

This opinion piece “The Limits of Certainty” by PCI Board Member Dr. Chung-in Moon appeared in the Sisa-In Weekly on July 23, 2011 in Korean and was translated by PCI Senior Fellow Fred Carriere, Adjunct Professor, the Korean Peninsula Affairs Center (KPAC), Syracuse University.

The Limits of Certainty

Karl Popper said that there can be no such thing as ‘absolute truth’ in the natural or social sciences. From this standpoint, the ‘certainty’ that Representative Park Sun-young has about the sinking of the Ch’önan is seen only in the realm of metaphysics.

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Why do political leaders tell lies? This is the subject of a book published early this year by John J. Mearsheimer, a celebrated political scientist at the University of Chicago. In the book he lists one by one and trenchantly critiques a series of diplomatic incidents that American citizens understood to be confirmed or absolutely true but in reality were demonstrated to be instances of ‘spinning’ or complete fabrication by their political leaders.

One prime example is the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. Vice President Cheney said very firmly: “Saddam Hussein not only possesses weapons of mass destruction, but he also is reinforcing these weapons to target us as well as our friends and allies.” Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld even went so far as to state confidently: “We know where the (Iraqi) weapons of mass destruction are located.” The most dramatic example was Colin Powell’s performance who was the secretary of state at the time. Holding up a bottle filled with white powder during an address to the Security Council of the United Nations, General Powell stated firmly: “Saddam Hussein not only has chemical weapons, but he also has the capability to increase their production.”

Another issue was the certainty that there was a connection between Iraq and al-Qaeda. On September 27, 2002, Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld announced: “We have bulletproof evidence that there is an alliance between the forces of Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden.”

In the end, however, all of these groundless certainties were demonstrated to be distortions or disinformation. After the occupation of Iraq, the U.S. government mobilized a force of about 8,000 men to conduct a search for the alleged weapons of mass destruction. Despite offering the mind-boggling sum of \$20,000,000 as a reward for leads in the discovery process, in the end no traces of weapons of mass destruction were found. The assertion that Iraq was a base for international terrorism also was proven to be

untrue. Each one of these assertions of certainties simply collapsed in the face of the actual facts.

Is the Iraq War the entire story? Another example we know well is the Tonkin Gulf Incident. On August 2, 1964, the U.S. government announced that there had been a preemptive strike by three North Vietnamese coast guard vessels against one of its destroyers—the USS Maddox—while it was conducting a routine patrol in the Tonkin Gulf. It was further reported that the USS Maddox responded to this attack instantaneously with the result that one vessel was sunk and the other two vessels sustained damages. Five days later, the U.S. Congress passed the Tonkin Gulf Resolution by unanimous consent and the Johnson administration used this resolution as an opportunity to escalate the Vietnam War.

Responding to the Soviet Union's protest of these developments, the U.S. government retorted saying it had 'evidence that left no room for discussion about the certainty' of the North Vietnamese attack. Robert McNamara, who was the secretary of defense at the time, testified before the U.S. Senate saying: "North Vietnam launched a premeditated, unilateral attack on the USS Maddox while it was engaged in routine patrol activities, and we have incontrovertible evidence to this effect." In 1995, however, Secretary McNamara testified on his own accord that the attack was an American fabrication.

Let's look back a little further. In 1941, Franklin Roosevelt, who at the time was president of the United States, announced that a German submarine had launched an attack unilaterally and without advance warning on an American destroyer carrying out routine defense patrolling in the North Atlantic. The announcement was intended to stir up a sense of alarm about Nazi Germany among the American public. As you might have surmised, it turned out that the allegation of an attack was not factual. It seems hard to imagine that these kinds of incidents would occur in a mature, developed democracy such as the United States, but these incidents in fact did occur. What these incidents show is precisely the limits of certainty.

If it happens even in a country with as mature a democratic tradition as the U.S.

I've quoted at length from the book because of an impression I got while watching a National Assembly hearing some time ago in which Cho Yong-hwan, a candidate for appointment as a judge of the Constitutional Court, was being questioned. The battle between Representative Park Sun-young of the Liberty Forward Party—who was pressing for an expression of veritable 'certainty' about the sinking of the Ch'ōnan—and Cho Yong-hwan—who took the position "I accept the government's statement, but it can't be said to be certain"—inevitably made me think once again about Mearsheimer's argument. Mearsheimer is a so called 'aggressive realist' who is considered to be a conservative scholar. So it is appropriate that he should give a timely reminder of just how dangerous certainty is in making foreign policy.

In this regard, we need to pay attention to the warning issued by Karl Popper, a philosopher who is very well known to us for his criticism of Marxism and totalitarianism. He argues in his book *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge* that 'absolute truth' doesn't exist in either the natural or the social sciences. Someone who claims the certainty of absolute truth is not arguing in the manner of a scientist but rather in the manner of those who are articulating only a metaphysical (religious) perspective. Scientific truth embodies the paradox that it has the meaning of truth not because it is verified but because it can be falsified.

If you adopt Popper's perspective, it is clear that the certainty demonstrated by Representative Park Sun-young is clearly within the realm of metaphysics whereas on the other hand, Cho Yong-hwan demonstrated the attitude of critical falsification. It is up to each one of us to decide which perspective is more desirable in our circumstances, but isn't it truly ironic that American and British conservatives appear to be closer to the progressive end of the intellectual spectrum than the mainstream of Korean conservatives.