

**Testimony on North Korea to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee
by Ambassador Mark Palmer
Washington, DC, November 4, 2003**

Let us be clear about our goal. We want to help the North Korean people liberate themselves from the gulag, achieve democracy and unite peacefully with their fellow Koreans in the South. This will require the ouster of the dictator, Kim Jong Il. We need a comprehensive strategy to achieve that goal.

In December 2002 Kim Jong Il created a new crisis by admitting that he had been conducting a secret program to develop nuclear weapons, in violation of the 1994 agreement with the United States. He threatened war if the United States did not agree to negotiate a nonaggression pact and restart economic assistance in return for his, again, promising not to develop nuclear weapons. This presents an extraordinary opportunity for the United States and South Korea to move “From Helsinki to Pyongyang”—the title of a statement of principles that Michael Horowitz of the Hudson Institute and I conceived and drafted and for which we secured leading Americans as cosigners. The *Wall Street Journal* published the statement on 17 January, 2003. We argue that just as President Richard Nixon in 1972 agreed to negotiations on Leonid Brezhnev’s demands for a nonaggression pact and improved economic cooperation but insisted on broadening the agenda to include human rights, so President Bush should propose to open negotiations on such a Helsinki-like three-basket agenda with North Korea. The animating insight of Helsinki was that, by publicly raising human rights issues to high-priority levels, the United States would set in motion forces that would undermine the legitimacy of the Soviet communist empire, and so it turned out to be. By formally acknowledging in Helsinki the legitimacy of such rights as the free exchange of people, open borders, and family reunification, the communists opened the floodgates of dissent and brought about their eventual ouster.

Would Kim Jong Il agree to enter into such a negotiation and agreement? In 2002 and 2003 he is showing signs of desperation, and searching for new solutions to mounting problems. In 2002, he introduced a modest reform in the setting of wages and prices, quite likely in part the result of his study trips to China and Russia. In his belligerent way, he is literally begging for relations with, and help from the United States. While he is no Gorbachev 1984-1985, there are some similarities which we should exploit.

Of the 43 remaining Not Free countries, North Korea is the only one that has yet even to take a cautious step into stage one of the three stages of democracy development set forth in my book “Breaking the Real Axis of Evil: How to Oust the World’s Last Dictators by 2025.” It has no proto-civil society, no legalistic culture to influence, no free media. It is far more isolated than the pre-Helsinki Soviet Bloc. Material privation surpasses that in the 1960s and 1970s Soviet Bloc, which failed its citizens miserably, but made at least some pretense of having a consumer base.

In fact, thanks to the resilience of the human spirit and imagination, countries are rarely as locked down as they seem from without. The people of North Korea can be persuaded that there *is* light at the end of the tunnel, and that they can rejoin with their relations in the South in a

united, democratic, and open Korea. The democracies, especially those with a strong presence in the region like the United States and Japan, in partnership with the Republic of Korea, a charter member of the Community of Democracies, need to make communicating with the people of North Korea their first priority. Once the brutalized people of North Korea begin to believe that they can work to change their destiny, and that they will have all the help the democracies can possibly provide, the rotten edifice will begin to crumble. But there is no time to lose.

An invaluable avenue is media penetration, which is not impossible in North Korea. People have radios even in the countryside. But we need to ensure that they have radios that can receive foreign broadcasts. Dr. Norbert Vollertsen's efforts, along with those of his South Korean colleagues, to send in such radios are a vital part of the larger strategy. Radio Free Asia has a Korean-language service, and South Korean stations can be received. Building up the Radio Free Asia Korean Service from its current four hours a day to a full-time service would take a modest spike in funding, and considering the potential dividends, the resources need to be found. A concerted effort to get through to the North Korean public in this manner is essential, even with the attendant jamming and monitoring.

