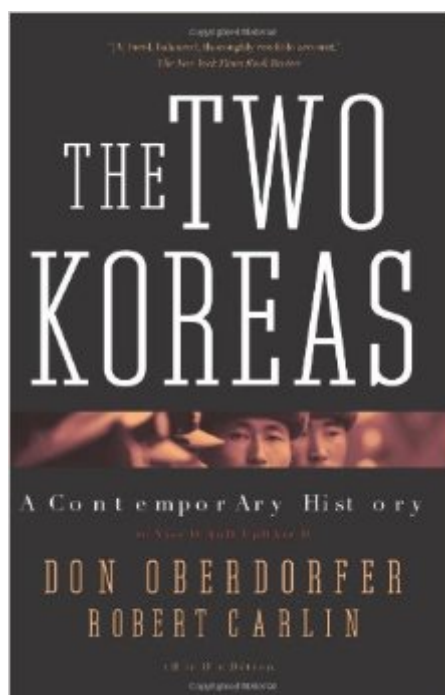


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The Two Koreas: A Contemporary History



Synopsis

Ever since Korea was first divided at the end of World War II, the tension between its northern and southern halves has riveted—and threatened to embroil—the rest of the world. In this landmark history, now thoroughly revised and updated in conjunction with Korea expert Robert Carlin, veteran journalist Don Oberdorfer grippingly describes how a historically homogenous people became locked in a perpetual struggle for supremacy—and how they might yet be reconciled.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Don Oberdorfer's *The Two Koreas* is generally a triumph of style over substance and I do not believe that it merits all of the high ratings it has received here. He does not know Korea as well as some of the other reviewers here think he does. To be sure, Oberdorfer is a compelling writer and he tells the story of North and South Korea since the 1970s with a great deal of flair. He did turn up some useful materials on American policy toward Seoul and Pyongyang during the 1980s through filing Freedom of Information Act requests. Through the use of these materials, interviews and newspaper articles, the book gives a fairly thorough if workmanlike account of Korean history from the early 1970s through the 1990s. He covers the emergence of Yusin, the Seoul Olympics, the negotiation of the Agreed Framework and other events in a fairly readable manner. But Oberdorfer's overall knowledge of Korea and Korean history is very shallow. Oberdorfer does not speak or read Korean and he can only use Korean sources that have been translated for him. His research in Korean materials is non-existent. How can a serious expert on Korean history not cite a single

Korean language source in his entire work? Those who lavish praise on the Two Korea's really need to answer this question. The author's limited knowledge of Korean history often shows in his analysis. First, his chapters on Korea before the 1970s are extremely superficial and contain very little useful information. In this sense, the book has a sort of truncated structure. Korea's history since the 1970s is incomprehensible without an understanding of the period between 1945 and 1972 when Korea was divided and the two Korean states were launched on their very different trajectories.

I picked up "The Two Koreas" before leaving for my first visit to Seoul and Busan hoping to get a full picture of political and economic developments on the peninsula since the end of the Korean War. I usually pre-screen my book purchases thoroughly, but in this case chose Oberdorfer's piece simply because it appeared to be the best option available on short notice. This isn't a bad book; but it is a bit awkward. First, the only logic to the timeframe covered (roughly 1972 to 2000) is that it corresponds to Oberdorfer's personal experience in Korean affairs as a journalist with the Washington Post. The post-war years of the authoritarian regimes of Syngman Rhee and Kim Il Song are not discussed at all, nor are the early years of Park Chung Hee's regime in the 1960s as he laid the groundwork for the South Korean economic miracle of the late twentieth century. Second, the weight of the narrative is heavily focused on the North Korean nuclear program and the efforts of the Clinton administration to negotiate a settlement with Pyongyang in the 1990s. Large and important swaths of Korean history in the 1970s are dealt with in a largely cursory manner, but the 1994 nuclear crisis is reconstructed in an almost hour-by-hour chronology of events. Indeed, nearly half of the book is dedicated to just a handful of events in the 1990s. Finally, the style of "The Two Koreas" is a clumsy blend of narrative history and personal memoir cum political analysis. Oberdorfer should have pursued one of two approaches to his topic. He could have written a comprehensive contemporary narrative of post-war Korea in the spirit and style of similar endeavors by veteran foreign journalists, the most notable example being Stanley Karnow's wonderful piece on the Philippines, "In our Image."

In the Gettysburg address, Abraham Lincoln questioned the sense of manifest destiny of the United States and asked "whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure." The same question could be raised about the two Koreas. Especially with regard to the DPRK, countless pundits and observers have announced at regular junctures that this last bastion of communism shall soon perish from the earth (to paraphrase Lincoln's famous address). But North

Korea has endured, and currently shows no sign of abating. Meanwhile, the ROK, conceived on the same hallowed grounds but dedicated to a different cause, has also endured various regimes and circumstances, but the world will never forget what they did here in terms of economic development and democratization. Leaders from the North and from the South regularly encourage their people to give their full measure of devotion to the cause of unification; but that great task remains before them, and is still an unfinished work. Don Oberdorfer's *The Two Koreas* focuses on inter-Korean relations in the context of great power politics. It begins in the early seventies, when the author was first posted in the region as a Northeast Asia correspondent for the *Washington Post*. The period was also a turning point in the relations between the main actors of the Korean drama: Henri Kissinger and then Nixon went to China; South Korea initiated exploratory discussions with the DPRK first through Red Cross exchanges and then through official contacts; and on July 4th, 1972, the two countries issued a joint statement committing themselves to unification through peaceful means and without external imposition or interference.

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