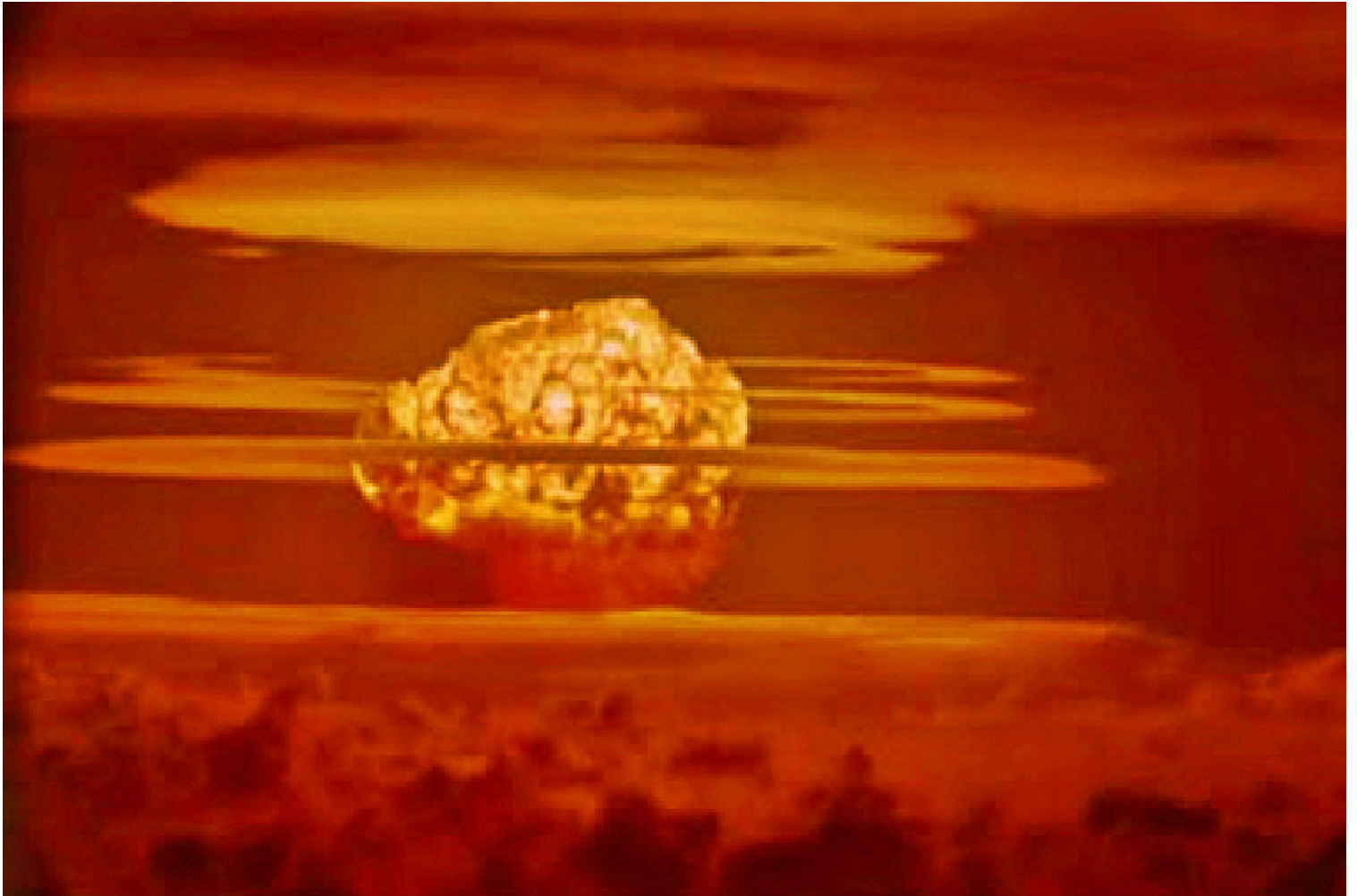


A HORRIFYING AND BELIEVABLE PATH TO NUCLEAR WAR WITH NORTH KOREA

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BOOK REVIEWS

SEPTEMBER 4, 2018



Jeffrey Lewis, The 2020 Commission Report on the North Korean Nuclear Attacks Against the United States: A Speculative Novel (Mariner Books, 2018)