Members of the elite in North Korea have greater access to information from outside, through satellite television, the Internet, and other media. They must get a consistent message that there is a future for those who are willing to switch their allegiance to the side of the people—and that the regime is doomed in any case owing to its own failings. They must also understand that should the leadership lash out in its self-imposed death throes, the response will be withering and total. The military, security, and foreign affairs elites' access to international media is essential to the regime. By using these conduits, the democracies can work to reduce the chance for a conflagration when the regime crumbles. High-level officials have defected before, some in recent years. There is no doubt they are taking the risk of defection for a reason. Certainly they know how low North Korea's dictators have laid the country, and how backward it is today. Now they must be shown a way out. The intelligence services of the democracies need to recruit agents of influence in this rarefied stratum. If the North Korean army and security forces can be persuaded not to turn on dissidents at home or against "enemies" abroad, and if the North Korean people can be empowered to take the necessary risks, the shift to democracy could follow very quickly.

The democratic world must work within Japan's sizable Korean community to find ways to get inside and funnel information out. While this community contains a great many North Korean agents and still more sympathizers, even this can be turned into an asset. Interrogating and turning North Korean agents, with all the attendant risks, will at the very least give a clearer picture of North Korea's support network. If these resources are squeezed or redirected toward the struggle for democracy, the regime will feel real pressure.

Such exchanges with the outside world as still exist must be exploited. Russia, at least nominally a democracy, continues to court cold-war-era allies. But North Korea cannot be seen as an ally that produces any financial or strategic gain for Moscow. Following the terrorist attacks on the United States, Russia's president, Vladimir Putin, has tried to draw closer to the United States. An opportunity to change tack is now at hand. President Bush should communicate to Putin that he sees a peaceful transition to democracy in North Korea as being in the interests of both the

United States and Russia, and that Moscow has an important role to play in assuring a “soft landing.” Broadcast facilities in the Russian far east could help increase the radio footprint—and the frequencies used—for reaching the North Korean general population. Russia’s border with North Korea, though relatively short, allows for some defections, refugee flows, and interaction with North Korean authorities. Furthermore, a declared policy of offering political asylum to those who escape should be adopted. A sufficient flow of refugees could, as in former East Germany, lead to the collapse of the regime without any bloodshed or war. If Russia wants to be considered a democracy and a partner in the war on terrorism, its actions with regard to North Korea, as well as the post-Soviet “near abroad,” rogue states, and its own dirty war in Chechnya, need to be the proof of such a commitment to a common goal.

China, which shares a much longer border with North Korea, has a deeper, more significant relationship with Pyongyang—a relationship among dictatorial regimes that feel besieged by the democratic world’s pull. While China is somewhat more open, it is integral to maintaining the regime it saved from annihilation in the Korean War. There is far greater interchange between China and North Korea. Defections and refugees from North Korea are common—some three hundred thousand in the past few years. Consistent with the rest of Chinese human rights practice, some are forcibly returned to North Korea. Others, as is the case with illegal aliens the world over, are kept in essentially chattel-slavery conditions in China. The communist Chinese regime’s quest for international respectability, though doomed by its own essential nature, could be used to advantage in this most dire circumstance. It is against international law to return refugees to countries where they will likely be tortured or killed. Chinese commitments—indeed exhortations—that international law must be the basis for relations among nations should be invoked. In addition, this is the most permeable border into North Korea, and better intelligence on the state of the regime and the people of North Korea is best gathered here. Democracies should fund the resettlement in South Korea of Koreans who manage to escape the North Korean border guards.

The bottom line is that Beijing needs to be forced to accept that North Korea will eventually reunify with South Korea in a democratic Korean state, and that the democracies wish to manage this, starting the process sooner rather than later. Of course, if China itself is democratized earlier than North Korea this problem evaporates.

In addition to all this external activity, the democracies need to work to get *inside* the country directly. Why not up the ante by announcing that the United States, and other democracies wish to open embassies in Pyongyang? With the right talent in even a handful of democratic embassies, the influence of democracies in North Korea—and over developments there—would increase exponentially. Like all embassies, these should be freedom houses, with Internet access and facilities where people can safely meet. The ambassadors and all their diplomatic staff need to make themselves visible on the scene in Pyongyang, testing their limits, traveling to the hinterland, reporting and networking and influencing, even passing out free radios able to receive foreign broadcasts, as our embassy office in Cuba has been doing.

