

Author of N. Korea Debacle Rewarded

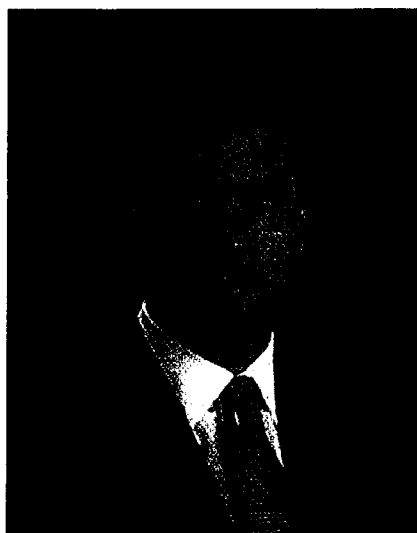
BY J. MICHAEL WALLER

The author of Clinton's appeasement policy that gave North Korea atomic weapons has been named to run Policy Planning at the U.S. State Department.

The man who helped engineer the Clinton administration's failed attempt to buy off North Korea with fuel and nuclear-power technology has been appointed head of a small but powerful office in the State Department. Mitchell Reiss helped start and manage a multinational organization devoted to giving nuclear technology and oil to the North Korean regime during the Clinton administration. The idea, hatched during the first Clinton term, was to try to convince North Korean leader Kim Jong Il, a Stalinist, to stop building nuclear weapons. The policy was a failure.

With U.S. policy toward North Korea a shambles after Pyongyang announced it had built nuclear weapons anyway, and with it threatening war against the United States almost weekly, Secretary of State Colin Powell has named Reiss to head the sensitive Policy Planning Staff, the State Department unit responsible for long-term strategic planning.

Advocates of Reiss, a scholar who has written extensively on North Korea and nuclear proliferation, call him a visionary with firsthand, tough-minded experience with Pyongyang. His talent is needed, they say, at a sensitive time when the world is hurtling toward a nuclear showdown with one of the two remaining legs of the Axis of Evil. Reiss replaces former Brookings Institution figure Richard Haass, who left the State Department to become head of the Council on Foreign Relations. With Haass, the representative of Eastern Establishment foreign policy gone, critics say that just about anyone at Policy Planning would be an improvement at such a critical time.



Who picked him? Reiss started and ran an organization devoted to giving nuclear technology to North Korea.

But does Reiss share President George W. Bush's vision of how to fight terrorist regimes and safeguard U.S. interests? Insiders say the record suggests not. Reiss' scholarship shows a conventional and widely criticized approach to arms control that places faith in paper agreements and confidence-building measures at the price of propping up the very dictatorships that are part of the problem in the first place. Using the same language Soviet agent of influence Harry Hopkins had used about Josef Stalin, Reiss told skeptical congressmen in 2000 that, indeed, we can "do business with Pyongyang."

The president rejects such reasoning. "I think that one of the things that is important to understand in North Korea

is that the past policy of trying to engage bilaterally didn't work," Bush said at a July 30 news conference. "In other words, the North Koreans were ready to engage but they didn't keep their word on their engagement. And that ought to be a clear signal to policymakers of what to expect with North Korea."

Just a few days before on July 21, Powell had installed Reiss — a dean at the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Va., with experience on the National Security Council staff and as a consultant to the Ford Foundation — in his post. Reiss tells *INSIGHT* that he can't comment yet on North Korea policy questions, saying he has to settle into his new position at State. "I'd prefer to defer all these questions until later," he says. Asked how he could square his long-held North Korea policy position with that of President Bush, Reiss explains, "The president's approach is to seek a diplomatic solution, so that's what I'm here to do."

Reiss recognizes that Kim's regime is bad. "North Korea is the world's poster child for rogue regimes," he told Congress in testimony three years ago. "This dysfunctional country excels in only one area — it exports trouble."

But Reiss represents the old-think of the foreign-policy establishment, critics say. "The collapse of communism and the fight against nuclear proliferation and terrorism show that doing business with tyrants doesn't work," says Al Santoli, best-selling author and vice president for Asia-Pacific affairs at the American Foreign Policy Council. U.S. policy, Santoli counsels, should be to get rid of the tyrants who threaten us.

Such a policy seems alien to Reiss, whose record differs markedly from that of top Bush arms-control official John Bolton, the undersecretary of state for arms control and international security affairs. Bolton's aggressive defense of U.S. national interests includes bringing down tyrannical governments that threaten the United States and its allies with development of weapons of mass destruction. Perhaps it was a coincidence, but with Reiss on the horizon, the North Korean government made known that it hates Bolton, heaping abuse on him in official statements almost immediately following the appointment of Reiss.

