

**Pembroke, M. (2018) "Korea: Where the American Century Began".
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Cutting History to Fit: A Study in Motivated Reasoning

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"For my father (1928 -)" reads Michael Pembroke's brief dedication, "*who was there*". It is a raw, honest and principled motivation for writing a book... but not an intellectual one. '*Korea: Where the American Century Began*', teases to do something impressive, but finds itself stuck in this first sentence; unable to kick free from the author's antipathy toward what, and who, he blames for his father's 'being there'.

Pembroke starts in the same place as one of his quoted reviewers, Noam Chomsky, with the claim that history, in this case Korea's, "*was one of prolonged and extensive stability*". And in a way his story must begin here, with an image of a rare utopia, protected from suffering by its relative isolation. "*In the nineteenth century the historic rhythm of Korean life began to weaken when missionaries, traders and gunboats of the western powers arrived*". This is a running theme for the book, an exclamation that things would have worked out so much better if only the unique viciousness of the Western mind hadn't interfered. In three brief sentences Pembroke talks over the bulk of Korean history, makes no mention of ancient Choson, the cultures that preceded it, the early invasions from China, the splintering and constant fighting for supremacy in the Three Kingdoms period; and dismisses the Mongol domination and constant Samurai invasions from Japan as blips in a largely peaceful history. To speak of pre-modern Korea as "*a society built on hierarchical respect*" is an oddly euphemistic way of talking about casteism, serfdom, slavery and a parochial dominance that would have made contemporaneous Europeans blush (and whose remnants still plague Korea today). All Pembroke sees here, is "*a world defined by virtue*".

With this flag-post set, '*Where the American Century Began*' unfolds, along with an unpleasant question mark in the reader's mind; one that forces a psychoanalysis of the author – 'is he unaware of the actual history, or is he maliciously trying to deceive by selective over-emphasis and deliberate omissions of fact?'

Pembroke skilfully slips past a huge amount of conflicting information and finds the arrival of Western Jesuits to be the tripwire moment toward collapse and suffering. This sickness permeates through the peninsula and finally emerges, ready to kill its host, by – if you could believe it – defeating the Japanese and liberating Korea. Justifying this, Pembroke has found a smattering of American military disregard and casual racism – considering the era in question, this is not the kind of smoking gun that it is played up to be. But by brushing so dismissively over the details of Japanese occupation, the author seems to have missed an important insight into the Korean mind. As the “*Americans admired Japanese precision, orderliness and efficiency*”, so largely did the Koreans who – much to their retrospective shame – have had to struggle with the knowledge that a significant proportion of them, after the 1919 uprising, bought heavily into this same type of admiration; choosing to speak Japanese in their homes and gobbling up the race myth of a pure bloodline, to which only Koreans and Japanese belonged.

These types of ‘mistakes’ are far too common. But, this is a story about division and war, so errors in early historical records could be dismissed if only they weren’t symptomatic of what was to come. For Pembroke, the initial division of the Korean peninsula was an American design, matched to a “*single-minded pursuit of its own strategy and ideological objectives*”. And nothing shows this more than their choice of Syngman Rhee and his “*brand of right-wing extremism*” to rule the newly created South Korea; “*Rhee was... MacArthur’s man*”. The trouble is, Rhee wasn’t any of this, he was chosen by the Americans not because of his ideology, but because of his fluent English. From the moment he arrived in Korea he immediately set about angering his patrons by denouncing their policy of trusteeship, demanding immediate independence; and this says nothing of the fact that Rhee unnerved the Americans even before he was selected, due to his penchant for socialism. A tendency toward authoritarianism does not make someone, by default, ‘right-wing’. So much easier, and so much better for the false claims yet to come, simply to label Rhee as an American stooge and move on.

Pembroke’s thesis is still on a slow burn at this point, hinting at early, what he will later – once in full stride – be a lot less shy about. The first stages of the Korean division are delivered to the reader as a contrast between good and evil. “*The Soviet military occupation did not encounter the same difficulties or the degrees of hostility and turmoil that the American administration endured in the south*” because “*the opposition was weaker and the Russians were better prepared*”. It is easy to miss what Pembroke is smuggling in there; ‘the opposition was weaker’? This lopsided political landscape was the result of a million-plus refugees who, seeing what was to come, ran terrified – leaving their belongings and sometimes

family behind – into American-backed South Korea. When this is mentioned in *‘Where the American Century Began’* it is just “*the departure of hundreds of thousands of potential opponents of Soviet rule*”, grouped as “*Christians, Japanese collaborators, landowners and other political and economic refugees*”. What the reader needs to hear from the author but never does, is what they all had in common – a desire for basic freedoms of association and a fear of persecution based on nothing more than their identity. More accurate to call them ‘human rights refugees’.

