

Korean Cherry Trees and World Peace*

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Abstract

In 1943, Koreans and Americans gathered at American University for a simple ceremony affirming friendship between our peoples and voicing the hopes for world peace. As we gather here today, we are again on the precipice of world war—a war from which no one may survive. Three years ago, former president Jimmy Carter, calling the United States “the most warlike nation in the history of the world,” said that the United States has only enjoyed 16 years of peace in its 242-year history. This time it is who threatens world peace. But the lesson is clear. As the proponents of environmental peacebuilding understand unless we quickly end this war and find a way to solve problems without resorting to violence, especially in the nuclear age, humans will not long be here to enjoy these beautiful cherry trees or nature’s other gifts to humanity.

Key words :

Koreans. Americans. World Peace. Environmental Peacebuilding. Cherry Trees. Jimmy Carter, Russia. the United States. North Korea.

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Introduction

On behalf of American University, it is my privilege to welcome you all, and especially to welcome my friends Dean Max Paul Friedman and Professor Changhoon Ko, who made this commemoration of friendship between the people of Korea and the people of the United States and our collective plea for world peace at this very special place on our campus. It was 79 years ago at this very spot when American University President Paul Frederick Douglass, who had worked as a missionary in Korea, U.S. Congressman John Rankin, and Syngman Rhee, president of the Korean government in exile, surrounded by AU students and faculty and Korean visitors, planted four beautiful cherry trees. At the time, Dr. Rhee, who had received a Ph.D. from Princeton, declared that the trees were really of Korean and not Japanese origin as most believed all the cherry trees in the DC-area were. In fact, he claimed, the Japanese had appropriated the trees from Korea during Japan's colonization and that these should be known as "Korean Cherry Trees."

Korea Garden, Korea, Koreans and Cherry Trees of Jeju Island

It was 13 years ago in 2009 when AU President Neil Kerwin visited Seoul to meet with American University alumni and announced plans to build the Korea Garden here on campus. Two years later, in 2011, American University held a ceremony to open the Korea Garden. The ceremony, presided over by AU President Kerwin, was attended by South Korean Ambassador Han Duck-soo who said he hoped the garden will enable visitors to "truly feel the landscape of Korea" and "serve as a reminder and an inspiration to the future generations of Koreans and Americans of the bonds" between our two countries. "The garden," he said, "will be the first of its kind in the United States commemorating the longstanding relationship between American University and the Republic of Korea." The garden was adorned with numerous plants donated by the South Korean government, the Korea Forest Research Institute, and the government of Jeju

Province, which also contributed a couple of traditional stone statues called "dolharubang."

Over the years, every spring Korean Americans and visitors from Korea, mostly older Korean men who had participated in the independence movement, would visit the garden and tie a thread around the blooming cherry trees. This intrigued Lou Goodman, the former dean of AU's School of International Service. In 2005, at a diplomatic reception, Korean Ambassador to the United States Lee Tae-sik asked Dean Goodman if the trees were in fact of Korean origin. Goodman didn't know. However, in 2009, USDA researcher Dr. Cheong Eun-ju, a U.S.-based Korean botanist and cherry blossoms expert, and Dr. Kim Chan-su of the Korea Forest Research Institute confirmed that the trees, like those on the Tidal Basin, shared genetic material with the wild cherry trees of Jeju Island, proving Rhee to have been correct. Upon learning this, Dr. Goodman flew to Korea together with the two researchers to announce the findings and set the record straight. Although Americans had long assumed the trees were of Japanese origin, it turned out they were from Jeju Island.

When Syngman Rhee planted that first tree in 1943, the world was in the midst of the most brutal and costly war in human history. And sadly as we meet today, the world is again witnessing war in Ukraine with thousands dead as the result of an illegal and immoral Russian invasion and in Yemen, where the Saudis, using weapons provided largely by the United States, have killed hundreds of thousands. By the time of the ceremony in 1943, the tide had begun to turn in Europe as the Soviets had defeated the German invaders in the battle of Stalingrad two months before the tree planting here on campus. The Soviets would ultimately triumph with the aid of the U.S., Britain, and the other allies, but they would pay an enormous price with 27 million dead and, according to President Kennedy in his famous June 1963 Commencement address on this campus, Soviet losses that were the equivalent of the entire United States east of Chicago having been destroyed. The Pacific War against Japan was still raging as the U.S. was steadily gaining ground in its island-hopping campaign. In March of that year, the U.S. had just defeated Japan in the Battle

of the Bismarck Sea.

