Missiles and Miscalculation

Author: **Jed Lea-Henry**

Lewis, J. (2018) "The 2020 Commission Report on the North Korean Nuclear Attacks Against the United States: A Speculative Novel". Mariner Books: New York

Jeffrey Lewis's new book is a story of academic and policy lament. The finer details of the North Korean nuclear crisis – the things that should really matter to people concerned by the issue, and those people driving government responses –are too often glossed over or simply never understood. The small circle of people who 'are' concerned tend to have very little sway. Jeffrey Lewis is one of those fringe people, and 'The 2020 Commission Report on the North Korean Nuclear Attacks Against the United States: A Speculative Novel' is his attempt to bundle academic substance into a more accessible, narrative format; a place where fundamental questions play out in a different light: "did America's leaders have the opportunity to avert the greatest calamity in the history of our nation?"

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Most writers walk an uneasy line – they think they have something important to say, and yet when they say it, no one listens. Their work never speaks for itself. Never finds its way to the right readership, and when it does, rarely manages to drag them past the title. The riggings of the trade – improvements in prose, style and research – are, of course, ineffective here. Everything a good writer spends time making improvements on, is predicated on there already being a loyal or cap-

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tive audience waiting impatiently for their next collection of words to drop. The medicine for this, cooked-up by marketing firms, and making the patients often yearn for the disease instead, is the 'click-bait headline'. And so we get books like this, and crude titles like *'The 2020 Commission Report on the North Korean Nuclear Attacks Against the United States: A Speculative Novel'.*

But Jeffery Lewis is not playing the traditional game here. He doesn't even try, despite the 'speculative novel' suggestion. Once the title is out of the way, Lewis begins with the ends of his story: *"March 2020 represents the greatest calamity in our nation's history".* All the important narrative details are given away from the first pages: *"We lost almost a million and a half of our fellow citizens that day"* because the American government failed to properly understand *"North Korean views about nuclear weapons"*, and was poorly *"prepared for combating a nuclear adversary."* This is not designed to suck in an unsuspecting audience as much as to flag the already converted. The 2020 Commission is simply a lighter continuation of Lewis's academic work. And so it is – without any intended derision – something that would appeal to its author, and very few else. But if you are one of those few – well, you are in for a treat.

An expert on the technical details of missiles, missile defences and weapon development, Lewis sticks close to what he knows. And at times it is impressive, and does layer a certain mechanised realism over a plot, that for many, would seem questionable. The specifics of North Korean missile batteries, their coupling with the P14-TALL-KING radar, their use for the SA-5 Gammon long-range surface-to-air missiles, the dated, Soviet origins of these defences, and an understanding of Hwasong-14 and Hwasong-15 missiles, are important – and not just because *"a dozen"* of them, with nuclear payloads, will soon be heading towards the United States. All this technical jargon begins to build a complexity and an insecurity in the reader's mind. There is nothing precise about missile technology, is the slow building message; we are all vulnerable, in ways that we don't properly appreciate. Though letting us all know that the *"Pongae-5 surface-to-air missile"* is *"also known as the KN-06",* when this detail doesn't return with any importance later on, can only be seen as a representative indulgence of the author. This is, after all, a novel.

Lewis does hit the right emotional – narrative building – triggers, but always at the wrong pace. The crisis begins with an end to the current *"diplomatic thaw"* and the more moderate passengers in the American administration talking down the likes of John Bolton and Stephen Miller. The value of a *"bloody nose"* option – a

term we are now all too familiar with – of a tactical, limited strike on North Korean missile facilities, is assuaged by the openly aggressive, yet less kinetic, policy of 'psychological operations'. North Korean air defences begin spotting American bombers tracking toward their territory, they employ radars to desperately follow the flight paths, defensive aircraft and ground forces are placed on high alert, and then they wait helplessly for the bombs to start falling; only for the approaching planes to pull-out at the last moment, and repeat the exercise the next day. Terrifying, and identical from a North Korean perspective – until that final moment – to an actual attack.