It continues. Sure the “*Russian troops behaved badly on arrival*” but this was just “*their habit*” and “*Stalin moved to stop the rape and pillage*”. If such moral latitude were applied to American actions then there wouldn’t be a book to talk about. It is hard to see this as anything other than attempts to cut early distinctions into the reader’s mind, for the soon to be applied labels of ‘perpetrator’ and ‘victim’. The statement that Stalin “*agreed to the American proposal for partition, even though at the time the Soviet Army was well able to take control of the whole country without opposition*” is an odd way to talk about the ‘restraint’ to dominate not the whole nation by force, but only half; and once again such grace is never offered to the other side. But it makes the reader think – ‘Without opposition’? Has Pembroke already forgotten those being ‘raped and pillaged’? Or those rushing to ‘depart’ Soviet control? And beyond such sins of understatement, are outright omissions. Where – if the North was such a bastion of stability and virtue – were the corresponding masses fleeing the other way?

Once the early division of Korea is out of the way, Pembroke – perhaps feeling that his audience is now on board – begins to lose any sense of moderation; and the history of Korea becomes increasingly malleable. The United Nations election is where he does some of his best work – just as it is here that it becomes obvious that Pembroke didn’t manage to access any information from the former communist archives. Unable to coordinate a nation-wide election with Stalin, who insisted that only hand-picked (appropriately communist and Soviet leaning) political parties would be allowed to stand in the North, America handed off responsibility for the election to the United Nations. We now know that what motivated the Americans here was exasperation, they wanted to wash their hands clean of all things Korea and get out. Dismissive and short-sighted, maybe? But to claim that both sides “*were at fault*” for the intransigence of one, is a hard leap. And soon enough the soft language returns, patting down the sharp edges of totalitarianism – “*as the commission was unable to travel, observe and consult through Korea, as it was required to do, it concluded that it could not achieve its mandate to facilitate a national Korean government*”.

The same author that romanticized the backdated possibility of Soviet troops

taking the peninsula by force and solving the division issue, is now someone that doesn't see this as a missed opportunity. Well, sorry, he does – but only in so far as it is, once again, America's fault; this time for not being able to navigate through Stalin's stone wall. That the election was a "*hopeless cause and Washington appears to have known it*" and "*Truman had anticipated this outcome*", doesn't change the fact that one side was championing democracy and the self-determination of the Korean people by a neutral arbiter, while the other side wanted nothing of the sort. But Pembroke has already picked his team, so these democratic convictions become just "*ritual incantations*". And soon enough he is, once again, lamenting that the "*opportunity for a unified, independent Korea had already been lost*" and claiming that America should shoulder the blame for Soviet refusals to take part.

This touches on the methodology behind Pembroke's thesis – infantilise one actor, while holding the other omnisciently responsible. When America are rightly to be blamed, Pembroke blames them; when the Soviet Union are to be blamed, Pembroke blames America for not managing to talk the Soviet Union out of its double-dealings. Without spotting the irony, President Truman is lambasted for his "*true objective... the validation of a separate state in southern Korea that would be supportive of the United States*", yet Stalin is presented as reasonable because his "*sole aspiration was that any government established in Korea have 'friendly and close relations' with Soviet Russia*". Even greater the mistake when this latter statement is presented in support of Stalin's anti-war stance, when it should be read – in proper context – as a forced division and an imposed ideology. This is all part of a nasty type of teleological reasoning, where all roads, at all times, lead back to American treachery. (If you find Pembroke's line of argument convincing here, and are searching for a 'further reading list', then simply acquaint yourself with the Rodong Sinmun).

But Pembroke hasn't yet come close to bottoming-out. "*The United States would not be deterred*", and the entirely understandable overreach in claiming that the Soviet-boycotted, southern election, should stand for the whole peninsula, is a rare – though be it small – validation for the author... and it quickly goes to his head. The corresponding 'election' in the north, with the same nation-wide claim to authority, gets the now – almost trademark-able – speed walk of soft language. Sure "*the figures lack independent verification but*", hey! "*An election of some sort was undoubtedly held*". What emerged was "*a cohesive, peaceful, and highly disciplined North against the increasingly chaotic, violent, and unstable South*". It is worthwhile pausing here, and taking a moment to let that all soak in. Using 'cohesive and peaceful' to describe dictatorship, purges, concentration camps, genera-

tional guilt and oppression – especially knowing what we know now about the regime in Pyongyang – seems to go well beyond a mere error in reasoning. As does the casual, indifferent statement that “*Kim Il-sung was named as Premier – a title that he held for many years until he became president under a new constitution*”. No mention that, as ‘The Great Leader’, Kim wrote the ‘new constitution’ himself, and that he wasn’t awarded the title of ‘President’, but rather that of ‘Eternal President’; meaning he still rules over the country today, despite being dead for nearly 25 years.

