchison, a scholar of emotions, explains, "I suggest that the type of solidarity constructed after trauma often serves not merely to reinstate a conservative and ultimately exclusionary vision of political community, but moreover it can become a source of perceived cultural (or national) injury that risks fueling new conflict."[6] The North Korean leadership has been particularly adept at manipulating the historical memory of the Korean War for its own political goals. From referring to the conflict

as the "Victorious Fatherland Liberation War" to establishing a museum in Sinchon dedicated to U.S. war atrocities, the Kim family regime controls the narrative of the Korean War as a way to emotionally mobilize its population.[7]

This article does not equate the liberal democracy of the United States with the absolute autocracy of North Korea, which continues to commit human rights violations on a massive scale.[8] Rather, this social history approaches U.S.–North Korean relations from the bottom up in an attempt to highlight the importance of negative emotions, notably anger and fear, in this often hostile diplomatic relationship. In discussing the history of emotions, it is important to question whether Americans and North Koreans expressed anger and fear in the same way. As emotions are culturally specific, anger and fear are seemingly subject to linguistic differences as well. Nonetheless, as psychologist Paul Ekman explains, anger and fear are two of the six basic emotions that all humans, regardless of age, gender, and linguistic or cultural background, exhibit.[9] These two emotions are hardwired into the human brain as a "fight or flight" response to stimuli in their environment. The division between anger and fear is ambiguous and in this piece, I often merge these two negative emotions together. I also use other adjectives as well, such as frustration and paranoia, to describe these two emotional states.

Emotions are slippery and ill-defined concepts that are often individualistic. While all individuals express fear and anger, can nations collectively express emotions? I contend that a national consciousness or national psyche manifests itself through the medium of the mass media and emotional expressions. A national consciousness or psyche is the mental amalgamation of public opinion, popular sentiments, and polling data of civil society within a particular nation-state. As Benedict Anderson explained, nations are "imagined communities" that give individuals a sense of unity and identity.[10] With that in mind, a dichotomy of "us" and "them" exists within the nation-state framework and I contend that anger and fear is one of the most important signifiers in delineating this divide. If a national discourse is fearful and angry towards a certain group of outsiders, national unity is strengthened and a greater sense of national identity emerges. The generation of negative emotions, chiefly anger and fear, via the proliferation of the mass media unifies diverse communities and mobilizes local populations across a nation-state.

In this social history, I primarily utilize U.S. and North Korean press reports as well as archival materials from Pyongyang's former communist allies, which had diplomats in the DPRK send dispatches about the domestic atmosphere back to their home countries, in order to capture the emotional responses from both societies. These press reports, specifically letters to the editor and op-eds in U.S. newspapers, and diplomatic wires described the national sentiments of their respective societies as related to U.S.–North Korea relations. Due to the lack of many basic freedoms in the DPRK, recovering a true social history of North Korean emotions is near impossible. One cannot freely walk around Pyongyang and interview citizens on the street or stroll

into the archives of the DPRK's Grand People's Study House. However, by looking at a variety of North Korean press reports and diplomatic wires from those foreigners inside the country, I recover a partial image of the ways in which the Kim family regime emotionally mobilized the masses.

Similar to Maoist China, the North Korean leadership "did not attempt to rule through pure coercion. Rather, it aimed not just to induce conformity but also to establish its legitimacy through the transformation of minds, which in turn depended on eliciting appropriate emotions."[11] As experts in thought reform, the North Korean leadership relied upon revolutionary discipline and charismatic politics rather than violent coercion. As social scientists of North Korea, Heonik Kwon and Byung-Ho Chung, explain, "North Korea had a highly skillful political leader [Kim Il Sung] who knew how to build an aura of captivating charismatic power. This leader understood the efficacy of this power for mobilizing the masses toward ambitious political goals, and he was committed to keeping that power not only during his lifetime but also beyond the time of his rule."[12] The North Korean leadership galvanized feelings of patriotism and loyalty by compelling citizens' participation in mass rallies, mass organizations, and public displays. Often regarded in the West as an all-powerful dictatorship that controls its peoples' every action, Pyongyang in fact depends on widespread public support for regime maintenance. No government, not even one as brutal and authoritarian as the Kim family regime, can rule without people buying into the legitimacy of the sociopolitical system.

As a way to retain domestic support during periods of economic instability, the leadership in Pyongyang instigated clashes with the United States and promoted anti-American sentiments amongst the populace. From holding mass anti-American rallies in Pyongyang to calling Americans "wolves" in its media, the North Korean government manipulated the emotions of its citizenry to bolster popular support for the regime. Meanwhile, the U.S. population unknowingly often fell victim to the same emotional manipulation of the North Korean regime. By instigating a naval conflict, a major border skirmish, and a nuclear crisis, the North Korean leadership stoked feelings of anger and fear within the United States towards the Kim family regime, which ironically strengthened Pyongyang's own strategic messaging to its people that Americans were intent on destroying their small mountain republic. By creating a siege mentality and a paranoid fear of the United States, the North Korean leadership held onto power during periods of domestic uncertainty.