To add context here, we are asked to remember similar American missions conducted against the Soviets during the Cold War. But Lewis misses the far more applicable reference point, that these exact same psychological operations were previously conducted against North Korea – and by American planes – in response to the Tree Cutting Incident (1976) inside the Demilitarized Zone. And we know just how effective this strategy was, by listening in – at the time – to the daily panic from intercepted North Korean radio communications. This is a strange oversight from a book that is always trying to pull away from its story, and divert its listeners to what is real and historical. Sure enough, when these missions lead to the first spark in a firing line of miscalculations, Lewis is quick to reference the 1969 shoot-down of an American spy plane, and the 1987 terrorist attack by North Korean agents of Korean Air flight 858.

Yet this 'first miscalculation' – as much as it is well conceived – is also poorly played by the author. Through a complication of events – technical malfunction and six minutes of 'dark time' in the cockpit – a South Korean passenger plane headed to Mongolia, drifts 50 miles off-course and is mistaken for another American bomber. Only this time North Korean defences respond, and the plane is shot down. *"Of the passengers on BX 411, 102 were schoolchildren – students from a Busan secondary school"* who, before take-off, were posting over social media with *"wonder and enthusiasm for the adventure"*. By invoking school children in this way, Lewis is nudging at a national disaster – the 2014 sinking of the ferry, MV Sewol. There is no poor taste here – rather an important insight: certain tragedies, especially when highly personalised in media reporting, can quickly take on disproportionate significance, and force politics into new directions. And the message should resonate, if only the author would let it. The chance is missed, and the Sewol is not explicitly invoked until much later when South Korean President, Moon Jae-in, is weighing up a policy response, and we are told, *"I am sure the*

Sewol was in his mind".

With too many moments like this, The 2020 Commission tends to miss its audience from both directions. There is not enough Korea-related padding (there are ample amounts of missile-related information) for the uninitiated, and too many Korea-related oversights for those with a grasp on the peninsula. Either way, the audience is left seeing holes in the narrative and questioning the author's linguistic choices. In part, this is likely a problem caused by trying to straddle too many worlds. But this doesn't feel like the accident it should be. More than just an attempt to blend a non-fiction reality into an approachable, novelistic style, Lewis also has his eyes on making this part academic journal, and part tedious policy brief. And it certainly takes on this tone: the language – particularly the opening and closing passages – are suffocated with a constantly repeating 'we, we, we' and 'our, our, our'; *"**We** present this final report", "**We**, the members of this commission", "**Our** mandate was a broad one", "Over the course of **our** investigation".*

This type of hedge-your-bets, share-the-blame, desperate-to-sound-professional, and unnecessarily deferential method of speaking is often a way for think tanks and governments to avoid scrutiny by ensuring that no one actually reads beyond the executive summary of their publications. It pleads for the reader's attention, rather than just seizing it on merit. But here it also has the unplanned for side-effect of drowning out the post-apocalyptic tone and necessary emotion – everything begins to feel just a little too matter-of-fact to be believable. The sentences do tend to trundle along, and there is a slight thoughtlessness to the composition. Take, as a typical example, the choice of the words 'lifting' and 'literally' in the following sentence:

> *"The President of South Korea lived in an elegant palace with the **lifting** name Cheong Wa Dae, which is **literally** translated as the Pavilion of Blue Tiles"*

Beyond adding no extra meaning to the surrounding language (If Cheong Wa Dae is indeed a *"lifting"* name, then we can make that judgement from the translation, at which point no reader is ever going to pause and ask themselves, *'I wonder if that was "literally" translated?'*) the use of both words, starting with the same letter, so close together, in the same sentence, and doing similar linguistic tasks, breaks a cardinal rule of all good writing. Not a rule arbitrarily regimented into literary guides and followed as a mini-religion, but rather a psychological appreciation for the sound of it all. The more you vocalise it, the more it clangs the ear – all

compositional elegance is destroyed. Maybe this type of criticism is a touch highbrow and pedantic, but it is mixed-in with moments when the author gives-up all novelistic pretence, and decides instead to simply move the story forward without actually bothering to tell it – *"These missions are summarized in Table 1".*