Many of us believe that if nuclear missiles were to strike the United States, they would most likely come from North Korea. However, it is hard to dramatize this possibility or to make a convincing case for the exact pathway to a war. Jeffrey Lewis, a respected nuclear analyst, sets this as his task in what he calls a

“speculative novel,” *The 2020 Commission Report on the North Korean Nuclear Attacks Against the United States*. This way of explaining events that have not yet happened is, of course, not a new invention. British writers used it to warn of invasions from the continent in the 19th and early 20th centuries, with the menace coming first from France and then from Germany, and Lawrence Freedman recently outlined how future wars have been seen in numerous contexts. It also follows in the tradition of the Cold War movies *Fail Safe*, *The Bedford Incident*, and the unforgettable *Dr. Strangelove*, which got deterrence theory right because Thomas Schelling was an adviser on the film.

The main purpose of these imagined histories is to generate a self-denying prophecy by alarming readers. By showing what *could* happen, these books seek to energize people to make the effort necessary for it to *not* happen. This seems to be Lewis’ motive. I infer that he believes that if the United States stays on its current trajectory (or rather the trajectory it was on when he wrote the book, which was when tensions were particularly high following the North Korean nuclear and missile tests and President Donald Trump’s belligerent reaction to them), the likelihood of war will remain dangerously high. This does not tell us what should be done, however, since multiple alternative policies are possible. British authors in the early 20th century were urging more vigilance against Germany and what we would now call a more vigorous containment strategy. Readers of Lewis’ book will take different lessons from it. Some could perhaps be persuaded to support a preemptive strike. I assume this is not Lewis’ intent. His main thrust is toward policies, presumably more conciliatory ones, based on a better understanding of Kim Jong Un’s hopes and fears. He also hints at the virtues of, or at least the necessity for, abolishing nuclear weapons.

Imaginary histories strike a chord when they involve outcomes that we really don’t think will come about but still recognize as possible. Without the former condition these stories are redundant. Without the latter, they are just science fiction. A nuclear war with Korea is comfortably — or uncomfortably — in this middle range of being neither certain nor impossible. Part of the reason for this lies in the

nature of conflict between two nuclear-armed countries, which resembles a game of chicken. Any war between them that is less than fully contained would be worse for each side than any conceivable political settlement, even a defeat. This very fact means that the danger of all-out war can be used by either country as a bargaining lever against the other. The leverage is effective, however, only if it implies some danger that a war will occur. The fact that both sides need to avoid a collision makes it hard for us to see how one might occur. The coercive bargaining tactics that each side can use — and feel they must use — make us realize that the war could happen.

Lewis' task then is to lay out a succession of steps that lead to war, each one being plausible but leading to a destination that both sides abominate. Almost by definition, this must involve misperceptions and miscalculations on one and probably both sides. Mira Rapp-Hooper and I sketched out such a possibility last spring, but Lewis has the much harder task of developing the scenario in detail. The problem is that unless he relies on crazy generals or malfunctioning equipment, he has to show Kim and Trump taking reasonable steps that take them to their destruction. In this novel, Lewis accomplishes that brilliantly.

Lewis draws upon Cold War incidents like the 1983 shooting down of a Korean airliner by Soviet forces, President Ronald Reagan's probing of Soviet peripheries with aircraft and naval forces, and what we now know of Saddam Hussein's thinking about dealing with the conspiracies arrayed against him to detail a story that few of us could have thought of beforehand. And it is horrifyingly plausible. Many of the events involve bizarre coincidences and gross misperceptions, but they are precisely those kinds of things that have occurred in the past, could readily recur, and, given a very high level of hostility between the United States and North Korea, could lead to a war that no one wants.