While it may seem obvious that international relations are a heavily emotive space, the study of the affect in the history of international relations (IR) remains under-researched.[13] However, as Emma Hutchison states, "Emotions cannot be removed from politics, because emotions lie at the very core of human existence."[14] Perhaps due to the perceived subjectivity of emotions and the difficulty of extracting the affect from written documents, IR scholars remain reluctant to delve into emotions–focused research. In addition, when emotions are used as a heuristic device, IR scholars tend

to focus on the emotions of leaders, not that of the populace. For example, in his book *Emotional Choices: How the Logic of Affect Shapes Coercive Diplomacy*, Robin Markwica emphasizes "emotional choice theory" in analyzing the actions of Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev and U.S. President John F. Kennedy during the Cuban Missile Crisis, and that of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein and U.S. President George H. W. Bush during the Gulf War.[15] In his book, *Emotional Diplomacy: Official Emotion on the International Stage*, Todd Hall highlights "official emotion" and the ways in which leaderships conducted emotional diplomacy. However, Hall distinguishes "official emotion" from "popular emotion," which he defines as "the unofficial, public expressions of emotions by private citizens within a state."[16] In this article, I focus on popular emotions as a means to investigate the deeply rooted biases and prejudices of both Americans and North Koreans. These domestic populations incited and marshaled certain emotional responses on their own accord, which in turn influenced the decision-making processes of leaderships in both Washington and Pyongyang.

As Todd Hall explains, "Granted, certain authoritarian regimes may be quite adept at exercising control over displays of popular emotion."[17] This was the case in North Korea, where civil society does not exist and the lines between the state and the individual are blurred. This article uses popular emotions, specifically anger and fear, as a lens into examining the social history of U.S.–North Korea relations. Popular emotions still remain a vital facet of U.S.–North Korea relations and further research on its historical context should be investigated in order to better evaluate the contemporary situation on the Korean Peninsula.

1968 Pueblo Crisis

On January 23, 1968, North Korean armed forces captured the *USS Pueblo*, a U.S. Navy spy ship, in international waters off the coast of the DPRK. Ill equipped for combat, the U.S. intelligence vessel quickly succumbed to North Korean forces and was brought to Wonsan port. The eighty–two crewmen on board would spend the next eleven months in North Korean prison camps where they endured regular torture sessions and propaganda photo-ops. A couple of days before Christmas day in 1968, the crewmen were released after the U.S. government signed an official declaration of confession, that indicated the *Pueblo* had crossed into North Korean waters, at a formal ceremony.[18] After the crewmen were released back into the free world, the U.S. government quickly renounced this confession. While the 1968 Pueblo crisis has evoked considerable scholarly attention from historians, especially when it comes to the broader international context of inter–Korean relations and the Vietnam War, the emotions raised by this incident have not been sufficiently examined.[19]

After capturing the *USS Pueblo*, North Korean leader Kim Il Sung galvanized patriotic fervor and a siege mentality by creating a "military psychosis" in North

Korea. Pyongyang provoked this conflict with the U.S. during a period of internal economic instability as a way to deflect public criticism of the regime's activities and boost national unity. Based on archival documents from the Eastern bloc, diplomats and the North Korean public genuinely seemed to believe a war was going to break out at any moment. On the other hand, the U.S. government's focus on the war in Vietnam reverberated throughout the U.S. public and made many Americans believe the monolithic communist forces intended to open up a second front in Korea after the capture of the *USS Pueblo*. However, as documents from the former Eastern Bloc demonstrated, the North Korean government acted on its own in capturing the U.S. spy ship. Pyongyang's aggressive actions greatly irritated the Soviet leadership. Nonetheless, paranoia and misunderstanding diffused throughout the U.S. public that Moscow used the North Koreans as proxies for this brazen attack on the *Pueblo*.

In the days after the capture of the *Pueblo*, the U.S. public was shocked and irate that such a brazen attack on U.S. sovereignty took place in international waters at the behest of a small remote nation. The pastor from the Madras Conservative Baptist Church of Central Oregon said in an op-ed in his local paper, "Our own nation was utterly embarrassed and humiliated over the *Pueblo* incident with tiny North Korea."[20] The Associated Press journalist, James Marlow, summed up the domestic environment after the incident, "The first reaction in this country was dismay that this might mean another war, astonishment that it could happen at all, and anger that it did happen."[21]

Some members of the U.S. Congress pressured President Lyndon B. Johnson to declare war on North Korea and immediately take back the *Pueblo*. However, amidst the prolonged war in Vietnam and the black freedom struggle within the U.S.., Johnson's administration wisely urged restraint and dialogue. Secretary of State Dean Rusk said, "My strong word of advice to the North Koreans is to cool it."[22] A survey from the Associated Press Managing Editors Association in March 1968 explained that Americans "generally indicated anger" at what the *Pueblo* crisis had done to "the national posture, but no agreement on whether the United States followed the right course."[23] Meanwhile, a Gallup poll in mid-February 1968 indicated that the U.S. public approved of President Johnson's nonviolent handling of the *Pueblo* crisis by a 3:2 ratio.[24] Thus, while anger was the emotion that initially described the U.S. public's response to the *Pueblo* crisis, most Americans feared starting a second war in Asia and this emotional community overrode the first.

