

No magnanimity, no unification

By Spencer H. Kim

Every couple of years I reread a few classic books that tell fundamental truths that you can forget if you don't keep reminding yourself.

For the work of the Pacific Century Institute, I read former U.S. Senator William Fulbright's "The Arrogance of Power."



The lesson it clearly tells me now is that without a bipartisan South Korean policy toward the North based on magnanimity there is no hope for Korean unification any time in the imaginable future. This realization struck me hard as Koreans just marked their 70th year of liberation from the Japanese colonial rule.

Fulbright wrote his book in 1966 as America fought a bitter war in Vietnam, but well before it had become fashionable to question the war — in fact, his book was what prompted America's elite to begin to ask questions.

Fulbright wrote that it is the tendency of human antagonists to dehumanize each other, and to implant a preconception of the other as evil, and to then filter every piece of information about the antagonist to reinforce that preconception — whether it fits objectively or not. And to disregard the other side's narrative of its hopes and fears as invalid. As I reread the book, every time Fulbright mentioned North Vietnam to demonstrate this phenomena I replaced it with North Korea and it fit like hand in glove. We — the U.S. and South Korea — are doing the same today.

But Fulbright said the real danger comes for the powerful. Powerful nations, he said, tend to equate power with virtue, therefore they feel self-righteous in forcing their virtuous will on others. That is the arrogance of power. Only magnanimity can defuse arrogance.

Here is Fulbright's quote: "There is something appropriate and admirable about a small country standing up defiantly to a big country; such behavior confers upon the small country strength and dignity that it would not otherwise possess. The same behavior on the part of a big nation is grotesque, marking it as a bully. The true mark of greatness is not stridency but magnanimity."

Magnanimity is not a code word for being "pink" or "soft" on North Korea. It should be the basis for an all-purpose long-term strategy. Will the North do outrageous things? Yes; It is the weaker party. Do you have to be afraid to respond? No. But you do have to ask yourself before acting, what is the magnanimous response that will bring the best strategic result?

This May at a Pacific Century Institute dinner in Seoul, Volker Rühle, of the conservative German Christian Democratic Union Party, and one of the key aides to Chancellor Helmut Kohl during German unification, told the audience that West Germany's bipartisan Ostpolitik policy, in which West Germany as the richer and more powerful country took a magnanimous approach to the East, was what led East Germany to seek reunification with the West.

Rühe noted that he and Kohl thought unification would take at least 10 years after the fall of the Wall, but because of the positive view of the West brought about by years of the magnanimous, bipartisan Ostpolitik, the East German people voted for immediate unity.

If you are a progressive who might hope for a gradual Korean unification, a bipartisan policy based on magnanimity is essential, although you might want to choose a different name than “Sunshine Policy.”

If you are a conservative who hopes that the North Korean regime will somehow fall, you have to be realistic that even if that happens there will be some kind of follow-on force in control of the country. If they perceive the South as a snarling, angry bully that threatens their future, will they bend their country in the direction East Germany’s transitional leaders did? And if there is no challenge to Kim Jong-un in a long reign that may be 40 years, will he move to accommodation with a government in Seoul that changes policy each five years?

Fulbright, a conservative Southerner, was fond of quoting Edmund Burke, the philosophical godfather of modern conservatism, "Example is the school of mankind, and they will learn at no other." Every North Korean in the coming years — Kim family member, military commander, apparatchik, factory worker or farmer — will form their view of the South based on its actions, and on its magnanimity — or lack thereof.

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