Korea, meanwhile, had been under Japanese domination since 1905. Militarily Defeating both China and Russia had given Japan a free hand in Korea. Japan established a protectorate in 1905 and made Korea into a formal colony in 1910. The U.S. and Britain consented to Japanese domination of Korea and Manchuria, glad that Japan was turning away from the Philippines, a U.S. colony, and the British colonies.

But the Korean people never accepted Japanese colonization. They resisted fiercely during the early years, suffering tens of thousands of casualties. Outspoken nationalist leaders were again tortured and executed in 1919 as Koreans, like Ho Chi Minh and the Vietnamese, demanded colonial liberation at the Versailles Conference. The treatment got worse during World War II. Almost 700,000 Koreans were brought to Japan to serve as slave laborers and sex slaves (euphemistically called “comfort women”). As Syngman Rhee planted the first cherry tree, AU President Douglass read from the Korean Declaration of Independence in a show of solidarity with the brave Koreans who were resisting Japanese colonization, exploitation, and dehumanization.

As we see now in the largely unified Democratic and Republican response to the fighting in Ukraine, wars often make strange bedfellows. Among those in attendance in 1943 was Mississippi Congressman John Rankin. Rankin, a supporter of the Ku Klux Klan, was one of the most notorious racists and anti-Semites in the U.S. Congress. As a member of the House UnAmerican Activities Committee, he was also one of the most vicious anti-communist witch hunters in America. He was Joseph McCarthy before McCarthy came on the scene.

Syngman Rhee, who had lived in the United States for nearly four decades and fought unrelentingly for Korean independence, went on to become the first democratically elected president of the Republic of Korea in 1948. Seen in 1943 as the heroic patriot who championed Korean freedom, as president Rhee wasted little time before becoming brutally repressive. His brutality was most evident in his ruthless repression of the Jeju uprising in 1948 and 1949, with tactics that resulted in tens of thousands

of deaths.

Until the pandemic forced us to temporarily stop, I took students on a study-abroad class in Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and Kyoto every summer since 1995. In Japan, my students and I travel with an equal number of Japanese students and professors to study the history of the Second World War. Many Korean students have also joined us over the years. Among the highlights is our visit to the extraordinary Oka Masaharu Museum in Nagasaki. The museum is entirely dedicated to the atrocities Japan committed toward other Asians before and during the war. It goes into great detail about Japan’s horrific treatment and virtual enslavement of Koreans. The main focus of the class is the history of the U.S. atomic bombings of Japan. Both the U.S. and the Japanese students are surprised to learn that among the 350,000 people living in Hiroshima on August 6, 1945 were the lesson is clear. As the proponents of environmental peacebuilding understand, unless we quickly end this war and find a way to solve problems without resorting to violence, especially in the nuclear age, humans will not long be here to enjoy these beautiful cherry trees or nature’s other gifts to humanity.

45,000 Korean slave laborers and that a disproportionate number of Koreans were killed in the atomic bombings. We know how poorly Japan has confronted its own history and particularly the crimes it has committed against the people of Korea. But it is particularly poignant that today the risk of nuclear war again threatens our planet and does so in a way that we have not seen in almost 60 years since the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Conclusion

In 1943, Koreans and Americans gathered here for a simple ceremony affirming friendship between our peoples and voicing the hopes for world peace. As we gather here today, we are again on the precipice of world war—a war from which no one may survive. Three years ago, former president Jimmy Carter, calling the United States “the most warlike nation in the history of the world,” said that the United States has only enjoyed 16 years of peace in its 242-year

history. This time it is Russia not the United States or North Korea who threatens world peace. But the lesson is clear. As the proponents of environmental peacebuilding understand, unless we quickly end this war and find a way to solve problems without resorting to violence, especially in the nuclear age, humans will not long be here to enjoy these beautiful cherry trees or nature's other gifts to humanity.

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