Like a magician taken in by his own magic trick, Pembroke continues to offer a particularly distasteful type of orientalism to the reader without, one assumes, realising he is even doing it; turning the menace of Stalin into grandfather-esque foibles, and the everyday indignities imposed on the North Korean people by their regime into misunderstood virtues. Written into short chapters, all further divided into minute sub-chapters – sometimes no more than a page long – the reader is left questioning the relevance of much of it (and there is no doubt that the book is longer than it needs to be). But this type of literary device, whether intended or not, has the effect of constantly hurrying the reader forward onto something different. Perhaps not a huge problem in itself, but it brings the unpleasant psychological outgrowth of deflecting attention away from Pembroke’s more egregious claims, and fortifies the mistakes in his underlying argument.

And yet ‘*Where the American Century Began*’ has found no shortage of people willing to accept its claims uncritically: John Schauble calls it “*timely*” and “*important*”; for David Stephens it is “a brilliant book”; Leonid Petrov and A.C. Grayling – two people who should know better – again “a brilliant book” and “a brilliant book”. Such fall-back clichéd language isn’t always indicative of lazy thought, but it does make you question whether any of these people actually read it from cover to cover. Noam Chomsky weighs-in in predictable fashion, calling it “*perceptive and compelling*”. So thank heavens for Blaine Harden who – after writing three books on North Korea – has developed a sure-enough grasp on Korean history to see the book as “an anti-American diatribe” that “cherry-picks events” and emphasizes “*American outrages*”. Along with a series of friendly, superficial interviews conducted with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, all these commentaries and reviews (with the notable exception of Blaine Harden’s) can be found on Pembroke’s personal website.

From its outset, this is an anti-war book. And Pembroke, before he gets to the meat of this argument, struggles to properly contend with the fact that the Korean War was Northern launched and Soviet planned. Yes, “*Kim itched to invade*”, but we are asked to take this in the context of Syngman Rhee hoping to do the oppo-

site. And though he does include a reference to the American administration holding Rhee back under the threat of military and financial abandonment, he fails to mention that America were so eager to avoid provoking a war that they actually withdrew the bulk of their troops and military hardware from the peninsula. This, however, had the opposite effect. As South Korea looked increasingly weakened, Kim Il-sung ratcheted-up his appeals for a Soviet-backed invasion. Pembroke talks about the planning for a brutal invasion in the matter-of-fact numbing tone of Stalin being “*ready to help*”, that he “*received Kim in Moscow to discuss it*”, and only acceded to Kim because he believed that America were “*unlikely to intervene*”. Given this, you just wish for accuracy’s sake that when Pembroke says things like “*Before 1945, a Korean war was inconceivable. After 1945, it was inevitable*”, he would rightly add that it was inevitable only because one side chose to invade the other.

Instead, he brushes over the invasion planning and even the invasion itself, and strangely tries to talk up the character of Joseph Stalin. Again showing a lack of research, he uses the famous cautionary quote from Stalin to Kim that “*If you should get kicked in the teeth, I shall not lift a finger*”, to show Stalin’s consideration and restraint; he “*did not intend to make it Moscow’s war, let alone a war for all Asia*”. In reality, this was nothing of the sort. It was a statement of backing and generosity – Stalin was imploring Kim to ask upfront for all the armaments and military assistance that he required, saving the need to come back later. That Pembroke misses this is one thing, but it is quite another to blame the war on those being invaded; but soon enough, that is exactly what the reader is witnessing. And what a show it is! Because “*Truman received the news of the North Korean invasion at home in Missouri on a Saturday night, [and]... had no doubt that it was Moscow’s war*” (which it was); and because he had recently committed himself, under the Truman Doctrine, to “*support free peoples who are resisting subjugation*”, we should therefore see America as “*dangerous*” and “*of embracing an opportunity for war with gusto*”. America is a flawed actor, sure! And Cold War paranoia should not be scoffed at, but how little Pembroke must think of his reader to hope that they – by such a clumsy sleight of hand – come to see an unwanted, defensive war as an aggressive pathology.