In order to communicate with Pyongyang about the release of the crewmen, President Johnson opened up diplomatic channels with communist nations, chiefly the Soviet Union. However, the U.S. media angrily pointed at the center of the communist world, Moscow, as the primary culprit of the attack. Leon Dennen, a writer in Newburgh, New York's *Evening News*, wrote, "To have asked Russia to mediate in the dispute between the United States and North Korea was like asking the Mafia to serve as a friend of the court. There is no doubt that North Korea is one Asian communist country that is completely subservient to Russia."[25] On January 29, 1968, syndicated

conservative columnist David Lawrence wrote, "The attitude of the Soviet government will be a key to whether the [*Pueblo*] incident will diminish in importance or become an excuse for starting war crises in the Far East."[26] Six months later, Associated Press journalist Spencer Davis wrote, "Pro-Soviet Premier Kim Il Sung of North Korea, who praised the Soviet intervention of Czechoslovakia, has threatened repeatedly to try the *Pueblo* crew for spying, but he has set no date."[27]

The communist linkage between Moscow and Pyongyang in events surrounding the seizure of the *Pueblo* seemed obvious to these U.S. journalists. However, as Soviet documents later revealed, Moscow thought North Korea's independent and reckless handling of the *Pueblo* crisis was extremely dangerous. In an April 1968 speech in Moscow, Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev said, "The measures taken in this case by the government of the DPRK appear unusually harsh." Brezhnev added, "We insistently advised the Korean comrades…to show reserve, not to give the Americans an excuse for widening provocations, to settle the incident by political means."[28] In other words, Soviet leadership held the DPRK, not the United States, responsible for the ratcheting up of tensions and grew frustrated with their renegade North Korean allies in 1968. Misunderstandings hindered both U.S. and North Korean sides and may explain why the release of the crewmen took eleven months to carry out.

As in the United States, feelings of anger also permeated the North Korean population after the seizure of the *Pueblo*. The North Korean government's version of events explained that the *Pueblo* encroached upon the territorial waters of the DPRK. Thus, the intelligence vessel violated the sovereignty of their republic. This breach added to an already intense anti-American atmosphere within the country. For example, the seventh issue of the 1968 *Chosŏn Yesul* (North Korean Art) magazine published a song, entitled "Death to the U.S. Imperialists." A part of the chorus went, "Remember American imperialists, you were once defeated here, you will perish on this land."[29] A July 1968 article from the North Korean magazine *Chollima* explains, "Even the brutal U.S. imperialists would not dare to fight the [North Korean] sea soldiers again, whose hearts are filled with devotion to their Great Leader. If the bastards forget this lesson and rush into it again, it will be death and corpses."[30] This propaganda carried over into real dialogue as North Korean General Pak Jung-guk told the ambassadors of Poland and Czechoslovakia on January 28, 1968, "It is an empty illusion if the American imperialists believe that they could get back the ship and the crew by force. They will miscalculate, if they believe that they could solve the problem with the government of the DPRK by use of force." Pak continued, "If they use force, we cannot help but answer with armed forces. In this case the American imperialists will get nothing but the dead bodies of their men, who are anyway nothing other than criminals."[31] Based on historical memory of the Korean War, the emotion of anger factored into North Korean perceptions of U.S. actions in 1968.

However, a climate of fear, more than anger, enveloped the DPRK. The East German ambassador to the DPRK wrote, "On the day the '*Pueblo*' was seized there

was no light in North Korea in the evening, for they were obviously afraid of serious consequences. Ever since then jets have been permanently in the air. Massive defense forces are concentrated in the harbor area." The ambassador added, "Recently the militias have exercises every Saturday and Sunday in larger groups, whereby they practice in particular long marches. All [North] Koreans, starting at the age of five, have to carry their necessities in a backpack all the time." Militarism and war-readiness became a part of everyday life in 1968 North Korea. Czechoslovak diplomats noted, "Military training of civilians, including women and children, was justified by the thesis of 'turning the DPRK into a steel, impregnable fortress' and reached unprecedented magnitude in the DPRK."[32] Fear of a U.S. attack on the DPRK created "military psychosis," as the Czechoslovak diplomats called it, within North Korean society.[33]

In late February 1968, the domestic situation in the DPRK turned even more dangerous. According to Helga Picht, an East German diplomat stationed in Pyongyang, "On February 24, I was informed that the population of Pyongyang was put on highest alert for February 25. Residence wardens and other people reported that everything has to be prepared for defense until February 25, since the Americans in Panmunjom had ultimately requested the return of the *Pueblo* and its crew for this day." Picht continued, "On February 26, the statement was changed to the effect that everything has to be prepared until the end of February, though there was no further talk about the ultimatum. Citizens of the city of Pyongyang with relatives in the countryside are said to have been requested to send their families to these relatives."[34] In late February 1968, DPRK officials had warned Eastern European embassies in Pyongyang that North Korean workers were going to build military bunkers in case a war broke out on the Peninsula.[35] A siege mentality defined North Korea's political culture in February 1968. A *Chollima* article from early February 1968 stated, "The [North] Korean people do not want war, but they never fear war." The article added, "If the U.S. imperialists proceed on their route to war, the 40 million Korean people unified around our Great Leader Kim Il Sung, who has abundant experience in defeating the U.S. imperialists, will strike at the bastards. Therefore, the U.S. imperialists will die and perish in the war they cause."[36] As evidenced by Eastern European diplomatic reports and North Korean propaganda, the *Pueblo* crisis galvanized the spirit of patriotic self-defense in North Korean society and thus mobilized the entire population.

Meanwhile, foreigners in North Korea were caught in these crossfires of war fever and nationalistic passions. In a diplomatic report, the East German embassy on March 4, 1968 said, "The most significant element of the current domestic situation in the DPRK is the creation, respectively fueling, of an all-out war psychosis among the population."[37] With due cause, DPRK authorities may have legitimately believed a second Korean war was going to break out on the Peninsula in 1968. Nonetheless, this siege mentality and mass mobilization of North Korean society added to the nation's

growing economic problems.

