The Two Koreas: A Contemporary History, by Don Oberdorfer. New York: Basic Books, 2001. 496 pp., US$ 22.00, ISBN 9780465051625 (paperback)

In August 2007, when I retired from my work of 30 years as a professor at Konkuk University, my wife and I travelled to American continent to celebrate my retirement, starting from Minnesota in the United States all the way down to Yucatan Peninsula in Mexico. While preparing the belongings, I was thinking about what kind of books I had to bring to kill time during a long trip. My daughter, a doctoral candidate in social work at University of Minnesota, recommended me to read the biography of Frida Kahlo. It is necessary, she said, to read it to understand the Mexican cultural heritage. In the book store in Minneapolis, I found another book, Don Oberdorfer's *Two Koreas*. At that time I was writing the book, *The History of Korean Political Thoughts*, which had been my long aspiration. It was composed of 41 chapters including a chapter on the former president Park Chung-Hee. I picked up Don Oberdorfer's book, thinking that it would contribute to my work. My expectation was not betrayed. Several months ago this year, U.S. Ambassador Mark Lippert was attacked by a crazy terrorist. He said that he would like to read this book during the treatment in the hospital.

Don Oberdorfer was born in 1931, a native of Atlanta, GA. He graduated from Princeton University in 1952 and participated in the Korean War as an artillery officer. Oberdorfer began his career at *The Washington Post* as a White House correspondent in 1968 and a Northeast Asia correspondent afterwards. He was also one of the most recognized correspondents for U.S. diplomacy, an assignment that took him to more than 50 countries. In 1996, Princeton University bestowed upon him the Woodrow Wilson Award which had been annually given to alumni for exemplary services to the nation.

Oberdorfer had worked for 25 years for *The Washington Post*. He spent 17 years as a diplomatic correspondent in Tokyo. While staying in Japan, he met an elegant Japanese woman who became his life-long mate. As a standing correspondent in Tokyo, he had so many opportunities to call upon Korea. His friend, Hwang Gyung-choon, former *AP* and *Time* correspondent in Seoul, remembered him as a polite and taciturn Princetonian. Leslie H. Gelb, a president emeritus of the Council on Foreign Relations, said: "I don't think

there was any better-read reporter…in the foreign-policy business than Don Oberdorfer" (Emily Langer, July 24, 2015, Follow @emilylangerWP).

During the Vietnam War, Oberdorfer was "one of the standards." In addition to his daily journalism, Oberdorfer wrote the book *Tet!* (meaning Vietnamese New Year), a chronicle of the 1968 communist offensive that was a military victory for U.S. and South Vietnamese forces, but turned many Americans against the war. The volume, published in 1971 before the end of the conflict, was chosen as a finalist in the National Book Award. Benjamin C. Bradlee wrote in his memoir, *A Good Life*, that Oberdorfer was "a mortal lock to become what he became, a foreign affairs expert who could and did peg even with the very best foreign affairs experts" (Emily Langer, July 24, 2015, Follow @emilylangerWP). Don retired from *The Washington Post* in 1993.

After retiring, Oberdorfer taught at Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins University, and chaired its U.S.-Korea Institute. During these days, he wrote *The Two Koreas: A Contemporary History* (1997) which was regarded as a seminal work on the Korean peninsula. Oberdorfer earned "a reputation as one of the most insightful and fair-minded reporters on his beat" (*The Washington Post*, July 24, 2015). His another book, *Senator Mansfield* won the D. B. Hardeman Prize in 2003. He also co-received the Van Fleet Award with the Peace Corps in April 2008, and was appointed as a member of the Nogunri Massacre Investigation Committee by President Clinton. Don Oberdorfer died in July 23, this year, in Washington, D.C. He was 84 years old and suffering from Alzheimer's disease for a long time.

This book, *The Two Koreas* begins with the dedication remarks to readers: "For the people of the two Koreas; May they be one again, and soon." In order to write this book, he had 521 interviews with 226 persons including Gorbachev, Clinton, and Park Chung-hee as well as refugees from North Korea with real names. When this book was published, Ezra Vogel at Harvard University commented "Engrossing, informative, wise. A rare achievement, the best account yet of a tragically divided country." And *The Boston Sunday Globe* commented "Assembled into a clear and unpretentious journalistic narrative of the past quarter-century's public and behind-the-scenes political and diplomatic efforts to solve the Korean questions."

His work is based on his experience and own observations. His first impression on Korea was not good as other Western-triumphalists' was. Korea, in his eyes, was one of the oriental underdeveloped countries. His view was well

shown when he cited words of Richard Whelan (a historian at Yale University) saying; "the U.S. government would probably have been happiest if Korean simply had not existed [in 1945]" (6). When he participated in the Korean War, one boy crawled around the train with his only leg and shouted "hello, hello" to the troop train hoping to be thrown cigarettes, candies, or something valuable (xi). As most American scholars did, he had gloomy memories in Korea. He was shocked when he read the General Hodge's record saying that there were three things that American troops in Japan were afraid of; three words ending—*rea* such as diar*rhea*, gonor*rhea*, and Ko*rea* (7).