Each time Pembroke lays down a tautology like this, he uses it as a foundation for the next. If you are to believe his claims to come, it is important that, early on, you charge America with being the warmongers in this narrative, rather than Stalin and Kim who petitioned, planned, built towards, and then invaded the South. This is the core anti-war argument from “*Where the American Century Began*”. “*Three months after it started, the North Korean invasion had been repulsed and the man-*

date of the United Nations achieved. The war should have been over". Should it have been? Yes, this was the extent of the United Nations mandate, but was Syn-gman Rhee's claim – that Pembroke dismisses as "*self-serving*" – that North Korea had, "*obliterated the 38th parallel and [that] no peace and order could be maintained in Korea as long as the division at the 38th parallel remained*", really that unreasonable? If an enemy invades once (unprovoked), and suffers no great cost, is it really such a flawed calculation to think that they might very well return for a second attempt? And we know that this is exactly what Kim Il-sung wanted, constantly petitioning the Soviet Union to support a second war.

But let's look at the language here, and contrast it with the latitude that is always granted to Kim and Stalin – "*The ensuing euphoria*" from America's first major victory at Inchon "*resulted in galloping optimism that killed all sober analysis, unleashed a dangerous hubris and whetted an unseemly appetite in Washington for a larger war*". The closer Pembroke gets to the end of his book, the more desperate he becomes to convince his reader. When China enters the conflict, they are presented as having war forced upon them. Distrustful of the United States, they wanted to keep the fighting away from their border. No mention here of Stalin consulting Mao over his pre-invasion planning, or of Mao seeing the conflict as a chance to catapult China into a position of global communist leadership. Again, accessing the old communist archives would have saved the author from these mistakes. But at this stage, Pembroke sounds more like a cheerleader – apparently American forces suffered so many casualties against the Chinese army because "*none of them was aware of Mao Zedong's writings on the art of war and military strategy*"; comical, if he weren't talking about actual human lives. The small amount of supplies that the average Chinese infantryman carried with them – when compared with an American – is explained as a sign only of their superior soldiering. Accounts of daily suffering and constant hunger from the Chinese side would tell a different story, but Pembroke plays this off almost as a choice, openly mocking the 'pampered' Americans with their "*woollen socks...candy...toilet supplies...waterproof boot[s]...field jackets...mittens...[and] mufflers*". I wonder which army the author would rather have fought in?

It is hard to defend the extent of the American bombing campaign, and Pembroke – as you would expect – makes hay while he can. But soon enough he is mis-attributing intentions and outcomes – "*The armistice negotiations were accompanied by ever expanding and more punitive US bombing – in the belief that the bombing would lead to concessions at the truce talks*". Anyone with any sort of understanding of the armistice talks knows that rather than America slow-playing the negotiations, it was China and the Soviet Union who saw it as a chance to pro-

long the war; exhausting American resources and will. For Mao and Stalin the war was low cost, but offered an awful lot in potential upside. America and North Korea, both with a lot more to lose, desperately wanted it to end. This can be read in the increasingly frantic cables from Kim Il-sung to Stalin, imploring him to sign the armistice agreement; the replies were always the same – an insistence that Kim continue fighting (again, all documented in the old communist archives).

Pembroke's long-term consideration of the bombing isn't just mistaken, but lazy. The United States, unable "*to comprehend the long-term effect of its devastating bombing of North Korean cities*" accidentally "*established a pattern for the next sixty years*" that damaged the "*long-term stability of the peninsula*". This is a line taken directly from the Kim regime, which runs something like 'every North Korean remembers your bombing campaign, so we need nuclear weapons and an aggressive military posture because we are scared you will do it again'. On the surface, this seems to make sense. The trouble is, this is external propaganda only (propaganda sent out for international ears, but never resold to North Koreans), seen on selected-for-purpose news reports and announcements, and told to unquestioning tourists. The Kim dynasty has always based its legitimacy on the idea that North Korea are, by virtue of their unique moral purity, a constant target for predatory states; and it is only by the will and genius of the Kim's that these enemies have been defeated at every turn. The memory of complete and utter destruction at the hands of the 'Yankee Enemy', and of a Great Leader helpless to stop them, is a memory that would go a long way towards bringing down the regime by the standards of its own ideology. Rather than animating North Korean minds for the past "*sixty years*", the success of the American bombing is heavily downplayed through internal propaganda.