In 1968, the patriotic indoctrination and "all-out war psychosis" of the DPRK had the effect of distracting the North Korean people from domestic economic troubles. According to Eastern bloc diplomatic reports, economic stagnation and a general decline in living conditions became increasingly apparent in late 1960s North Korea. A February 1968 report from the East German Ambassador to North Korea stated, "The Korean Workers' Party has given up on the possibility of making the DPRK into an economic model for South Korea and has fully entered a path close to the Chinese ideas."[38] Thus, starting in the late 1960s, the DPRK tied its legitimacy as the true Korean government to its military prowess *vis-à-vis* South Korea. The North Koreans in 1968 not only feared a U.S. invasion but the inevitable economic supremacy of South Korea on the Korean Peninsula.

Thus, this 1968 mass mobilization campaign in North Korea was most likely an intentional strategy by Kim Il Sung's regime to divert public attention away from the economic problems at home and allow him to pursue a military-first approach with little internal criticism. The Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs explained, "In 1968, the DPRK economic plan was under fulfilled, chiefly in connection with the creation of a war atmosphere in the country." The Soviet report concluded, "According to unofficial data, in 1968 the actual expenses for military purposes exceeded 40 percent of the state budget."[39] Similarly, the East German embassy in Pyongyang said that the militant atmosphere in 1968 contributed to the "economy's militarization, a certain stagnation of the civilian sector, as well as the difficulties to maintain the modest living standards of the population."[40] As a way to retain political power and bolster domestic support amidst economic problems, Kim Il Sung most likely used the *Pueblo* incident to provoke this climate of fear and anger. This mobilization of emotions was quite possible to achieve in authoritarian North Korea and Kim Il Sung used his absolute autocracy in the DPRK to create an emotional community of fear and anger in 1968.[41]

While Americans believed Moscow and Pyongyang were close allies, the reality was that there was a high degree of mistrust between the two communist governments. During the late 1960s, the Moscow-led communist monolith that existed within the U.S. consciousness was a creation of fear and paranoia that was not based on reality. The U.S. government's inability to understand the North Korean worldview and political culture has been a major reason why hostilities between the two countries continue to the present day. On the other hand, the paranoid and vengeful North Korean government held onto the *Pueblo* crewmen for eleven months and subjected them to brutal torture sessions. The North Koreans only released the crewmen after the U.S. government had officially declared in a formal ceremony with a signed confession that the *Pueblo* had violated the sovereignty of the DPRK and crossed into their territorial waters. As Mitch Lerner explains, "Consistent to the end, the DPRK stressed the signing in the domestic media, milking the incident for every possible ounce of *Juche* [self-reliance] by portraying the letter as a demonstration of North Korean strength and audacity forcing

a great power to yield."[42] The North Korean government feared the start of a second Korean War but strategically used the *Pueblo* crisis to stir up a domestic climate of anti-American rage and militaristic paranoia.

1976 Axe Murder Incident

In mid-August 1976, a large poplar tree sat in the Joint Security Area of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) between North and South Korea. On August 18, 1976, the U.S. and South Korean armed forces decided that it was finally time to cut down this tree, which obstructed the strategic view of the United Nations command (UNC) at Panmunjom. Despite earlier protestations from the North Korean side, vehicles took five South Korean woodcutters and ten UNC soldiers to cut down the tree. North Korea opposed the cutting down of this tree as they claimed it had been planted by the "Great Leader" Kim Il Sung himself.[43] Thus, North Korean soldiers approached the UNC team at the tree and demanded they stop cutting down the tree. The UNC team refused and the North Korean soldiers attacked them. The woodcutters dropped their axes, which the North Koreans then used to beat them. Altogether, two members of the UNC team, U.S. Army Captain Arthur Bonifas and U.S. Army First Lieutenant Mark Barrett, died in the attack and several others suffered serious injuries. A few days later, the UNC unleashed a large-scale exercise to finally cut down the tree. Appropriately named Operation Paul Bunyan, the UNC convoy included over eight hundred soldiers, twenty–seven military helicopters, B-52 bombers, and massive amounts of artillery stationed nearby. With overwhelming force, Operation Paul Bunyan was a success but this incident nearly developed into a full-fledged military conflict. In the aftermath of the August 18 incident, Harvard Law School Professor Jerome Cohen wrote in the *Boston Globe* that the Korean Peninsula now rivaled the Middle East as "the world's most dangerous powder keg."[44]

At the time, pundits wondered what provoked the North Korean side into attacking the UNC team. Some said it was an attempt by the DPRK to oust U.S. troops from the Korean Peninsula after their recent pullout from Vietnam while others argued that North Korea intended to influence the upcoming U.S. Presidential elections. However, North Korea told the world in 1976 why they attacked the UNC team—Kim Il Sung had himself planted the poplar tree and thus had to protect it against the U.S. imperialists. By taking the North Koreans at their word, I delve into the emotional influences of the Kim family personality cult on the North Korean population and try to explain why North Korean soldiers would sacrifice their lives for a mere tree. Due to their deep-seated anger towards the United States, the North Korean soldiers in that border guard unit reacted on their own volition in order to protect Kim Il Sung's poplar tree. Focusing on emotions in this incident complicates the top-down stereotype of North Korean totalitarianism. On the other hand, U.S. perceptions of North Korea

during this incident reveal the extent to which an exaggerated fear of an Asian pariah manifested in the national consciousness. By labeling Kim Il Sung as an irrational dictator that controls the every move of his countrymen, the U.S. media created a racialized perception of North Korea as "the sick man of Asia" and its citizens as automatons without agency.