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AS LEWIS starts his story in March 2020, the thaw in relations between the United States and North Korea that began with the 2018 Winter Olympics has ended. Trump has stepped up pressure, ordering overt military exercises and covert runs by bombers that veer away from North Korean territory only at the last minute, mimicking the tactics that American officials believed had brought success against the Soviet Union in the 1980s. Against this tense background, North Korean air defense officials, like their Soviet counterparts in 1983, mistake a straying South Korean airliner filled with school children for an American bomber and shoot it down. South Korean President Moon Jae-in, personally outraged and under domestic pressure, responds with a limited missile strike against one of Kim's palaces and the North Korean air defense headquarters. He does this without informing the American authorities because he believes they would try to stop him.

All this takes place in the midst of a large South Korean-American war game. Kim, believing that Moon attacked on Washington's orders, and that this is the first step in an American plot to kill him and take over his country, orders a nuclear attack on South Korea and Japan designed to thwart the coming invasion and to send a signal to Trump: Back off or the ICBMs will fly. The United States, undeterred but not wanting to use nuclear weapons, responds with a conventional air attack, trying to destroy North Korean missiles and kill Kim. The attack fails and the ICBMs fly as promised, destroying New York, northern Virginia (the target was the District of Columbia), and the area around Mar-a-Lago.

At each point, Kim, Moon, Trump, and their subordinates might have made different choices and avoided war. But the choices that Lewis has them make are not implausible. Indeed, most of them conform to standard theories of effective coercion. The triggering event is of a different nature, but also is plausible. The concatenation of events leading to the shooting down of the South Korean airliner involves accidents and coincidences that, by their nature, are unlikely. Given the large number of airline flights and the way people react to ambiguous information under great pressure, however, this could indeed happen, and did with the Korean

under great pressure, however, this could indeed happen, and did with the Korean airliner in 1983 and arguably with the shooting down of a U-2 at the height of the Cuban Missile Crisis. That this occurs during a large war game is yet another coincidence.

Political scientists do not like coincidences because they resist theorizing, but this does not make them any less important. But it is even more consequential when leaders try to shove coincidences aside. They have a propensity to doubt the likelihood of coincidence and see events as following their adversary's malign plan. Lewis is well aware of this perceptual tendency. Kim is unable to use his cellphone after the South Korean attack because the telecommunications system was overloaded. In Lewis' book, one of Kim's aides later says, "We assumed it was an American cyber-attack. Wouldn't you?"

The next crucial link is Moon's decision to launch a limited retaliatory strike. This is perhaps the least plausible step in the novel. South Korea has never responded forcefully to any North Korean provocation, of which there have been many over the years. Seoul has always consulted with Washington. For this very reason,

however, it is not unthinkable that Moon would believe that he had to break the pattern. Lewis gives Moon reasoning that fits with standard coercion theory: "A small strike would shake Kim's confidence, while the possibility of a larger strike to follow would box him in." The latter point is crucial and well-understood by Lewis' South Koreans. The strike was designed to be harsh enough to exact punishment and constitute a warning that the South would be willing to take dangerous actions while simultaneously indicating a desire to keep the conflict limited. It is the targets not yet struck that provide coercive leverage, and the fact that they are left untouched shows the state's willingness to be restrained. The disastrous consequences of this decision were clear in retrospect, but at the time the decision was reasonable, although risky.

But Moon did not anticipate something that perhaps he should have. When Trump was told that North Korea had destroyed the airliner, he tweeted, "Little Rocket

Man won't be bothering us much longer!" Kim was told of this tweet when he was deciding how to respond, and it contributed to his paranoia. He would not — indeed could not — believe that Moon had acted on his own (perceptions of greater coordination than actually existed, again), thought that the objective had been to kill him, and, because of the ongoing U.S.-South Korean military exercises, concluded that an invasion was on its way. The attack on one of his palaces was an early reminder of the opening of the Iraq War when the U.S. military sent stealth bombers to Dora Farm in the mistaken belief that Saddam Hussein was there. To Kim, the only actions he can take to save his life and his regime are preemptive nuclear strikes against South Korea and Japan that would disrupt the coming invasion and show his resolve. Like Moon, he wants to avoid all-out war and so withholds his ICBMs. Trump, he reasons, will understand this, and faced by Kim's combination of resolve and restraint would call off the invasion to save the American homeland. In Lewis' account, Kim is not impulsive or irrational. In fact his understanding of what makes for a good coercion strategy is quite adequate. But his policy fails because of the deep flaws in his understanding of what has happened, American motives, and what the United States is planning. He also fails to realize that, despite the briefings he has received, Trump is not completely convinced that Kim has workable ICBMs and has unwarranted faith in U.S. missile defenses.

