



# Donald Kirk

BY STAFF REPORTER

Donald Kirk, based in Seoul and Washington DC., arrived in South Korea for the first time in 1972 and interviewed Kim Dae Jung in his home, which was watched by Korean Central Intelligence Agency people lurking in the ally. He interviewed Mr. Kim again before the 1980 Kwangju revolt, saw him during his exile to the United States and covered his campaigns for presidency in 1987, 1992 and finally in 1997 when Mr. Kim won by a narrow margin at the height of the economic crisis. As a correspondent for the *International Herald Tribune*, he interviewed Mr. Kim in the Blue House in January 2001, reported on events during his presidency and met him several times afterward, the last time in January 2009 at the Seoul Foreign Correspondents' Club.

Don's website, [www.donaldkirk.com](http://www.donaldkirk.com), includes descriptions of his books, including his latest, *Korea Betrayed: Kim Dae Jung and Sunshine*, published by Palgrave Macmillan in New York and the United Kingdom, in hardcover shortly after Mr. Kim's death in August 2009 and published again, as a trade paperback, last month.

Below are the excerpts of the interview he give to Asia Pacific Business and Technology Report

### What accounts for your interest in Kim Dae Jung and why did you write this biography of him?

Mr. Kim is an important historical figure. I was deeply impressed by his passion as a dissident, by his courage in standing up to dictatorship and also by his tremendous popularity, notably in the Cholla region in the southwestern portion of the country. I actually decided to write a biography of him about midway through his presidency, after he had visited Pyongyang in June 2000 to meet North Korea's leader Kim Jong Il for the very first North-South Korean summit. I did not actually complete the book until early 2009 when I had a lot more information about all that had gone into the Sunshine policy, his relations with North Korea and his success in winning the Nobel Peace Prize in December 2009.



### How do you evaluate the Sunshine policy and its role in bringing about reconciliation between the Koreas so many decades after the Korean War?

The Sunshine policy was bold and imaginative in many ways. It represented a dramatic break from the confrontational hard-line policy of the past. To carry out this policy, however, Mr. Kim and his closest aides had to compromise in many ways. They are often criticized for having made many concessions to North Korea without getting a great deal in return. Sunshine remains a dream – the “holy grail,” as I say in the book, but far from a reality.

### How do you support that view, and what kind of original material do you offer in this book that bears out the thesis of compromise?

The book explains the transmission of vast sums of money that were transferred to North Korea before the summit. I first reported on these transactions in an article that ran in the *International Herald Tribune* on January 31, 2001. The government wrote a long letter to the IHT denying some of what was said in the article. The IHT published the letter but did not run a correction or apology. Later investigation and hearings by the National Assembly revealed that everything in the article was totally true. The government never again tried to deny the truth of the article.

### But might it not be argued that the payoffs were worthwhile if they helped to bring about the North-South summit and end hostilities between the two Koreas?

Possibly, but the Koreans, both Koreans, may have made more of a compromise than anyone imagined at the time. North Korea subsequently accelerated its nuclear program, as revealed in October 2002 when a senior North Korean official acknowledged the North was developing warheads with highly enriched uranium. That revelation blew apart the 1994 Geneva framework under which the North had shut down the five-megawatt reactor at Yongbyon and stopped making nuclear devices with plutonium at their core. After North Korea's secret HEU program was revealed, the North resumed the program at Yongbyon and subsequently has exploded two underground nuclear devices and is assumed to be planning a third such test. This whole program has cost hundreds of billions of dollars, the amount that South Korea paid for the summit. North Korean people still live in abject poverty while the elite live well. The transfer of funds more than negated the value of the summit.