One of the rumors circulating amongst the American punditry was that Kim Il Sung personally planned the attack. An anonymous letter to the editor in the *Chicago Tribune* said, "All who recall the horrors visited on the captured crew of the *USS Pueblo* know that President Kim Il Sung does not shrink from horrendous acts. But axe murders in the Panmunjom truce zone constitute a new level of viciousness even for him."[45] Most op-eds figured the leadership in Pyongyang craftily orchestrated this attack on the U.S. servicemen to influence U.S. politics. Few, if any, op-eds took the North Koreans at their word that the soldiers protected the tree as it was planted by their god-like leader, Kim Il Sung.

Amidst the failure of the Vietnam War, the axe murder incident had an effect on American public debate regarding the continuing presence of U.S. troops in South Korea. An op-ed in the *Boston Globe* warned the U.S. leadership to not react militarily to Kim Il Sung's provocations as it would be "playing into North Korea's hands" of intensifying U.S. public opinion against the presence of U.S. troops in South Korea. Relying on emotive expressions, the op-ed explained, "In their anger and frustration, many Americans—including some officials of the Ford Administration—may feel the time has come to retaliate against the Kim Il Sung regime. But while their anger is justifiable, military action—even on the scale of a limited punitive raid—would not be."[46] However, numerous op-eds and articles in national newspapers called for the pullout of U.S. troops from the Korean Peninsula.

Some Americans angrily questioned why Washington continued to support Park Chung Hee's brutal dictatorship in South Korea while others thought it was time to pullback U.S. troops from Asia after the nearly twenty year debacle in Vietnam. For example, William H. Davis from the organization, Vietnam Veterans Against the War, wrote in the Chicago Tribune, "Certainly 45,000 U.S. troops permanently stationed in South Korea are not there to act as park rangers or tree surgeons… American troops are there to prop up the government of a two-bit dictator and to protect American business interests in South Korea."[47] Meanwhile, Ben Wasserman of La Palma, California wrote in a letter to the editor in the *Los Angeles Times*, "Two American servicemen died needlessly a few weeks ago over a lousy tree. Were they defending freedom and democracy in South Korea? Hardly. Before we lose one more American life in South Korea, we had better get the hell out of there."[48] A Korean–American by the name of S.H. Lee wrote in the *Washington Post*, "As a Korean, I am ashamed of the senseless violence committed by North Korean soldiers at Panmunjom." Lee continued, "Although [the] boorishness exhibited by North Korean representatives throughout the world is childish and puzzling for its lack of any visible purpose, this particular

tragedy might have been avoided if South Koreans were assigned more active roles at Panmunjom."[49] The general consensus that appeared in U.S. press reports during this time was that the U.S. military presence in Korea needed to end and to let the two Koreas figure it out on their own.

The long-established hatred for the "U.S. imperialist bastards" within the North Korean national psyche seemed to have resulted in the attack. As the East German embassy in Pyongyang explained, "It was an 'over-reaction' by the DPRK personnel involved in the incident, whose background probably lies in fanatical feelings of hate."[50] The East German ambassador called it "highly speculative" that the attack was planned by the leadership in Pyongyang and that "permanent ideological pressure" on soldiers on both sides of the DMZ resulted in the incident.[51] Soviet diplomats agreed with this assessment. In a conversation with a Romanian diplomat in Moscow, the director in the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs Mikhail Stepanovich Kapitsa said the "incident provoked by the North Koreans had a local character, not having originated, so it seems, from the center." Kapitsa added that the regime in Pyongyang used the incident to deflect criticism from the public regarding domestic economic difficulties, such as the recent drought and industrial decline, "as well as an attempt to use this incident to promote even further the national vigilance spirit and the effective military preparedness of the entire people." Kapitsa concluded, "The United States are not currently and they will not be in the future interested in getting involved in Korea militarily. Moreover, the North Korean side must logically not be interested in the tensions in the area."[52] Thus, it seemed to Pyongyang's closest communist allies that the axe murder incident was not coordinated by Kim Il Sung but rather derived from the intense political indoctrination that North Koreans underwent.

The North Korean government used this incident as a way to boost domestic support for the regime and further promote anti-American sentiment amongst the population. Anger and fear of the "U.S. imperialist bastards" went hand-in-hand with mass mobilization in the DPRK. On August 21, 1976, the Romanian embassy in Pyongyang said, "The August 18th incident in Panmunjom represents almost the only topic covered by the written press and by radio broadcasts in the DPRK."[53] Similar to the conditions in the DPRK during the 1968 *Pueblo* crisis, an atmosphere of militaristic paranoia permeated the North Korean population in August 1976. The Romanian embassy in Pyongyang commented, "On August 20th, in Pyongyang and Wonsan, and according to the information we received, in other parts of the country as well, anti-air military defense drills took place." The Romanian report added, "We noticed that the population is preoccupied, being more worried than on other occasions by the situation which was thus created, but it is not alarmed, [nor] confused."[54] Kim Yong-jip, the interim head of the Press Division in the DPRK's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, told foreign reporters at a August 25, 1976 press conference in Pyongyang that the domestic situation was "critical" and there was a "possibility that at any given moment war breaks out."[55] War hysteria, promoted by the DPRK government's

propaganda apparatus, distracted the North Korean population from internal economic troubles.