The trouble with stories about the futility of war, is that they look inwards. When a soldier has seen too much horror and felt the senselessness of it all, the lament 'what are we doing here?' tends to single out only one side of the battle. So when Pembroke looks at his father, sees that the "*irredeemable had happened*", and judges that this "*experience was deep in his psyche and that it was impossible to conceal*", it is hard not to have sympathy. But that does not mean that we should then accept claims like, "*For many Koreans – from north to south – it is 'an article of faith that the United States deserves the principle blame for the division of the peninsula'*". This is so wrong-headed that it takes away one's will to even critique it – the only way to make that sentence truthful is to remove the word 'south'. On the whole, South Koreans know who their enemy was... and still is. And statements by Pembroke, despite being designed to convince us of American malice, such as "*The war has not ended. China's army has long since withdrawn but that of*

the United States has not”, inadvertently show just this. American soldiers remain in South Korea today, only because South Koreans want them there.

Having skilfully deciphered “*that the outcome of war is rarely good*”, Pembroke blames the lingering “*siege mentality*” over the peninsula on “*the menacing presence of American troops just below the 38th parallel*”. He never asks the obvious question, ‘why do the South Koreans feel the need to keep hosting these American forces?’, and ‘what does that say about where the menace is really coming from?’ But Pembroke wants us to look back to more conciliatory times, when kindness was offered to North Korea, and when kindness was then returned; specifically, he wants us to look back on the 1994 Agreed Framework... if only he himself gave more than a cursory glance. All Pembroke sees is a comprehensive agreement between Washington and Pyongyang to denuclearise the peninsula. Yet at this height of diplomatic relations, where Kim Jong-il was personally offered assurances from President Clinton, and when U.S. aid was flowing into famine-struck regions, North Korea shocked everyone by announcing *Songun* (Military First Policy); labelling America as a vampiric race enemy, looming to invade. This is all one really needs to know when choosing a side to blame for current hostilities.

Through this book, I kept hoping that Pembroke would pump the brakes and offer some occasional caveats. Things like, ‘this is a nice argument and worth thinking about, but just remember which side moral progress, right intentions and human rights are on’, but they never come. Instead he just wheels forward, making the same type of errors when talking on issues from nuclear weapons, to the prospects of reunification, and even the nature of North Korea’s political system (there was only so much that could fit into this review). The way Pembroke builds his case against America, feels like that of a crooked police officer who, convinced that his suspect is guilty, plants false evidence, encourages dishonest witnesses and destroys exonerating information; convincing himself all along that he is doing the right thing, that he is putting away a bad guy. Overlaying this comes a wave of cheap, travel guide-esque orientalism. Gems like “*There is a sadness among the Korean people. It is their Han – a deep feeling of national grievance, a collective feeling of oppression and isolation, and unresolved resentment and a sense of helplessness*”, are the caricature equivalent of saying the Irish like a pint, or the Germans like a war.

There is an all-too-common mistake in North Korean studies, of applying plausible, yet unfounded thoughts, desires and intentions to the regime in Pyongyang... this book is not that! Michael Pembroke stretches credulity so far, and with such effort, that the reader is left looking inward only on his prejudice. He has a story to tell, and he needs the facts to fit. For anyone with even the slightest grasp on Kore-

an history, this book will make you angry – because somewhere, someone, uninitiated to the topic is picking up a copy of ‘*Korea: Where the American Century Began*’, and having an intellectual crime perpetrated on them.

Note on relevance to Korean society: Michael Pembroke, in ‘Korea: Where the American Century Began’, paints an unfortunate picture of history, and so an unfortunate picture of where Korea currently finds itself in the world, along with its possible futures. Korean society is as multifaceted as any, but the peculiarities at its core – the American alliance, the presence of foreign troops, the question of reunification, and the reactive elements of its nationalism – are all hangovers from its near-history. None of these challenges will be easy, or quick, to fix; but all can be helped by a clear-eyed, non-punitive look at the parties involved. Korean society is on the same knife-edge for which it has always balanced, and its future will require stepping-off... either side. Enterprises like Pembroke’s only help to edge the peninsula closer to yet another human catastrophe, and Korean society closer to regression, stagnation and pain. ‘Korea: Where the American Century Began’ wilfully embraces error at almost every turn. And the correction of error, along with the benefit gained by society at large – Korean in this case – should never be dismissed or understated. Washing steadily downstream, the small and the irrelevant soon become terminal. It is only by solving our problems as fast as possible that we have any chance of surviving. To misunderstand the problems we face, is to ensure they are never properly, or judiciously, addressed. So what is risked by Pembroke, is nothing less than the survival and progress of Korean society as a whole.