From the American perspective, the horrendous nuclear strikes in the region mean that they must eliminate Kim and his ICBMs as quickly as possible. Although Lewis gives little detail here, he makes clear that Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis and lower-level military officials are not confident they can act quickly enough to stop a barrage of ICBMs, but they see no alternative. Since Kim responded to a sharply limited South Korean reprisal by destroying Seoul, Tokyo, and other cities in those countries, it is hard to believe that he could be contained or bargained with.

The final play of the game also makes sense. Once Kim receives confirmation that the United States is seeking to overthrow the regime and kill him, he launches his ICBMs, including one aimed at Mar-a-Lago, where Trump is staying.

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Could this really happen? The fact that much of the behavior that Lewis portrays fits with standard coercion theory denies international relations theorists an easy way of discrediting his scenario on the grounds that his leaders are behaving not only foolishly, but contrary to what it would be reasonable to expect them to do. At one point, however, both Kim and Trump do go off script. Both launch decapitation strikes, trying to kill the other and disable the regime's ability to fight the war. While on one level this makes sense both for revenge and for reducing the other's military capability, it was a truism in the Cold War that to do so would be to risk all-out retaliation and make it much more difficult to bring the war to an end. Lewis does not have his players think through the likely consequences of their behavior. Perhaps at this stage of the conflict they would not have the intellectual or emotional forces to do so.

Having written a great deal about misperception and miscalculation, this is where I think the explanatory focus should be. And, indeed, even though *The 2020 Commission Report* is more descriptive, Lewis' explanation shines through. I would group the main phenomenon he sees at work under five categories.

First, like the rest of us, leaders are prone to see what they expect. As many psychologists have argued, the world is so complex and our brains are so limited that we have to be theory-driven in our understanding of the world. Once we have a belief about how international politics works, an image of the other, and an expectation of how events are likely to unfold (and we establish these views relatively quickly on the basis of whatever material is at hand), all but the most obviously discrepant new information will be assimilated to what we already believe. In Lewis' story, this was most glaringly true of Kim, who jumped to the conclusion that Washington was behind Moon's strike and that a full-scale assault was on its way. But American officials were similarly trapped by their mindsets. Although they knew that Kim would respond to Moon's attack and picked up the unusual volume and pattern of encrypted signals traffic in its wake, they

interpreted the activity as preparations for the long-feared North Korean staging of a nuclear test in the atmosphere, not the attack that actually ensued.

Second, each side found it impossible to place itself in the other's shoes and see the world and themselves as the other did. International politics resembles chess or poker less than it does the Japanese short story and classic movie *Rashomon* in which each participant sees the events very differently and fails to understand that this is the case. At every stage, each participant had very different interpretations of what was happening and what the other's intentions and motives were. To make things worse, neither side made a serious attempt at empathy, but rather assumed that the other side shared their own understanding of the situation. Not only Trump, but more thoughtful American leaders failed to appreciate that American pressure, the war games underway, and the memories of the American overthrow of Saddam primed Kim to see an imminent American invasion. Kim similarly could not imagine how Moon could believe that his strike was a carefully calibrated limited one. They lived in different perceptual worlds, but didn't know it.

Third, and related, it is particularly difficult for leaders to seriously entertain the possibility that others think they have malign plans when in fact they do not. Trump and his colleagues knew that they were not about to invade North Korea and so did not pause to ask themselves how Kim might interpret Trump's tweet or what he might do if he did hold this mistaken belief. Kim launched his nuclear attacks against South Korea and Japan in the hope that the United States would realize that he was holding back his ICBMs and seeking to contain the war. For the Americans, this appeared to be a prelude to an attack on their homeland, not as North Korea's attempt to end the fighting without having to undertake such an attack.