Less than a month after the axe murder attack, North Korea's state-run media published numerous articles with a heavier than usual dosage of anti-American rage and fear-mongering. For example, the main newspaper of the Korean Workers' Party *Rodong Sinmun* said on September 2, 1976, "The U.S. imperialists, after having perpetuated planned provocations in the Panmunjom joint security area, are making desperate efforts to set off a new war while concentrating naval and air power, including a nuclear aircraft carrier in and around South Korea."[56] Two days later, the *Rodong Sinmun* declared, "Our country's situation has now become extremely tense due to the aggressive scheming of the U.S. imperialists. The U.S. imperialist aggressors have completed their war preparations and are now on a status ready to attack the northern half of the republic on a large scale."[57] Fourteen days later, the *Rodong Sinmun* proclaimed, "The U.S. imperialist aggressors, who are planning a new war in Korea and who are running wild with red eyes, are our forever enemies who began trampling our 3000-ri-long beautiful land under their feet over one hundred years and who cruelly massacred our people."[58] The North Korean state-run media's portrayal of the "U.S. imperialist wolves" as provocateurs was meant to bolster domestic morale during a period of economic decline. The North Korean government also implored the youth to be loyal warriors for the Great Leader. As an August 25, 1976 article in *Rodong Chongyon* (Working Youth) explained, "Today, in our country, a highly tense situation is developing and a war may break out at any moment." The article concluded, "If the U.S. imperialist enemies dare to set fire to the tinderbox of another war of aggression, our invincible forces, united iron-like in one ideology and will around the Great Leader and the honorable Party Center, will repel the enemy's aggression with a single blow and successfully defend our beloved socialist motherland."[59] Particularly after diplomatic crises with the United States, such as the *Pueblo* crisis and axe murder attack, the leadership in Pyongyang strategically used emotions of anger and fear as a way to boost national unity and nationalistic fervor.

Also similar to the *Pueblo* crisis, the economic situation in the DPRK was reaching critical levels as the North Korean government failed to pay back loans to numerous Western investors.[60] Much like the domestic circumstances prior to the *Pueblo* attack, the North Korean economy was in decline and the regime used the axe murder incident as a way to divert domestic attention outwards toward the "forever enemy," the U.S. imperialists. The North Korean government triggered anti-American sentiments, primarily fear and anger, during periods of domestic instability. This emotional triggering became a useful way for the Kim family regime to retain power.

The emotion mobilization of the North Korean government generated a domestic atmosphere of intense anti-Americanism, which resulted in spontaneous incidents such as the axe murder attack. The political culture of the DPRK was based on fear-mongering and a systematic hatred towards the Western world, particularly the United

States. In 1976, the axe murder attack brought the U.S. and DPRK to the brink of another war. Pyongyang's anti-American indoctrination resulted in a rogue border unit murdering two U.S. servicemen over a tree. The Kim family regime then strategically used this incident to divert public criticism towards the U.S. imperialists and away from domestic economic troubles. As an ancient Korean proverb says, "You can turn misfortune into good fortune." The North Korean leadership, adept at emotion mobilization, did just that in 1968 and 1976.

1994 Nuclear Crisis

In the early 1990s, North Korea's international partnerships were crumbling. With China's transformation into a capitalist economy and the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Pyongyang found itself isolated and alone in the socialist world. With only Cuba still clinging to a Stalinist economy, the DPRK government faced an increasingly hostile international environment. As a 2008 North Korean book explains, "Before and after the 1990s the renegades of socialism negated the revolutionary core of Marxist–Leninist theories, denied the class character of the political mode of socialism and advocated 'pure democracy,' causing socialism to crumble in the long run in these countries."[61] As funding from Moscow ceased, national security became even more paramount to the North Korean leadership's interests. Faced with these international uncertainties, the regime in Pyongyang forged a more militant path based on the principle of *Songun* (military-first policy). Kim Il Sung and his successor, his son Kim Jong Il, viewed nuclear weapons as the only way to secure a future for their regime. Thus, they built nuclear reactors and sped up their nuclear development program in the early 1990s, which caught the Western world's attention. With the United States declaring itself the victor of the Cold War, Washington could not accept the reality of a stubbornly communist nation in East Asia with nuclear weapons. The unipolar post–Cold War world that the United States ruled could not tolerate the existence of a nuclear North Korea.

During the Persian Gulf War, armed forces from the U.S. and its coalition rolled back Saddam Hussein's Iraqi forces from Kuwait. The U.S. government loathed having to deal with another unpredictable dictator from the developing world, Kim Il Sung. In fact, many in Washington believed, and likely hoped, that the North Korean regime was going to collapse during the early 1990s. As Aloysius O'Neill, a U.S. Foreign Service Officer from 1976 to 2000, explained in an oral history interview, "I don't want to sound retrospectively self-serving, but there was a period from 1990 through 1992 in which the idea took hold in Washington that North Korea could not survive the death of Kim Il Sung. I didn't believe that."[62] With the collapse of the Eastern bloc, the U.S. government seemingly counted the days to the Kim family regime's impending collapse. On the other hand, if the regime persisted, U.S. weapons would

seemingly finish them off. As an anonymous op-ed writer in the *Philadelphia Daily News* explained, "We could kill some of the few remaining communists on earth. We could feel the pride of being the only people on the planet with the ability to bomb the hell out of anybody we please. We wouldn't have to think about why we would want to." The writer added, "George Bush has been a lousy president…. But he can strike a militant pose with the best of them."[63] By 1991, U.S. and North Korean militarisms seemed to be on a collision course.

