

James Laney: The man who saw the bridge built

By **Spencer H. Kim**

• Published Sep 15, 2026 4:59 pm KST



James T. Laney, left, then U.S. ambassador to Korea, shakes hands with Han Seung-joo, Korea's foreign minister, during their meeting in Seoul in 1994. Korea Times

James T. Laney, the U.S. ambassador to Korea during President Bill Clinton's first term, is widely credited with helping prevent war during the 1994 North Korean nuclear crisis by giving strong advice to Washington and suggesting to former President Jimmy Carter that he go to Pyongyang and meet personally with Kim Il Sung.

Laney died in August at the age of 98.



Spencer H. Kim

Luckily for us, before he died, he told us exactly what he had learned in nearly eight decades of being a dedicated friend of Korea and gave his unvarnished advice for Korea going forward.

In March, Laney accepted the "Building Bridges Award" from the Pacific Century Institute in Los Angeles. He recounted his views on the two-way bridge Koreans and Americans had built over the decades.

His ambassadorship was Laney's third long stint living in Korea. He came the first time as a young 19-year-old soldier in 1947 serving in counterintelligence with Korean comrades. He fell in love with the determination and intelligence he observed in a country emerging from the depredations of colonialism and competition with the communist North.

His fascination with Korea led him to come back again from 1959 to 1964, this time with his family, serving as a Methodist missionary minister and a professor at Yonsei University. Two of his daughters were born in Korea.

In video remarks to the Pacific Century Institute dinner, Laney reiterated his deep love and respect for

Korea and its people. He noted that he had personally witnessed the two countries build a wide bridge between themselves that carried heavy two-way traffic.

But recent events, he said, had saddened him, as the U.S. side was sometimes unilaterally interrupting that traffic. Perhaps it was inevitable that it was going to happen in some form at some time. His conclusion was that it is now incumbent on Koreans to forge a new path forward — to keep the bridge to the U.S., but to also build bridges to Japan, China and elsewhere to create a more independent national security policy. Laney said he expected Koreans to take this path with the same intelligence and prudence they used when they built a democracy from the ruins of the post-World War II period and the Korean War.

It is important to remember where Laney's advice comes from. First, he lived a life of service. As a soldier, pastor, theologian and university president, he sought to serve. His long perspective over decades did not come from an ego seeking glory. Second, his love of Korea was real. It developed, one might say, from "love at first sight," as he was moved by what he experienced as an impressionable young man. He never forgot the emotions he felt and was drawn, again and again, to Korea.

Finally, his advice comes as a religious man of high character who was also wise and lived in the high-pressure world of a university president. In the late 1970s, he successfully raised a \$105 million endowment for Emory University (at the time a record) and transformed it from a mid-tier institution to one of America's preeminent universities.

When Clinton in 1993 asked him to serve again, he agreed to leave his sinecure as a successful university president and go to Seoul at a time of great challenge — as South Korea solidified its democracy internally and faced the threat of a nuclear challenge from North Korea.

Laney faced the challenge of the nuclear crisis in 1994 with his characteristic integrity, honest and yet world-wise ways. He didn't just passively observe a slide toward a possible war in his beloved Korea; instead, he decided to do something, and many say he was instrumental in preventing conflict, death and destruction.

When Laney told us in March that it is now time for Korea to expand its bridges in many directions, he was speaking from a place of love and a dedication to service, but also from the perspective of one experienced in how the world actually works.

Spencer H. Kim is CEO of CBOL Corp., a California aerospace company. He is a co-founder of the Pacific Century Institute and a member of the U.S. Council on Foreign Relations. He was appointed by President George W. Bush to represent the U.S. on the APEC Business Advisory Council 2006-08. He was a resident fellow at Harvard's Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation 2012-13.