Under the leadership of the South Koreans, the democracies and NGOs need to vastly expand educational, cultural, scientific, people-to-people, and other exchanges with North Koreans. This tried-and-true method had huge impact on opening up the USSR and eastern Europe and can

work in North Korea as well. Kim Jong Il has been willing to explore exchanges, although very tentatively and with repeated backsliding. Even if the initial areas the dictator is interested in should be restricted to such subjects as management training, learning how the World Bank and other international development institutions function and how commercial law works, the democracies should see this as the beginning of a process. While nervous and paranoid, Kim Jong Il, like most dictators, may begin to think he is smart enough to avoid the fate of others before him who thought they could control everything. We need to believe that he will fail once enough opening occurs.

Managing the shift to reunification should start now. Because regimes rarely crumble according to a timetable, having a plan in place for the disintegration of the North Korean regime is imperative. The neighborhood needs to buy into the overall plan, or, as with China, be willing to stay out of the way. The whole democratic world must reassure the region, and Seoul most of all, that it will have resolute backup—including resources—when the process gains its own momentum. Fear of being overwhelmed is palpable, and understandable given the massive disparity that has grown between North and South Korea. This fear is the perhaps the largest barrier to active South Korean government support for regime change in the North. They need reassurance that the process can be managed. The time to begin planning for what can be done in all conceivable scenarios is now.

A major reason to begin post-communist planning now is to do it publicly, broadcast it to North Korea and therefore help raise expectations there, create momentum, make the prospect of radical change seem real and near-term. No dictatorship can long survive once the people withdraw their cooperation.

Already, South Koreans and others are studying how Germany went about its unification in 1990, and what is to be avoided. While the analogy is imperfect, there are still lessons to learn. One obvious “don’t” is not to convert the North Korean currency on a basis too favorable to it. This killed East Germany’s one competitive advantage -- low labor costs. Labor mobility will also have to wait for some time, until the North’s economy has made some advances, so as not to swamp the South with cheaper labor and again, not to deny northern Korea its natural advantage in attracting investment. Squaring this need with the inevitable drive for family reunification and freedom of movement will be a difficult equation, and one that requires serious thinking now. Perhaps Korea should be reunited in principle after the dictator’s ouster but with some degree of separation and autonomy for a transition period. A positive lesson from Germany’s unification: building up infrastructure pays big dividends in enabling economic growth, attracting domestic and foreign investment, and stemming the exodus to more affluent areas. North Korea was once the country’s industrial base, and industry requires serviceable roads, ports, railways, and communications systems.

Cadres of South Korean police, administrators, and other managers will need to move north to help make the transition as smooth as possible. Northerners need to be brought into the process at all stages. Most important will be the early introduction of democratic political institutions and getting to the point where North Koreans can manage local matters in the same way South Koreans already do.

One of the most positive models for a liberated North Korea is the example of South Korea. In a single lifetime, South Korea has risen from being considered a hopeless backwater under dictators to joining the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development—the club of the world’s richest democracies. South Koreans also had to struggle against and overcome dictatorship to achieve their freedom. Their ingenuity and know-how are already on hand.

A campaign to help bring the world’s most repressive regime down, with the North Koreans themselves leading the way for their own liberation, can make an entirely free and united Korea a reality. In parallel with all the other steps outlined above, from the outset we must be working with North and South Koreans and others to organize a non-violent movement to achieve this objective. In a sense, all the other steps are designed to open the space for a nonviolent movement to operate and succeed.

Trying to force dictators to modify the worst aspects of their behavior may certainly help to lessen the human suffering they cause. Soviet leader Nikita Sergeyevich Krushchev closed down much of Stalin’s gulag; and we should strive to get Kim Jong Il to do the same. But softening repression does not eliminate its cause; eliminating the dictator is the only way to do that. History provides no account of a dictator being converted into a democrat while still in power, or of relinquishing power of his own volition. The only way for democracy to emerge is for the dictator to go.

How the dictator is challenged determines whether and how quickly he can be ousted, and it also has a crucial effect on whether sustainable democracy ensues. Armed rebellions usually fail, often even before they can begin. Even if they succeed, what comes after is typically no better, and frequently worse, than what they displace. Leaders of guerrilla movements are adept at the use of violence and take those skills with them when they take over presidential mansions: that is why violent revolutions typically produce repressive regimes. The people inherit only a new set of jailers.