His book is excellent in describing the era of the former president Park Chung-hee. This book is composed of 16 chapters covering 50 years from 1945 to 1997, but the history before the Park's era was condensed in Chapter 1 which includes liberation, territorial separation, the First Republic under Syngman Rhee, and Second Republic under John M. Chang. Other chapters cover the Park's regime in South Korea and the Kim Il-sung regime in North Korea, followed by reigning of Chun Doo-hwan, the Olympic Games politics of Roh Tae-woo, and democraticization periods under Kim Young-sam and Kim Dae-joong. Among these, an outstanding mouthpiece is a description of the ambivalent interrelationships between Park Chung-hee and Kim Il-sung. The history afterwards is nothing but a struggle and reconciliations of Park Chung-hee's and Kim Il Sung's kids.

In analyzing Park's career, Don indicated that he had "flirted with communism" (10). Given his prewar Japanese education, his Confucian heritage, and his military background, there was nothing in Park's previous life to suggest fealty to the American-style democracy which he considered an inconvenient and unproductive practice (32). Moreover, since the announcement of the Nixon Doctrine in 1969 that Asians should provide the manpower for their own wars, the United States appeared to be moving steadily toward disengagement (13).

In 1975, Park Chung-hee established three laws through the National Assembly intended to put the nation on war-time footing: a tightened Public Security Law, coming on top of the issuance of Emergency Decree No. 9 which in effect banned all political criticism toward the government, a Civil Defense Law creating a parliamentary corps of all males between ages 17 and 50, and a new Defense Tax levied on a wide range of items (67). Park viewed that the American pulled out from Vietnam betraying South Vietnam in the

Paris negotiations with communist North Vietnam and he raised agonizing doubts about the reliability of the U.S. in his own case (64).

Don did not overlook Park's political mislead or misgovernment, but he was basically favorable to and familiar with him. He especially emphasized that Park never became rich nor personally corrupted although he wielded enormous economic power. He usually had a simple bowl of Korean noodles for lunch, and ate rice mixed with barley to spare rice. He had bricks in his Blue House toilettes to conserve water (36). And Don evaluated Park's career as "In broad terms, South Korea's inflation-adjusted GNP tripled in each decade after Park's first year in office, thereby condensing a century of growth into three decades" (37).

In describing Kim Il-sung, Don was also not antagonistic. According to his explanation, Kim Il-sung was fluent in Chinese and conversant in Russian. He cited that a Russian official described Kim as "a flexible and pragmatic politician, an Oriental Talleyrand" (18-19) Kim Il-sung had remained in power throughout terms of six South Korean presidents, nine U.S. presidents, and twenty-one Japanese prime ministers (16). Don did not impute intentional blame to Kim. According to his view, Kim Jung-il emerged from the shadow showing himself as a more powerful and flexible leader than he was in the first year after his father's death. He had done much more to take advantage of his opportunities more quickly and smoothly than anyone had guessed. The prospects for the survival of North Korea appeared to be improved, but they remained guarded due to its economic collapse (444).

In Don's view on Korean-American relationships, he showed himself as a descendant of the Empire. He insisted that the United States would continue to be the most important outside power in Korean affairs, maintaining a formidable troops presence on the peninsula, exerting a major influence on the political and economic life of South Korea, and continue to be the most important negotiating target for North Korea (444). But it was not possible to forecast the nature with any assurance or even the direction of future change, whether it could be toward greater cooperation or intensified hostility. He believed, however, that the future of their relationships was likely to be different from that of the past. To a greater degree than before, the two Koreas appeared to take fate into their own hands (443).

In his last visit to Korea in 2005, he gave a speech titled "United States and South Korea: Can This Alliance Last?" at the Seoul Peace Prize

Foundation. He left a message: "I have not lost my affection for the country that I first saw as a devastated, poverty-stricken place in 1953 and for its people, who continue to try to make their way in the world.…If one is to be emotionally as well as intellectually involved with a successful country still in the process of becoming, Korea is not a bad one to have chosen, or to have been chosen for you by history and fate."[1]

In the enlarged edition co-written with Robert Carlin, 3 chapters were added including the Geneva Conference on the development of Atomic weapons and the rise of Kim Jung-un. Robert Carlin graduated from Claremont McKenna University and earned MA at Harvard University. He worked as an information analyst at CIA and a member of U.S.-North Korean negotiation in 1971-2002, and since 2006 he has been a fellow at the Center for International Security and Cooperation, Stanford University. Robert Carlin said that the stories contained in this book were not contents but storytelling (Afterword in 2014 edition).

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1. Paper titled "United States and South Korea: Can This Alliance Last?" presented at Seoul Peace Lecture, Samsung Centennial Hall, Korea University, Seoul, South Korea, November 3, 2005.