Fourth, as I noted, decision-makers rarely credit accidents and coincidences, but instead fit everything that is happening into an image of the adversary's unfolding designs. The apocryphal story of the Austrian statesman Klemens von Metternich reacting to the death of the Russian ambassador at the Congress of Vienna by

asking “I wonder why he did that?” is funny only because it is an exaggeration of a real perceptual propensity.

Finally, in many cases crucial considerations never occurred to the decision-makers. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld’s talk of “unknown unknowns” was widely ridiculed, but it was a perceptive observation. It is often things that were never thought of that can derail plans and policies. It never occurred to

Moon, for example, that in the confused wake of his strike the North Koreans would believe that they had been attacked by many more than the six missiles South Korean forces launched. Even the American officials who deplored their president’s tweets did not consider how they might lead Kim to believe that he would soon be attacked.

One thing that is absent from the story is diplomacy, aside from one inconsequential meeting with the North Korean delegation to the United Nations. Part of the reason is that this crisis unfolds with unprecedented speed: Only about 36 hours elapse between the shooting down of the South Korean airliner and the thermonuclear explosions in the United States. This pace is not impossible, but I do find it unlikely. This is not to say that diplomacy would necessarily have been effective given each side’s belligerence and lack of trust, but even a confirmed realist knows that diplomacy often prevents disasters.

Similarly, while Lewis does portray some role for failures of communication within each side’s government, these played a smaller role than I had expected. To develop them more might have complicated the story and led some readers to discredit it on the grounds that modern governments are more competent than that, but I think it would not have given pause to those who have seen the machinery at work.

Finally, it is interesting that while Trump is portrayed as inattentive and showing signs of dementia, and his one tweet was consequential, the progress of the situation from dangerous to disaster does not turn on his idiosyncrasies. Lewis’

important point, I believe, is that even with more thoughtful leadership unwanted wars can occur. And in a humanizing touch, Lewis' Trump is devastated by his wife's death when New York is obliterated.

Of course, to argue that a war could start in this way is not to claim that this is the only or even the most likely path to war. Since we now seem to be heading back to the face-off as it was before the June 2018 thaw, a somewhat more calculated sequence of events is at least as possible. Attempts to restart talks might fail, perhaps after an additional summit meeting that leaves Kim and Trump far apart and leads each to think that the other had misled him. The United States and South Korea could restart military exercises, as Mattis has recently suggested. Kim could respond by resuming missile tests, enraging Trump and worrying American officials that a showdown cannot be long avoided (unless the United States is willing to accept North Korea as a nuclear power, which many defense analysts outside the government would be willing to do). After an exchange of harsh words and some unpredictable incidents, Washington could turn to a "bloody nose" strategy and launch a limited attack against North Korean missile launch sites, production facilities, and perhaps the locations where it believes missiles are stored.

There is precedent for such thinking. President Dwight Eisenhower believed that the limited use of force could show Chinese leaders that they had underestimated American resolve in the 1958 offshore islands crisis and should retreat. The crisis ended peacefully (reminding us that even seemingly desperate situations usually conclude without a major war) and so we do not know what would have happened had the United States put this theory to the test. In the Korean case, perhaps Kim would realize that he had dangerously misread Trump and that he had no choice but to curb if not end his nuclear program. Much less pleasant possibilities immediately come to mind, however, that I believe are more likely. Without positing that Kim would act as he did in Lewis' account, some major retaliation would seem probable. How to limit the violence and bring the war to a halt would

be a major challenge. Fighting a limited war is extremely difficult and planning for how this might be done has gone out of fashion, at least in the United States.

This scenario is a bit different from Lewis', but even if I find it more plausible at this point in time than his, the fact remains that while I've read better novels, I have only read a few more convincing accounts of how events can spiral out of control than what you can and should read in *The 2020 Commission Report*.

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