How American Christians from North Korea could have altered Korea's Future in 1945

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Few Americans realize that the hasty 1945 division of Korea and ensuing communist eradication of Christianity in the north occurred despite the efforts of a handful of uniquely qualified American officials. These men were born in the pre-World War II American Christian community in northern Korea, and were concerned, while serving in the U.S. government, about the fate of a land no less their home than America.

Historians generally maintain the U.S. government was largely uninformed about Korea during the Second World War and paid it scant attention. But these American Christians, serving in significant roles in the wartime U.S. government, sought to direct U.S. focus and efforts toward Korea. Despite their best efforts, they were unsuccessful and there is an almost complete absence from the historical record of their efforts.

Dr. George M. McCune was the best-known of these second-generation born and raised in Korea of American Christian missionaries. He became the main expert on Korea for the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), the forerunner of the CIA. His father, Rev. George S. McCune, a Presbyterian missionary, headed Union Christian College (also known as Sungsil School, both a high school and college) in Pyongyang, where, interestingly, Kim Il Sung's father (who later married the daughter of a Presbyterian minister) attended (the late Ruth Graham, wife of Rev. Billy Graham, also attended high school there for three years).

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The younger McCune was born and raised in Pyongyang, the "Jerusalem of the East," and earned the first doctorate in the study of Korea from an American university in 1941. He served in the OSS from 1942 and the next year became Korea desk officer for the Department of State, the leading official in the U.S. government on Korean affairs. His brother, Dr. Shannon McCune, was an expert on the geography of Korea and East Asia.

According to Robert S. Kim, author of the groundbreaking new book, Project Eagle: The American Christians of North Korea in World War II, Dr. McCune attempted to guide U.S. actions affecting a little-known country to Americans which he considered his personal responsibility. Running up against the ethos of the time, McCune found no one else in government truly cared about Korea. He argued, according to Kim, for preserving Korea's unity, and despite poor health, nearly worked himself to death attempting to bring his recommendations to President Franklin Roosevelt's attention prior to the Yalta Conference in February 1945 (McCune died in 1948 at age 40).

Dr. George M. McCune in 1946 (courtesy University of California Archive).

Roosevelt likely never saw McCune's detailed reports; they did not appear to influence his discussions at Yalta with Stalin and Churchill in which the allies agreed on a joint U.S.-Soviet trusteeship for Korea, ironically foreshadowing its division. Dr. McCune learned, as many others would in the postwar era, that interest in any small nation is rare in U.S. foreign policy because America faces constant competing interests in the world. (Even today, North Korea's biggest fear remains not American power, but being ignored by America – thus becoming irrelevant and subject to greater Chinese pressure. Hence its nuclear and missile tests to remain in active U.S. attention)

The OSS also utilized numerous Korean-Americans, some of whom came to positions in which they could have had a significant impact on a postwar Korea. The highly-decorated Maj. Gen. William J. Donovan, director of the OSS, was unique among senior American wartime leaders because of his significant interest in Korea, which he viewed as a major weakness within Japan's empire.

Students and American and Korean faculty of Union Christian College, Pyongyang, in 1933 (courtesy Presbyterian Historical Society)

Another American Christian the OSS worked with was Clarence Weems, Jr., raised in Kaesong as the son of the head of Methodist missions in northern Korea. Joining the OSS in 1943, he became its lead intelligence officer for Korean affairs and was assigned to Asia. Starting in late 1944, Weems arranged OSS operations with the Korean Provisional Government (KPG), a self-styled government-in-exile in wartime China, and its armed forces, which was designated Project Eagle. Robert Kim explains it "called for sending OSS-trained Korean agents into Korea and Japan for intelligence and sabotage operations culminating in guerrilla warfare."

The use of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in early August 1945, with the simultaneous Soviet entry into the war in China and Korea, rapidly ended the War in the Pacific. As I have detailedelsewhere, the circumstances behind the tragic division of Korea are complex and lamentable, but nonetheless may — or may not — have been the best the U.S. could do under the rapidly changing circumstances in summer 1945. Project Eagle's personnel were essentially the sole repository of American knowledge of Korea and had unique connections to Korean political leaders in exile.

In mid-August, OSS director Donovan tried to persuade President Truman to use Project Eagle's personnel in Korea because he recognized its pivotal position between the Soviet Union, Japan and China as vital to future Northeast Asian security. He believed Project Eagle was a crucial asset for establishing a pro-American democratic Korean government to counter Soviet influence.

But Donovan's efforts failed "because of both policy disagreements and personal animosities among senior American leaders," Kim observes. Gen. Douglas MacArthur, Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers in the Pacific, who would lead the military occupations of both Japan and Korea, disliked Donovan and the OSS and kept them out of his theater throughout the war. MacArthur also rejected using Project Eagle in postwar Korea (while arguing for Soviet entry into the war).

