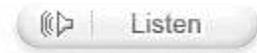


## Beyond today's political turmoil, Korea will prevail

Posted : 2017-02-17 16:38  
Updated : 2017-02-17 16:38



By Vincent Courtenay



I am what Koreans find to be an unpopular person. I may be liked by many who meet me, but deep down I can never be warmly accepted by them. I am a foreigner, born in England, raised in Canada and schooled in the United States.

Even now, with the cogs of the nation's government and political machinery clashing and locking, and with a collective depression spreading throughout the population, I still am an outsider to the people.

However, as a former corporate consultant, I know it is wise many times to ask an outsider to stand out in the hallway and ask what he can see within the room where the principals are gathered.

I have a unique qualification to do that. I am a veteran of the Korean War. I could look at South Korea with the same foreigner's eyes that saw the country and its people more than 60 years ago. I can see things from the perspective of one who, by birth and upbringing, has been raised in a benevolent democracy – albeit one with its many faults.

My goodness, just 60 years ago the nation was not much better off than it had been for centuries before! The Japanese forces and their occupying government had left, but what had they left behind? There was very little industry and most of

it was located in North Korea.

For the people, there was virtually nothing! There were fields where the farm workers stood knee deep in dirty water, planting or harvesting rice. The crops were fertilized by human night soil, as they had been in Japan and other Asian nations for centuries.

There was hardship and misery everywhere. Life was hand to mouth. Crops and fish from the sea were consumed in fragile amounts by very hungry, very lean people. They worked from the dark hours in the mornings until the dark hours of each night.

But I will tell you what a 13-year old Korean boy who shared my trench said to me. He was a boy we took in to do chores for my platoon of Canadian infantry soldiers.

One night we spoke about Korea, by candlelight, in our small trench. We were just behind the United States Marines, who were one mile distant. We were listening to the rifles and machineguns and grenades of the marines and the enemy.

I said how hopeless the country seemed to be; how difficult the task of fighting the enemy was. I wondered out loud what good there might be for him in South Korea, even if we drove out the invaders and made it a free nation.

The boy smiled. With great pride that astonished me, said, "No. No. Korea is Number One!"

He was puzzled that I, a soldier from a rich democracy, could not see things as he saw them.

Yes, the war was horrible. Yes, there was no work, except a little on the farms and grubbing for the foreign soldiers. Yes, he would never have a chance to go to high school, or to college.

Yes, except for the food we gave him he might be scratching for weeds and roots; there was nothing else to eat for one without home or family.

But he had something that was enormously precious.

He had his Korean pride and his great love for his country, and for the Korean people!

Even in that trench, with the canvas above our heads shuddering when shells exploded along the front lines, or when the great American cannon blasted near the Imjin, he was smiling, and he was very proud and hopeful.

We foreign soldiers might have a few military scrip notes of money in our pockets, abundant cigarettes from the largesse of the American forces, adequate food, but we did not have what he possessed.

We were not Koreans whose ancestral lines went back five millennia. We could not wake like him and be thrilled to see the Korean mists rolling up the rugged hillsides.

We could not, like him, be thrilled to hear the morning call of a pheasant that was somehow or other – not unlike the people – surviving in the bushes and the shrubs and what grass was left on the battlefields of that horrid war.

To our soldiers his Korea, despite its great beauty, was a place of constant danger. It was a place of hardship, a place to want to get away from. We stayed on principle and not heart's desire, because we had pledged to stay.

To that boy, full of zest and expectancy, Korea was a paradise!

While he was orphaned by the war, he was not really alone in his brave young heart.

His family numbered in the millions!

He was Korean and the great community of Korea – even politically divided into two nations – was his abundant treasure. That great Korean family and the unconquerable Korean spirit had lived and survived and prevailed for centuries.

He was 13 and he rose each morning before the soldiers did; before the pheasant crowed. He lit a fire to boil the water and the soldiers sent him fetching this and fetching that throughout the day.

