

# Teaching The Federalist in South Korea

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By Peter Berkowitz

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Recently, New York Philharmonic musical director Lorin Maazel — before departing for his just concluded first trip to North Korea and in the face of sharp criticism that his orchestra's performance in Pyongyang would present dictator Kim Jong Il with a valuable propaganda victory — reflected on America and the world:

People who live in glass houses shouldn't throw bricks, should they? Is our standing as a country — the United States — is our reputation all that clean when it comes to prisoners and the way they are treated? Have we set an example that should be emulated all over the world? If we can answer that question honestly, I think we can then stop being judgmental about the errors made by others.

In fact, there is a world of difference between a police state in which citizens lack rights, and a liberal democracy in which the rights of unlawful enemy combatants seized on foreign battlefields are vigorously debated in the press and zealously defended before the highest court in the land. Indeed, contrary to Maazel, informed reflection on America's standing as a country obliges us to formulate responsible judgments on other nations, as well as on our own.

So recently, before my own first trip to South Korea, I was, like Maazel, impelled to consider America and the world — particularly America's protection of freedom on the Korean peninsula. To do so responsibly, I sought to consider the historical context.

The year following his June 1950 decision to send American troops and materiel to repel a Soviet-sponsored invasion of South Korea marked the toughest time in Harry Truman's presidency. Critics vilified him for rushing to judgment, accusing him of gross incompetence that was dragging the U.S. into World War III. When he fired war hero General Douglas MacArthur for insubordination in the spring of 1951, the Congressional Republican leadership, along with conservative editorialists throughout the country, vehemently demanded his impeachment. By 1952, Truman's public approval rating had sunk to 22 percent, still a record low for a sitting American president.

Yet were it not for Truman's steadfastness, and the efforts of U.S. troops — about 34,000 of whom gave their lives to stop the communist invasion of South Korea — the Korean peninsula might look very different today. Had America not waged its "Forgotten War," the 50 million or so citizens of the free, democratic, and prosperous Republic of Korea might very well be living like their 25 million neighbors to the north — mired in ruinous poverty and subject to the cruel and arbitrary state power that dictator Kim Jong Il wields in the so-called Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

Such were among my thoughts as I read up on South Korea at 35,000 feet above the Pacific Ocean. I was making my way from Washington to Seoul to spend a week lecturing on *The Federalist* at Yonsei University's Underwood International College, South Korea's only four-year, English-language undergraduate degree program.

What, I wondered, did South Korean students and professors think about freedom and democracy, and what were their attitudes toward America? The conventional wisdom holds that, since the invasion of Iraq, anti-Americanism has soared around the world. At the same time, an all-too-pervasive multiculturalism implies that this anti-Americanism is perfectly reasonable, since all cultures are equal — except for Western culture, particularly as embodied in America, which is peculiarly vulgar and unjust.

But the classroom discussions and conversations that I enjoyed at Yonsei University confirmed for me that South Koreans do not fit the American intellectual class's complacent conceptions. What little anti-Americanism I found there did not run deep. Certainly, students complain about the 28,000 U.S. troops stationed in South Korea, and about our large military base occupying prime real estate in the center of Seoul. But ask them what impact the departure of the U.S. military would have on young men's already lengthy two-year mandatory military service, and they will quickly acknowledge the importance of the America alliance.

To be sure, South Korea's 680,000-man military is modern and powerful. And a wide consensus favors Seoul's continuation of the ten-year-old policy of engagement with North Korea: The main disagreement between the leading political parties is over how aggressively to proceed. Few doubt, however, that America's military presence provides a crucial deterrent to Kim Jong Il's one million troops, nuclear weapons, offensive missiles, and enormous installations of heavily fortified long-range artillery aimed at Seoul a mere 30 miles south of the DMZ.

Nor is South Korea's alliance with America strictly military. South Koreans may complain about American presumption, power, and influence, but wealthy South Korean parents still spend lavishly to teach their children English and hope to send their children to the States for college. And South Korea's hypercompetitive young people still want to travel to America, buy American, and dress American.