The more Lewis begins to lose feel for the *"speculative novel"* dimension of his book, the more he falls back into what is comfortable and familiar; a style of writing synonymous with academia, and a single-minded, near paranoid commitment to getting the intended message across to the reader. Of the numerous ways this shows up in language, the most clearly visible is the tendency to repeat oneself. Take the following passages, from different points in the book:

> *"Kim had held back those of his nuclear missiles that could strike the United States" and "Kim Jong Un hoped that the big missiles he was holding back, the ones that could strike the United States, would force Donald Trump to see sense".*
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> *"The commission was given access to a number of classified documents" and "[we had] access to a substantial number of government documents".*
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> *"[American-South Korean annual war games are] indistinguishable from a North Korean point of view, from preparations for an invasion" and "From a North Korean point of view, the presence of so many enemy forces was indistinguishable from preparations for an invasion".*
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> *"We would be remiss, however, if we did not note the one question that, to our surprise, was asked far more frequently than any other… [the] deceptively simple… should the United States seek to reduce nuclear dangers and ultimately eliminate these weapons?" and "People believe that the United States should abandon its nuclear arms and join international legal agreements prohibiting the development, possession, and use of such weapons".*
>
> *"[We are] mindful that our nation is more divided than ever before" and "[We] have further deepened the partisan division in our country"*
>
> *"The only security measure that South Korea took was placing trees over sensitive military facilities in Naver and Daum – the South Korean equivalent of Google Maps" and "[South Korean military sites are] obscured with digital trees in the apps Naver and Daum, South Korea's version of Google Maps".*

In the moments when the 2020 Commission discovers a real novelistic feel, they tend to have Donald Trump in common. Lewis does a reasonably astute job of stepping into the Presidents unusual head-space: *"PRESIDENT SAYS KNOCK*

SOME SENSE INTO THAT FAT CRAZY KID"; his Twitter voice: *"If China doesn't get little Rocket Man under control, we're going to start RATTLING THE POTS AND PANS"*; and his solipsism: *"The so-called 2020 Commission is a total Witch Hunt and just more Deep State FAKE NEWS"*. Here we begin to see a world where diplomats, cabinet members and high-level government officials – having learnt from the firing of their predecessors – embrace a *"hands-off approach"* to things. Instead, skulking behind the scenes, they have taken to *"mollify the president"* and *"stalling"* him over poor decisions, in the hope that he later forgets about them; anything to keep Trump smiling and on an *"even keel"*. From an ornamental – and often *"agitated"* – President, with an internally distracted administration, where misunderstandings exist between the Pentagon and White House, and where the impact of language and behaviour is not properly valued – no matter how bellicose – what you risk is more than just embarrassment. This book misses a lot of small targets, but does successfully hit the big one it is aiming for: the dangers of miscalculation.

On the other side of this are North Korean soldiers. Desperate to show loyalty to the regime, and committed to defending their nation from an ideologically constructed enemy, it is easy to begin to feel how things might go quickly wrong, in poorly appreciated ways. Include a standing bonus for *"seeing an airplane"*, equivalent to two times the average soldiers monthly salary, and soon enough airflight BX 411 is shot down (however, unfortunately for the soldier responsible, "*war started. I never got my bonus*"). South of the DMZ, this information moves "*swiftly up and out to various government agencies*", and the cogs of war are in motion. The plane is the spark, the political atmosphere reduces the space under which any benefit-of-the-doubt could be granted, various chains of command are overcome by failures, ramifications are inaccurately considered, and everything comes down to a few individuals – out of their depth, and always operating on limited information. The whole book is, in many ways, "*a tragic series of mistakes and errors of judgement*".