He did mind that they called him the Japanese name, "Skoshay," meaning he was small. He did not mind the hard work if they showed him the respect it should have earned for him.

All of them did not all understand that. So instead of equality they gave him chocolate bars and chewing gum, which he kept in a small metal bullet box.

Even subject to this, he still had his considerable pride.

Just 13, he knew that the war would end. He knew the Korean people would still be there and they still would go on, even after we had left.

That small, 13-year old boy knew that, no matter how hard the life, how few the chances for betterment, though there would be many dangers and deprivations then and later, he would prevail.

He was gifted with the great pride of the people, and pride of the wonderful part of the natural world that is his Korea.

Even early in the war, when the great, moaning, pitiful throngs of civilians crowded the roads in endless lines, hauling their few pitiful things on their backs or in hand carts, hungry, sometimes fired upon, in the mind and heart of every one of them they still were proud to be Korean – and all had hope.

Yes, the flame of pride and love was low in many hearts, in some it only flickered; how could it not be so with all of the sorrow and suffering?

But without hope they would not have joined in the tedious horribly hard march to a better time and a better place.

Today that boy would be in his mid-70s, if he survived. And today there is once again a great sigh from the people, in every city, every county, in every province.

Yes, that long march to a better time and a better place continues.

Yet the rugged foot paths that served as roads then are now great concrete highways, second to none in the world; in every way the nation's infrastructure is a model for other nations.

Now the people of South Korea, take time off from their jobs and travel hundreds of kilometers to visit family elders for Chuseok, and other great holidays. They go in fine clothing and with gifts.

Many travel to those places in sparkling new cars. Many more take the high-speed trains, or inter-urban buses and enjoy one the very best public transportation systems in the world.

That boy's Korea of more than 60 years has magnificently become the Korea of today. It is a great industrial giant, its manufacturing prowess and its technologies lead those of other nations.

And yes, not all of the people can share equally in the bounty of the new Korea. Yes, there is enormous distance between the wealth of many, and the low incomes of so many more.

And yes, at this time the nation is in political turmoil. Many of the people are feeling betrayed by their own political leaders and the political system that was adopted from the democratic institutions of America. They are feeling despondent that some of the nation's great industrialists may have let them down, too.

But South Korea's free democratic system – albeit imperfect, like that in the other democracies – is still solid! The country still is being governed by the representatives of the people, and for the people!

In what other nation can millions of people turn out with lighted candles to peacefully demand a change in their government? Without one act of violence? Without arrests being made?

The fact that they can do it shows that the Korean institutions, while abused, are durable and still function for the people.

They are their institutions!

The government is indeed of the people.

And this great Korea is also of the Korean people!

They send a bit of their work – or their pride – to other nations all around the world.

They send fine, soundly engineered cars; magnificent ships that ply the oceans; electronic conveniences like television sets, smart phones, scientific instruments.

They send their brilliant people, where in more than 100 foreign nations they excel in their fields of learning and their endeavors.

There is not room in the entire newspaper to list even a percentage of the great achievements of this Korea and its free people!

But here is what this foreigner who fought to defend the Republic of Korea of the 1950's would say if he was asked what he sees when he examines the country and the people of today:

Stand and rejoice, People of Korea!

The current political turmoil is of nothing compared to the great war that we all experienced together some 60 years ago.

It is nothing compared to the long occupation of the nation by a foreign power before that, or compared to the many invasions by foreign armies.

It is nothing when one thinks of the droughts and the famines the people have lived through, and the mismanagement of the kings in the feudal times.

Your Korean spirit, your love of neighbor, your Korean greatness is in your hearts.

It is in your blood.

A 13-year old boy taught me that more than 60 years ago.

The poor judgment of a misguided few will not detract from the greatness of the Korea of today.

The great moral depression it has caused will be gone and you will lift your spirits and rejoice.

The long march to a better day and a better place that I once joined in still goes on.

It takes great strength and determination, for the road is always ascending.

But Korea will go on.