The notion of a nuclear North Korea conjured fears of an unstable post–Cold War Asia. On April 7, 1991, David Sanger of the *New York Times* wrote, "By various estimates, the increasingly isolated government of Kim Il Sung, North Korea's aging 'Great Leader,' may be only four or five years away from producing a crude but effective atomic bomb." Sanger continued, "If true, Mr. Kim is already far closer to becoming a nuclear power than Mr. Hussein ever was. And that prospect figures in virtually every disaster scene that the Americans, Japanese and now even the Soviets dream up about the balance of power in Asia in the 1990's."[64] Meanwhile, Leonard Spector of the *Wall Street Journal* echoed Sanger's comments and said on April 17, 1991, "Considering Mr. Kim's past readiness to use violence and terror, the thought of nuclear weapons being at his disposal is chilling. Not only does a nuclear North Korea present a grave danger to South Korea, it could also damage the delicate web of regional security."[65] The North Korean threat loomed large in Washington's hegemonic view of a post–communist world order.

In the early 1990s, newfound U.S. hegemony and North Korea's seemingly "crazy" militancy could not peacefully co-exist within the minds of many Americans. Leslie Gelb of the *New York Times* called North Korea in 1991 the "next renegade state" and "perhaps the most dangerous country in the world."[66] A hyperbolic fear of Kim Il Sung as a terroristic warmonger and violent villain clouded U.S. perceptions of an extremely vulnerable and fearful DPRK government in the early 1990s. In the summer of 1994, during the height of the nuclear crisis, a Wall Street Journal–NBC poll found that most Americans considered North Korea to be the biggest foreign policy issue.[67] Thomas Eagleton of the *St. Louis Post–Dispatch* said Kim Il Sung's regime was either "a maniacal regime of madmen willing to commit suicide in the incineration of the Korean Peninsula" or "an isolated regime of dangerous, ruthless thugs bent on preserving their regime at almost any cost short of war."[68] Matthew Jangelis of the *Chicago Tribune* explained, "Lately I have been hearing on the news how it would be so costly if we went to war with North Korea. In turn, our fears have caused us to be lax and submissive in our dealings with North Korea." Jangelis grimly concluded, "I can't understand how a war with North Korea could be so much worse than one of their nukes finding its way to the World Trade Center."[69] This type of sensationalist public discourse made the DPRK seem unknowable and senseless to many Americans. An editorial from the *Salt Lake Tribune* asked on March 25, 1994 if anybody truly knew Kim Il Sung's intentions as "understanding a man who has held 22.2 million

people in his thrall by force for almost a half–century is what makes fathoming the North Korean nuclear crisis so difficult."[70] As described by these newspaper articles, sentiments of rage, frustration, and anxiety permeated the U.S. national psyche in the early 1990s regarding North Korea.

While the fear of a nuclear North Korea affected the U.S. national consciousness, the regime in Pyongyang faced an entirely different and more hostile post–Cold War order. Unlike the *Pueblo* crisis and axe murder attack, this dangerous situation was more real than imagined. The major sticking point for the North Korean leadership in negotiations with Washington was the continued presence of U.S. nuclear weapons in South Korea. As a matter of national sovereignty, Kim Il Sung's regime explained that their refusal to grant inspections to outside experts was in direct response to U.S. nuclear weapons being based in the South. Donald Gregg, the U.S. ambassador to South Korea from 1989 to 1993, knew the presence of U.S. nuclear weapons in the ROK was going to be a major problem in negotiations with the North Korean leadership and advocated for their removal. As he explained in an oral history interview, "So we also were beginning to have suspicions about what was going on at Yongbyon, the North Korean's nuclear interest. So, I thought, my god, if we had nuclear weapons in the South, that is going to become an immediate issue. We will never take them out under pressure." Gregg added, "It will become a sticking point with the North."[71]

According to relatively frank discussions with their Soviet allies, the North Korean government's fear of U.S. nuclear weapons in South Korea seemed to have been genuine. The DPRK's ambassador to Moscow, Son Seong-pil, told Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister Georgy Kunadze in October 1991, "The USA are making demands upon the non-nuclear DPRK about conducting inspections, ignoring Pyongyang's appeal about the conduct of inspections at nuclear sites in the South."[72] A week later, Son explained to A.S Dzasokhov, Soviet Chairman of the International Affairs Committee, "Washington is trying to apply direct pressure on the DPRK with the aim of forcing North Korea to unconditionally sign the safeguards agreement with the IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency). However, our position is that this question should be decided in close connection with the withdrawal of American nuclear weapons from the territory of the ROK (Republic of Korea; official title of South Korea."[73] However, by December 1991, all U.S. nuclear artillery and bombs were removed from South Korean soil.[74] Nonetheless, anxiety of a changing international system worried the North Korean leadership.

An aging Kim Il Sung was in his early 80s and presided over a failing Stalinist economy that had become overly dependent on Soviet subsidies. In a conversation with the U.S. ambassador in Seoul Donald Gregg, South Korea's national security advisor Kim Chong Whi mentioned, "High-level [North Korean] officers now said they were walking to work to improve their health and to avoid polluting the air. The real reason was, of course, the lack of gas."[75] To complicate matters, Kim Il Sung's untested son,

Kim Jong Il, would soon become the leader of an economically destitute DPRK that hung on the legitimacy of his father's legacy. After the death of Kim Il Sung on July 8, 1994, the North Korean state-run media explained, "the slightest attempt to damage" Kim Il Sung's achievements would not be tolerated and the deceased leader's system "must be upheld without the slightest deviation."[76]