### How do you know all this – do you have some inside source?

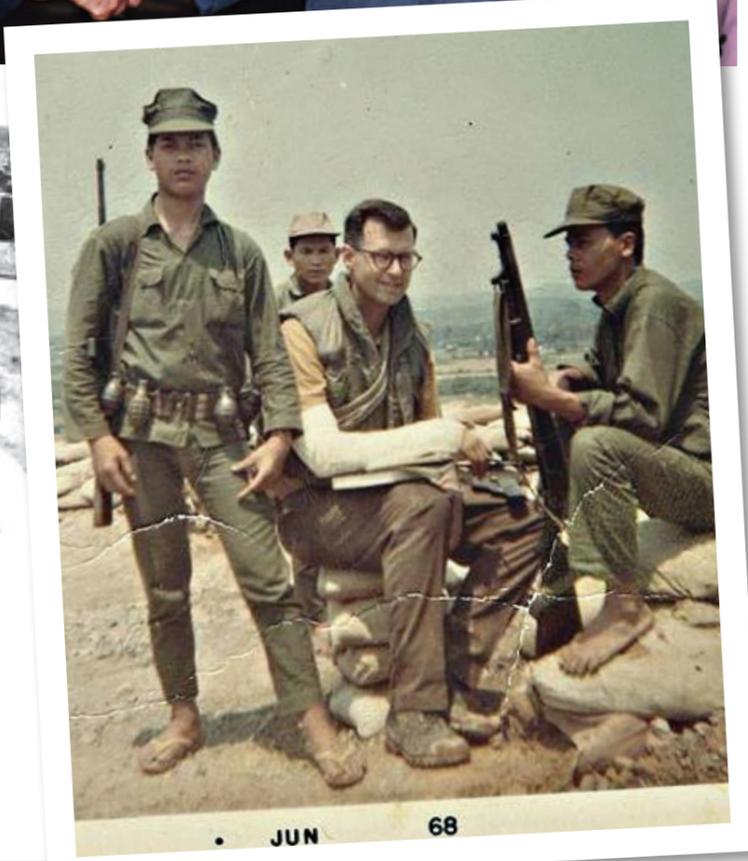
As noted, much of what happened went on the record during the hearings. Very tragically, Chung Mong Hun, the chairman of Hyundai Asan, the company responsible for opening up the North to South Korean investment in the Mount Geumgeeong (Diamond Mountain) tourist zone and in the Gaeseong Economic Complex, committed suicide in August 2003. Chung, the rather weak fifth son of the late Hyundai Group founder Chung Ju Yung, was under intense investigation and faced charges for his approval of the transfer of funds through his company. North Korea at the time said he had been murdered, but that seems unlikely.

### Why did you come to Korea in the first place and what other areas of interest or other research projects have been consuming your time all these years?

I first came here in 1972 to cover the first North-South Red Cross talks. There was tremendous excitement about them. The sense at the time was that at last, nearly 20 years after the end of the Korean War, the two Koreas could get along with each other, exchange mail, see members of divided families and conduct normal commerce. Guess what? That story is still with us. Here we've had four-party talks and two-party talks and six-party talks and missions and visits, but the confrontation goes on. In fact, it's worsened. North Korea did not have an advanced nuclear program that anyone knew about in 1972. Sure, Kim Il Sung had to have ordered his scientists to develop a nuclear deterrent, but it was not revealed until the 1980s. So I am covering much the same story.

### But you have written much more, including two other books that have very little to do with the nuclear program.

That's right. I spent several years researching and writing *Korean Dynasty: Hyundai and Chung Ju Yung*, about the Hyundai empire and its founder. That was a very difficult and time-consuming project. Then, after covering the 1997-1998 economic crisis, I wrote *Korean Crisis: Unraveling of the Miracle in the IMF Era*. The IMF in the subtitle was the International Monetary Fund that had to come to Korea's



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rescue in December 1997 when the economy seemed in danger of collapse during “the Asian Contagion” that swept much of the region. These projects were critical to gaining some special insight into the “Korean miracle,” Korea's economic rise and also its economic issues and problems. That background was helpful in covering the “Group of 20” gathering of world leaders in Seoul this past November.

### How did you get involved in Asia in the first place?

I went to Asia for the first time as a Ful-

bright Scholar in India in 1962. I was at the Indian School of International Studies, then at Sapru House on Barakamba Road in New Delhi, now part of Jawaharlal Nehru University, and my research focused on the Indian press. Naturally, I met a lot of interesting journalists. I particularly remember an interview with Frank Moraes of the Times of India in Bombay. I also met Vernon Ram, then an ace sports columnist for the Indian Express, whom I later encountered in Hong Kong. After India, I returned to work at the New York Post, then a liberal tabloid owned by

Dorothy Schiff, now a right-wing tabloid under Rupert Murdoch, but returned to cover the Vietnam War. I wrote two books about the war and reported for a number of newspapers. When I first went to Korea in 1972, I was the Far East correspondent for the Chicago Tribune, spending a lot of time in Vietnam. I returned to Korea for USA Today, was part of their team covering the 1988 Seoul Olympics and then did the Hyundai book, a totally unauthorized work that took much longer than anticipated and immersed me much more deeply in Korea. That's about it. A-P