But there is another set of strategies for dissolving dictatorial power and establishing democracy, and it has a remarkable record of success. In their seminal book, “A Force More Powerful”, Peter Ackerman and Jack Du Vall document a dozen cases in which nonviolent popular movements prevailed against seemingly overwhelming odds and took power away from arbitrary rulers. My own experiences in the U.S. civil rights movement and in diplomatic service in communist countries confirm their view that political systems that deny people their rights can best be taken apart from the inside by the people themselves – of course with substantial assistance from outside.

No dictator can hold power without sowing the seeds of popular discontent. Payoffs to cronies and constables who crack down on opponents eventually exude the smell of corruption, which is always deeply unpopular. The mothers and fathers of young dissidents who are “disappeared” do not forget who is responsible for sundering their families. And few dictators are known for their brilliance in economic management: the economic crises that frequently follow can pile up more dry tinder of public resentment.

From the moment when the match of organized nonviolent opposition is first struck to the day that the dictator steps down, years can elapse—or only weeks. Almost a decade passed between the first stirrings of organized dissidence against the Polish communist regime in the early 1970s and the appearance of Solidarity in the midst of the Gdansk shipyard strike. But forty years earlier, a general strike by the citizens of El Salvador had toppled a military tyrant in a matter of days. The difference is not in how much violence the state is prepared to use—the Salvadoran general was one of his country’s bloodiest rulers. What makes for success is developing and communicating clear objectives for the struggle, organizing and mobilizing people on a wide scale, applying maximum pressure to the pillars of a regime’s support, and protecting the movement from inevitable repression.

In his landmark tract “From Dictatorship to Democracy” which has been translated into a dozen languages and used as a bible by dissidents from Burma to Serbia, Gene Sharp—the master theoretician of nonviolent conflict—identifies 198 separate methods of nonviolent action. From social and economic boycotts to industrial and rent strikes, and from outright civil disobedience to physical interventions such as sit-ins and occupations, the panoply of nonviolent weapons is far more diverse and inventive than the broadcast media’s preoccupation with street marches would lead idle viewers to imagine.

That nonviolent resistance can be at once robust and precise, widespread and carefully timed, is typically unexpected by outsiders, but not by the dictators who are its targets. They do not share the common misconceptions that nonviolent action is passive and reactive and that its leaders are amateurs or pacifists. Nonviolent movements that develop a systematic strategy to undermine their opponents and seize power are deliberately engaging in conflict, albeit with different resources and weapons.

Even though these strategies do not use guns or explosives, they are not forms of conflict for the fainthearted. Nonviolent fighters often have to make protracted physical and economic sacrifices before they liberate their peoples. Many have to endure arrest, imprisonment, and torture. Many have been murdered. Yet tens of thousands of them, in conflict after conflict on five continents, have willingly faced these risks, in the interest of achieving freedom or justice.

Shrewd leadership can help them minimize risks and maximize the political damage their movement inflicts on the dictator. In movements that need people at the working level of society to join open or clandestine opposition, leaders can enlarge the ranks only by showing people that the goals of the struggle are worthy, the strategy sound. So unlike organizations that employ violence, nonviolent movements cannot be operated like an army, strictly from the top down. Their leaders have to rely on the same skills that are needed in running a democracy: persuading people to go along and encouraging initiative at the grass roots. A nonviolent campaign is effective when it overstretches the capacity of a dictator to maintain business as usual; but it can do that only when it empowers people everywhere to challenge his control.

Nonviolent power is therefore always rooted in the mind and action of the individual, and sometimes that action seems innocuous when the struggle is young. As Jan Bucek, the Czech student leader has said, most of the movements against communist rulers in central and eastern

Europe first took the form of samizdat, or self-published books, pamphlets, and other literature. The civic action to curb the military dictatorship in Argentina in the late 1970s began with a handful of unsophisticated mothers of the disappeared marching in the capital's central square. Nonviolent combatants understand something that dictators do not: to be sustainable, social or political action has to be built on the choice of individuals to engage in it, not on state edicts that prod unwilling subjects into compliance.