The death of Kim Il Sung was a traumatic experience for many North Koreans. Feelings of sadness and grief overwhelmed the North Korean population. An announcer on Pyongyang radio said, "All the people have finally come forward to bid farewell to the soul of our Great Leader. Children, adults, young and old, all are crying out for our father, the Great Leader, and we all yearn for you to just open your eyes, at least once."[77] Kim Il Sung's funeral featured such immense sadness that foreign journalists wondered whether this public grief was sincere. According to the Japanese reporter Kaoru Nakamaru, "People were hugging each other with grief and some drivers could not drive because of the tears in their eyes."[78] *The Independent* newspaper of London described the general scene, "Tens of thousands of North Koreans lined the streets of Pyongyang yesterday to watch the funeral cortege of President Kim Il Sung pass by in a meticulously orchestrated display of emotion and synchronized weeping." The scene of such massive sadness over the death of a brutal dictator made little sense to foreigners. Many foreigners assumed this weeping and crying was state-mandated and thus artificial. *The Independent* added, "It was almost crying by numbers, as the crowds broke into simultaneous mourning at the appearance of television cameras."[79] *The Washington Post* put it simply, "While the outpouring appeared to come from genuine affection for the deceased leader, North Korea is so highly regimented it was impossible to tell what was spontaneous and what was personally motivated."[80] North Korean propaganda implored its citizen to "turn this sorrow into strength" under Kim Jong Il's rule. Thus, the death of Kim Il Sung was used by the DPRK government as a way to emotionally mobilize the North Korean masses.

Internationally, conditions were similarly unfavorable for the North Korean leadership in the post–Cold War world. An economically resurgent Japan and South Korea in the early 1990s bordered the regime in Pyongyang. Russia was in political and economic disarray while revolutionary China turned capitalist. With these international circumstances, it was no wonder that the North Korean leadership sped up its nuclear development program and banned international inspection teams under the rubric of self-defense. Anxiety of a rapidly changing post–Cold War world made the North Korean leadership assume a "fight or flight" position. Predictably, Pyongyang chose the "fight" option. However, using a combination of charismatic politics, a vast surveillance apparatus, and a militant mentality, Kim Jong Il's regime survived the economic difficulties of the 1990s.

In the post–Cold War world, emotions played a major role in the resilience of the fiercely independent Kim family regime and the U.S. government that resented having to deal with a nuclear-armed Stalinist relic. With no communist superpowers left, the

fear of a U.S. invasion seemed highly likely within the North Korean consciousness. Meanwhile, a nuclear rogue state with an outdated political system seemed irrational and anachronistic with the U.S. consciousness. This interplay of emotional forces resulted in a nuclear crisis that once again brought Pyongyang and Washington to the brink of war.

Conclusion

Currently, the emotions of anger and fear continue to play a large role in U.S.–North Korea. National sentiments, as much as political differences, factor into international relations and these national psyches need to be better understood to overcome decades of misunderstandings and grievances between the two sides. Ongoing characterizations of the Kim family regime as illogical and unpredictable orientalize the North Korean population. Meanwhile, emotional rhetoric from the North Korean government calling the U.S. "warmongers" and "imperialist bastards" does little to improve bilateral relations. In addition to a military barrier, a massive psychological divide looms over the 38th parallel.

By tracing the history of anger and fear in U.S.–North Korea relations, I argue that these negative emotions have helped to perpetuate this unending war. As shallow as emotions may seem, they often cloud our perceptions of reality and lead people to commit dangerous acts. As Trump's far-right nationalist advisor Steve Bannon explained in the run-up to the 2016 U.S. President elections, "Fear is a good thing. Fear is going to lead you to take action."[81] Emotional responses to public discourse shape individual actions. By employing emotional analysis as a heuristic device, more historians and scholars of international relations can make the seemingly unknowable more knowable and irrational actions more rational.

Since President Trump's "fire and fury" comments in August 2017, the U.S.–North Korea relationship has shifted from nuclear brinksmanship to leader-based *détente*. In June 2018, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un met with Trump at a summit in Singapore. The meeting failed to produce substantive results but Trump claimed it was a breakthrough. Meanwhile, the Hanoi summit in February 2019 between the two leaders yet again yielded no tangible results and the meetings were cut short. Trump's idea of leader-dependent engagement with Kim Jong Un will only result in shallow propagandistic summits. The Trump administration's shortsighted North Korea policy fails to take history and emotions into account. While Trump may see photos with Kim Jong Un at luxury hotels in Southeast Asia as history making moments, they fail to build genuine trust with the leadership in Pyongyang. As Brookings Institution analyst Jung Pak told *The Washington Post*, "The United States and North Korea are fundamentally at odds in their strategic objectives. No amount of letters or phone conversations or summits at the leader level is going to shake that loose."[82]

In addition, Trump's term will be limited to a four or eight year stint depending upon 2020 Presidential election results. The Kim family regime will continue on. Thus, working-level talks and gradual trust building between the two sides must be slow and deliberate. Unfortunately, Trump's brashness and egotism stands in stark contrast to the gradual trust building approach that is necessary to finally ending the Korean War.

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Notes on Contributor

Benjamin R. Young is an assistant professor in Cyber Leadership & Intelligence at Dakota State University. He was a postdoctoral fellow at the U.S. Naval War College from 2018–19 and is currently finishing his first book, tentatively titled "Guns, Guerillas, and the Great Leader: North Korea and the Third World." He received his Ph.D. in Asian history from George Washington University where he wrote his dissertation on North Korea's relations with the Third World during the Cold War era. He has published scholarly articles on North Korea's diplomatic history in *Cross–Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review; Journal of Northeast Asian History; British Association of Korean Studies Papers; and Asia–Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*. He was a 2018–2019 CSIS/USC NextGen U.S.–Korea Scholar and has written pieces for *The Washington Post, The Guardian,* Reuters, and *NKNews.org*. His research primarily revolves around East Asian history, Cold War international history, Afro–Asian solidarity, security studies, and international relations.