President Harry Truman was also hostile toward Donovan and the OSS, and he ignored Donovan's personal request regarding Korea, sent to Truman in a memo accompanying a communication by the chairman of the KPG, Kim Ku, that sought to induce U.S. recognition. Truman responded to Donovan:

"I would appreciate your instructing your agents as to the impropriety of their acting as a channel for the transmission to me of messages from representatives of self-styled governments which are not recognized by the government of the United States."

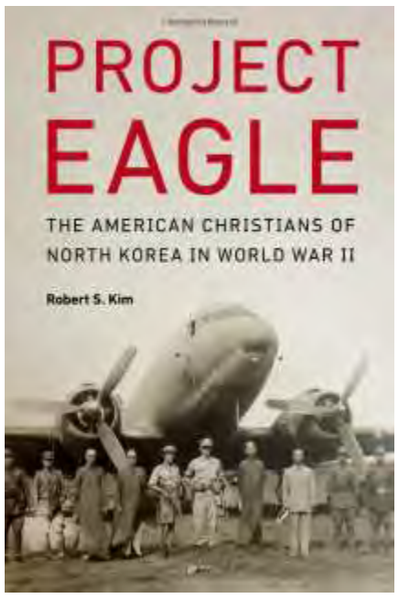
In other words, Truman deemed any communication from the Korean Provisional Government in exile to be invalid because the United States did not recognize it as representing the Korean people, who were colonized by Japan and considered Japanese nationals; his view toward Syngman Rhee (a senior KPG official then engaged in grass-roots efforts and lobbying in Washington to persuade Americans to care

about Korea; he became South Korean president in 1948) was comparable. Truman's rebuke, in effect, cut off Donovan's attempt to discuss the fate of Korea and the continuation of OSS work with the KPG. Three weeks later, Truman disbanded the OSS.

OSS Director William Donovan (right) with Kim Ku, president of the Korean Provisional Government, in Xian, China, in August 1945 (courtesy U.S. Army Center of Military History)

Because of these disputes at the highest levels of the Truman administration and wartime American leadership, the expertise of those working with Project Eagle found themselves kept out of Korea at the crucial moment, becoming distant spectators as ill-prepared U.S. forces commanded by Gen. John Hodge, who had no understanding of Korea or civil affairs experience, arrived in September 1945 to begin military occupation below the 38th parallel. The three years of American occupation of southern Korea were a deeply troubled period for both Koreans and Americans. The expertise of these highly-trained personnel from the OSS and Project Eagle could have greatly assisted the U.S. to carry out policies minimizing political strife in the south and strengthening it at a time when the Soviet Union seized firm control of the north.

The experiences of Dr. George M. McCune, Clarence Weems, Jr., and other American Christians born in northern Korea who attempted to guide U.S. policy toward the peninsula during and immediately after World War II ended in great regret. Though virtually left out of the historical record — both in the United States and Korea — Robert Kim argues "they were ahead of their time when they sought to steer U.S. attention and efforts toward a country that few Americans knew and almost no U.S. officials considered to be significant. At minimum they should be remembered as a significant part of the history of American relations with Korea." Their story is a saga of unconsummated heroism.



Unificationists recall that Reverend Sun Myung Moon, born in northern Korea in 1920, spent 1941-43 at an industrial college in Japan, 1944-45 in Korea, and after its division at the 38th parallel, took his public ministry to Pyongyang in mid-1946. One can only ponder the possibilities for his ministry if Korea had not been divided and were fully, or largely, under American occupation. Yet, one biography of him notes:

"[In postwar Korea] in this atmosphere of fervent Christianity, Rev. Moon's original plan was not to start a separate denomination but to work with other Christians to build God's kingdom on the earth. He worked hard to introduce his new revelations to existing Korean Christian churches. But his new teachings were not well received. American Christian missionaries disregarded him as an unschooled "country preacher."

Theologically, even in an undivided and democratic Korea, it may have remained difficult for Rev. Moon's teachings to be understood and accepted by returning American missionaries to (south) Korea, much less the majority of Korean Christians. Those U.S. missionaries, the last of whom were deported by the Japanese from Korea in 1942, had a decisive influence on the newly liberated Korean believers. Nonetheless, his task became far more difficult when the peninsula was divided for expediency's sake, with a Soviet-backed regime in the north and an ineptly governed, divisive and corrupt administration in the south.

The U.S. blundered into the division and occupation of post-war Korea without the benefit of the available — and prepared — expertise. Ignorance of a country and relegating it to unimportance have consequences. Americans should remember that disregarding, minimizing or deprecating another people can come back to haunt us years and decades later. The tragedy of the Korean War after the clumsy and ineffectual American occupation in the south was one manifestation; today's nuclear and missile crisis with North Korea is another.

The Korean people, who have suffered immensely over the past 120 years, and not known both full independence and national unity for most of that time, deserve far better. Unificationists, who regard Korea as the homeland of their faith, should understand the historical responsibility of the United States at this time of heightened danger on the peninsula.

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Top photo: OSS Director William Donovan discussing Project Eagle with Korean and American officers in Xian, China in 1945 (courtesy U.S. Army Center of Military History).