In the view of my host, Dr. Jongryn Mo, founder and dean of Underwood International College, these entanglements are good for South Korea. A staunch believer that South Korea's future depends on globalization and westernization, his fledgling program — it opened its doors in the fall of 2006 — aims to equip students to harness those forces.

UIC's 200 English-speaking undergraduates represent only a tiny fraction of Yonsei University's 29,000 students. Located in northern Seoul, where that city of 10 million climbs into the jagged mountains surrounding it, Yonsei — along with Seoul National University and

Korea University — is one of South Korea's three most prestigious universities. Graduate from one of them and your place in the elite is assured for life. Attend a lesser university, and you are forever barred from the best corporate jobs. This rigidity represents, according to Dr. Mo (who holds a B.A. from Cornell and a Ph.D. from Stanford Business School), a crucial obstacle to liberal and democratic development in South Korea.

Liberal education is key to South Korea's future, in Mo's view. The UIC curriculum, with its no-nonsense focus on basics, could teach a thing or two about requirements and rigor to many American colleges and universities. Mo boasts that his students, many of whom learned their English abroad, are the equal of those in the Ivy League. On the basis of my exposure to them at welcoming and closing dinners, during eight hours of seminar discussion, and in the give-and-take at a public lecture, I have to agree.

So what did these students think of *The Federalist*? In Hamilton's assertion in *Federalist* I — that, were Americans to fail to establish free and democratic government by ratifying the new Constitution, it would "deserve to be considered as the general misfortune of mankind" — they found an expression of American exceptionalism. Some saw arrogance in the fact that, even from the beginning, Americans attributed universal significance to their political challenges. But all were also open to appreciating a certain modesty in Hamilton's assertion that the moral and political principles that applied to Americans applied with equal force to all human beings.

In Madison's caution in *Federalist* 10 that "enlightened statesmen will not always be at the helm," they found easy application to their center-left president and his center-right challenger (who was elected in a landslide on December 19). But they were pleased to ponder Madison's insistence that, in all cases, liberal democracies should be built to withstand the folly of unenlightened statesmen.

In Madison's examination of the separation of powers in *Federalist* 51, they saw grounds for preferring the South Korean system of appointing judges — wherein the chief justice confers with the president on nominees before they are sent to the legislature for confirmation — because it assigned a role to all three branches, while the American system provides no role for the judicial branch in filling its own bench. But they had no trouble appreciating that Madison's larger lesson goes not to a particular constitutional scheme for judicial appointments but to the need to achieve a delicate balance in the blending of separated powers.

Like American college students, my Korean college students, whose democracy is barely two decades old, have never known anything but freedom and equality under law. Also like their American counterparts, they were intrigued by *The Federalist's* harsh assessment of the diseases to which liberal democracies are prone, and its calm explanation of the institutional

remedies for preserving liberty. This compelling mix enabled them to make sense both of their low opinion of their own politicians and their genuine excitement over a democratic future.

Creators of the 13th largest economy in the world — and growing — South Koreans seek unification with the North. But they are in no particular hurry, given the inevitable costs of lifting 25 million of their brothers and sisters out of grinding poverty. They confront China to the north and west and Japan to the east, countries that evoke memories of colonialism and oppression. Although not immediately apparent from our nations' very different situations, the long-term interests of the largest of the small Asian Tigers and the world's lone superpower converge to an impressive degree. More of the historically informed liberal education — in America as well as in South Korea — of the sort offered at Underwood International College will prepare students of both nations to recognize, and take advantage, of the convergence.

Not least, beneficiaries of a proper liberal education — in America as well as in South Korea — will be able to understand and appreciate the fundamental differences between representative democracy and totalitarian dictatorship.

– Peter Berkowitz is the Tad and Dianne Taube Senior Fellow at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University, and teaches at George Mason University School of Law.