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We Will Breathe the Ashes of the Dead for the Rest of Our Lives

William Gillis

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Tuesday, as the world prepared to listen to the State of the Union, a small piece of news slunk out with horrifying implication. The Trump administration had withdrawn its pick for ambassador to South Korea, Victor Cha, after he privately expressed disagreement with a plan for a “limited strike” on North Korea.

This piece of news largely passed by unnoticed in the US, our media preoccupied with the FBI investigation into Trump and the daily circus of partisan conflict. But it is quite arguably the most blood chilling and stomach curdling development of the last year. It’s been widely reported that Trump is pressuring for a military strike on North Korea, over the objections of just about everyone in the military. But the implication has faded into the general miasma of surreality attached to the current administration, bigger buttons and all.

This move to drop an ambassador in favor of one on board with war would be so astonishingly reckless as means of sig-

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naling it suggests the administration is truly committed to military action — truly sees itself in the planning stages of a desired conflict. The tale of an embittered President under investigation seeking to distract and harness jingoistic approval by bombing a distant country is now almost a classic motif in US politics. But while Bill Clinton's bombing of Afghanistan and Sudan were surely heinous, the prospect of an attack on North Korea occupies an entirely different dimension.

Beyond the nuclear warheads directly in play, beyond the risk of things spiraling out of control with The People's Republic of China, there's the simple fact that tens of millions of South Koreans sit under the guns of the North Korean regime. Seoul alone has a metro population of twenty five million. The bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki killed on the order of a couple hundred thousand, a crime that scarred generations; the catastrophe of an outright war on dense modern megacities like Seoul and Tokyo is unimaginable. Even the most fantastically conservative estimates of conflict with North Korea strain credulity to slide a death toll under a few million, and after the initial holocaust starry-eyed planners still talk of a conflict with only tens of thousands dead per day. There are no fucking words for the scale of human suffering that is being casually gambled with.

One can list figures all one likes, one can point out that if the odds Trump starts a war are just 1/3rd that's a roll of the dice where the payout likely averages to millions dead. No matter what you judge the risk of an full blown conflagration to be, it has become non-negligible, and must be multiplied by the scale of casualties. The human brain is poorly equipped to comprehend such statistics. Steve Bannon has talked of ten million dead. If you had but a fucking minute each to meet, to observe, to see rapid flashes of their lives, their loves and struggles, of every person in that number it would take you over nineteen sleepless years.

Almost any price is worth paying for even a sliver of a chance to stop this possibility. If we cannot find things to do with such a sliver of a chance then it is on us to search for them. Not to settle for performance. There are no easy answers, no easy retreats, that will wipe away this blood. What is demanded of us is immense. We must not hide from it.

I cannot tell you in these pages what to do. In part because speech is not free in this country and any urge to meaningfully resist evil risks getting you swiftly imprisoned. But also because I know that I do not know and cannot know the best means of resistance. Answers if they are to be found will be made by individuals looking around, each from their own unique vantagepoints, finding creative actions, ingenious ways to attack and derail the train of death.

Gone in a matter of days. Gone because we remained worthlessly transfixed on the spectacle of a reality tv president. Can you imagine how generations to come — if, again, a conflict does not geopolitically spiral into a final cataclysm for the planet — will judge us in this moment? How will they look upon our inaction? The callousness of our audacity to dwell in shellshocked numbness? There will never be time enough to weep. We will never stop lining the museums of this holocaust.

If we allow Trump and Kim to achieve in an instant a scale of evil which took Stalin, Hitler, Leopold, Mao, and Churchill years we will never recover from it. We will live forever in the echo of the immensity of it. We will breathe the ashes of the dead for the rest of our lives.

Be assured, there will be no escaping this one. No consigning it beyond the reach of our cameras in the Congo or Java. No cute shell game to shuffle causation beyond our attention, to obfuscate systemic murder.

And the wound will cut across the entire world. You think the Syrian refugee crisis was bad? You think ecological collapse is proceeding at a breakneck pace now? You think current geopolitical developments are brutal?

That the world would finally come to unite against the thrashing rabid monster of American imperialism goes without saying, as does Trump's ultimate fate. But it would dramatically empower many evils beyond Trump, beyond the long blood-drenched American empire and its establishment.

Those political movements most empowered will be the reactionaries of the left and right. No one will profit more than those leftists so inane and beyond redemption they already fly the flag of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. The fiery cataclysm of war would consume not just the lives of those directly incinerated or ripped apart, but the memory of those already enslaved and murdered by the fascistic regime of the DPRK. A second slaughter, the sudden dismissal of generations of evil by the Kim regime into the margins of a new tale of sud-

den genocide. And in the billowing ashes it will be the fetishists of authoritarian communism — addicted to power fantasies and the aesthetic of mass graves — best positioned to seize the mantle of anti-imperialism. To speak for the dead, to paint the vampires of North Korea as Davids before Goliath. And who in the left will dare to tell the truth — that the fallen regime was itself an unimaginable blight — who will dare to tell the truth when it serves the “narrative” of Goliath? If history has shown anything it has shown that they will get away with it. There is no better way to paper over an atrocity than with another one.

And almost indistinguishable from these goblins is the alt-right. Richard Spencer has long flown the flags of his fellow ethnonationalists Assad and Kim, an orientation that smoothly lines up with the interests of his Russian patrons and allies. The alt-right has always known they would have to jump ship on Trump, they’ve been setting it up for ages, and the old paleoconservative pretenses of opposition to US imperialism are once again emerging in the platforms of literal fascists. Oh to be sure, Trump’s dumbass base will embrace anything that triggers the libs, including a Korean genocide, just as they delightedly shouted “nuke em till they glow” after September 11th. But just as with the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, when the mistake becomes undeniable they will smoothly reposition themselves. No one on the right will have a better established narrative to justify and reframe their embrace of Trump than the literal fascists.

And in the background Russian and Chinese imperialism will delightedly expand to fill the crumbling edifice of American power, their own horrors from Chechnya and Tibet extended outward. A bloated empire riddled with resistance finally replaced in a fit of genocidal stupidity by upstart evils unburdened by as many contradictions. The US not finally overthrown by forces for liberation with their own strength and momentum, but collapsed around us like a rotting house.

If you are perverse enough to search for one in a Korean holocaust, rest assured, there are no silver linings.

Decency may eventually be rallied in the resulting ash-choked landscape, but if it comes it will not be as a result of such atrocity, but in spite of it.

Just as the bare minimum of conscience is not inaction but action, decency does not spring from passivity but active engagement.

Before such looming horror, we can feel powerless, mites condemned with awareness of the inexorably grinding gears around us. And there is a case to be made that — mites though we may be — throwing our bodies onto the gears of the war machine is the only conceivable way to retain our souls. For what are the lives of thousands of us in comparison to what is on the table?

That we must act is beyond question. But is there anything more insulting than a purely performative act?

History will not judge us for our ignorance, the inaccessibility of solid answers from our muddled state, but it will correctly judge us for our effort. It will ask why we could not bother to raise our eyes from the spectacle, could not look beyond the pressures of our immediate conflicts. It will demand to know how we could stare at an appreciable possibility of mass death and not do the fucking numbers.

It will view us as a man walking past a drowning child. Thousands of drowning children. Hundreds of thousands. Millions even. And it will know our true values. No bracelet, no performance of abnegation disconnected from consequence, will eclipse that reality.

There is much we do not know, the future is always unwritten. But there is no such thing as moral luck. Those with the benefit of historical distance will examine us not in light of what they know, but in light of what we know today. The problem isn’t that a war is certain, it’s that we have let it get on the table.