But in trying to pad-out these rolling miscalculations, Lewis stumbles into his most significant error. It is undeniably true that the next military exercise could be an invasion, and the next missile test could be an attack, but this alone doesn't make reasoning like this plausible: "*North Korea had begun staging missile launches to show that two could play at war*", "*Every year, you practice invading us…so every year, we practice repelling your invasion with nukes*". It is hard to know, just how much of an interest Lewis has in Korean studies beyond the mis-

siles and nuclear weapons, but he misses the particulars almost entirely. North Korea's 'Military First' commitment – or *Songun* – is not a defensive policy, just as when the regime in Pyongyang talks about a 'final victory' it has nothing to do with repelling an American invasion; it is, and always has been, a call for reunification. Americans are stigmatised inside North Korea not because they are a looming threat, but rather as they are blamed for dividing the peninsula and keeping it so by stationing troops in South Korea. Nuclear weapons and missile tests are a means to break-up the American-South Korean alliance and pressure an American troop withdrawal (a prerequisite to any conceivable reunification). In this, North Korea's conventional forces have always been a sufficient protective deterrent (a point the 2020 Commission brushes quickly over). Challenging Lewis's contradictory assessment of North Korean intentions, are the last seventy five years of Pyongyang's internal propaganda (what they tell their citizens when they think the world is not listening).

This is a very straightforward misunderstanding of Korean nationalism, from both ends. It is for this same reason, that the 2020 Commission gets Moon Jae-in and South Korea entirely wrong as well. Lewis consistently builds up the historical line that South Korean governments have traditionally been enthusiastic to engage the North militarily, and respond decisively to skirmishes and provocations; with America always intervening to temper their plans. Not since the early years of Syngman Rhee (and brief moments under Park Chung-hee) has this been true, but still we are told to accept that Moon Jae-in and his inner cabinet conceal their intentions to strike North Korean targets from America, for fear that their ally "*might try to restrain us*". So the country that was invaded in 1950, has been attacked repeatedly over the years, debated whether even economic sanctions was too strong of a response to the sinking of the ROKS Cheonan (killing 46 sailors), and jumped at the chance to forgive, out-of-hand, a year of unprecedented missile and nuclear tests the moment North Korea reached-out to join their delegation at the Pyeongchang Olympic games, suddenly decide to launch a brazen military response, in which Kim Jong-un's personal residence is targeted; because he "*must bear some responsibility too*".

Pan-Korean nationalism is only slightly less virulent in the South than it is in the North. Moon Jae-in was, after all, elected on the promise of achieving a confederation before the end of his five year term, whilst subsequently trying to dilute the commitment that this be liberal, or even democratic, in nature. The modern South Korean state has always gone out of its way to excuse the regime in Pyongyang –

because they are both on the same page when it comes to a long-term understanding of Korean national identity. Just watch the current enthusiasm in the South for breaking the same international sanctions that they were once so keen to get imposed on the North; while pushing ahead – with summit-after-summit and agreement-after-agreement – for a low-level confederation without bothering to wait for Kim Jong-un to even outline plans for "*permanent, irreversible, and verifiable disarmament*". But Lewis wants us to imagine Moon Jae-in as desperate to retaliate, considering a personal attack on Kim Jong-un and his family as a 'proportionate response', only asking "*that the number of missiles be kept to the minimum necessary*", and doing so under the fear that of all people, Donald Trump, might try to talk him down.

There is plenty in this book, and plenty to like. The imagery of American pilots over North Korean skies recalling "*the helpless feeling of watching the huge missiles powering up into space carrying huge nuclear weapons that the pilots knew were headed toward the United States*" is hauntingly well done (even if the repeated use of the word 'huge' sticks in the throat). But more than anything, this is bold. It reaches for something difficult, and succeeds, and fails, in just the ways you might expect. For this, Jeffery Lewis both seems to know the limitations of his project, and then at times completely forgets what that project actually is. The personal 'testimony' of survivors is a good piece of literary craft, however it doesn't blend as it should with the cold technical explanations throughout. And Lewis's attempts to slow-play his readers often doesn't catch, as he tries to retroactively hint at what he has already told us is coming. Yet, in a strange way it all kind of works. The clumsy moments and the jagged edges, don't take away too much from what this actually is – a missile expert talking us through an incredibly dangerous scenario. And the worst thing that can be said about this scenario, is also the best thing that can be said about this book – it is plausible.

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