Although nonviolent resistance begins with the individual citizen, it has far more potential than violent insurrection to enlist all parts of the oppressed society in the cause. While violent skirmishing with police or soldiers may appeal to young firebrands, it frightens off older people and those without a taste for physical confrontation—in other words, the most stable elements of civil society, whose support is essential for lasting social or political change. By giving people from all walks of life (even children) ways of participating in a movement, nonviolent strategies enlarge the inventory of resources and tools available to undermine a regime.

This eclectic, inclusive approach to mobilizing support can even extend to people within the regime. Dissatisfaction with a dictator is not limited to those who are politically motivated to oppose him. From lower-level apparatchiks all the way up to the praetorian guard, there is often fear and ambivalence in the ranks of the dictator's chosen servants and defenders. The greater the repression that the dictator has employed, the greater the opportunity to subvert the loyalty of those defenders—but not if the movement vilifies them. When Ferdinand Marcos fell in the Philippines in 1986, and when Slobodan Milosevic fell in Serbia in 2000, their own military officers and police refused final orders to crack down on the opposition. That could not have happened had nonviolent organizers demonized or picked fights with security and military services.

Whether it is manifested in crowded public rallies or the emptiness of boycotted stores, in the boisterous occupation of key factories or the public stillness of a general strike, the vitality of a nonviolent movement necessarily raises popular expectations that it can work where other methods may have failed. Unless people are encouraged by the chance of victory to take action, they will never believe that change is possible. Nothing aids a dictator like the assumption that he cannot be vigorously challenged and when he is challenged the confidence of those whose support he requires to remain in power begins to erode. Then, when a movement's momentum builds from one engagement to the next, the whole nation will realize that the dictator's survival is in question.

No dictator is exempt from having to face this question once a nonviolent movement opens up space for opposition. If we think that the dictators in Beijing and Pyongyang are too ruthless to be bothered by nonviolent challengers, we should revisit the story of Charlotte Israel, the German woman who organized a sit-in demonstration in the heart of Berlin in World War II and forced the Nazis to release her husband and thousands of other Jewish spouses who had been taken to the death camps.

North Korea definitely offers reasons for optimism. It is perhaps the most brittle dictatorship in the world today. Seldom has a regime more fully failed its people and had as little legitimacy and

popular support. We know from senior defectors that even those immediately around Kim Jong Il are more afraid than loyal, and that he himself is intensely afraid of being overthrown.

We need to develop a training and support program for a non-violent movement for and inside North Korea, benefiting from the experience in South Korea, the Philippines, Indonesia, eastern Europe and elsewhere. Leaders from those successful movements should train Koreans. A volunteer cadre of those who have escaped from North Korea could form one core group for training in organization and conflict techniques. But others in South Korea and beyond can play important roles.

Outsiders can help by delegitimizing Kim Jong Il. We need a new class of dictator-ousting sanctions narrowly targeted on him, as opposed to broad economic and other sanctions which wall off North Koreans, punish an already suffering people, reinforce the gulag and Kim's control. One such sanction gaining international precedent is to indict and try a dictator for crimes against humanity in a specially instituted tribunal. The basis for an indictment against Kim Jong Il is clear. David Hawk's magnificent and detailed report provides substantial material. Kim Jong Il also should be indicted for the deaths of some two million Koreans from starvation. He is also implicated in the assassination of South Korean cabinet ministers in Burma and the downing of a Korean airliner in the 1980s. I urge that dictatorship itself be declared a crime against humanity; by definition it denies an entire people of rights guaranteed under a host of international agreements adhered to even by North Korea. By treating Kim Jong Il as the criminal he is, we will undermine his attempt to appear almost like a god. We will show that the emperor has no clothes. This is profoundly important in building the will to resist and oust him.

Outsiders also could help instill the will to resist among North Koreans by the sort of fireside chats which Prime Minister Churchill and President Roosevelt used to give the free world the courage to resist and defeat the fascists in World War II. Democratic leaders should make a weekly or monthly practice of speaking to the North Korean people via radio, television and the internet. We persuaded over twenty prime ministers and presidents of democracies to join in broadcasting to Poland and Solidarity in the 1980s.

Let us finish the job of bringing democracy to the Korean peninsula through the diplomacy of opening and liberation, and inspiring and supporting people power.