They have reason to know that Reiss is cut from a different cloth. He was chief negotiator and general counsel of the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO), created in 1995 with South Korea and Japan to give the North Korean government 500,000 tons of heavy fuel oil per year and two 1,000-megawatt nuclear reactors worth bil-

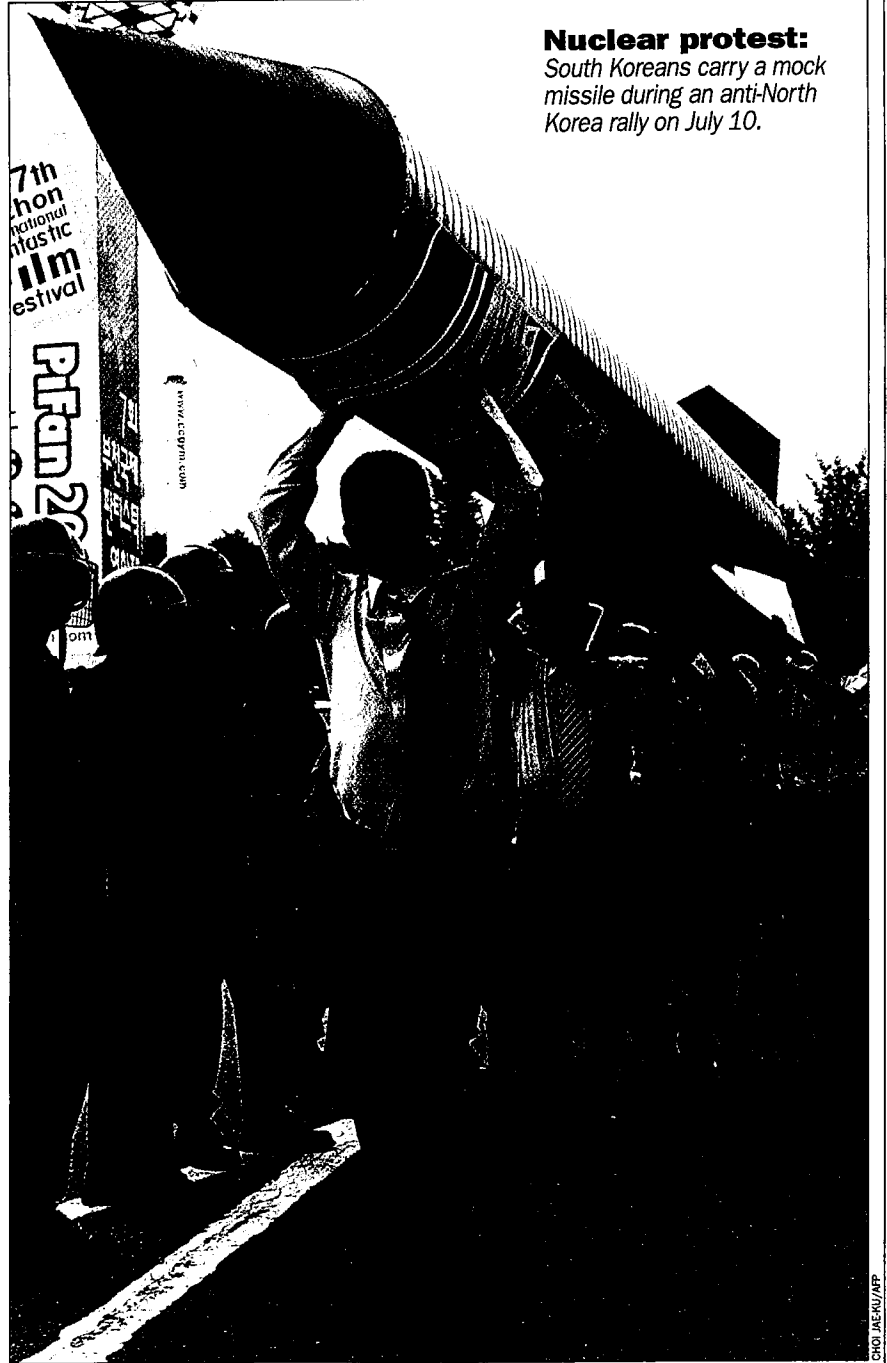
lions of dollars. The fuel and technology was sent in exchange for promises or, in Reiss' words before a 2000 congressional panel, "in return for the North initially freezing and eventually dismantling its nuclear-weapons program." Pyongyang, Reiss said, "pledged to freeze and eventually dismantle its nuclear complex capable of producing enough plutonium for dozens of nuclear bombs."

Reiss was on a fool's errand, critics said at the time, and the record has proved them right. KEDO delivered the fuel and much of the nuclear-reactor technology. But the North Korean regime diverted the fuel to the military, which since has massed along the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) at the South Korean border. It recently announced that, instead of freezing and dismantling its nuclear-weapons complex, it actually had started building the bombs — and threatened to detonate one as a show of force. "There was a fundamental flaw in the U.S. government's strategic analysis," says Santoli. It was, say critics, the Clinton-Reiss analysis.

Will Reiss be in a position to make what could be, arguably, bigger blunders under Bush? The Policy Planning Staff serves as an internal think tank for the State Department, developing broad analytical studies and long-term strategic planning. According to a State Department fact sheet, the staff coordinates and integrates policy among bureaus within the department and across government agencies, houses the secretary of state's speechwriters and authors of all his public statements, liaises with nongovernmental organizations and holds "dialogues" or planning talks with other countries. Policy Planning also works on "special projects," such as helping build the coalition of the willing in the war on terrorism. As director of the Policy Planning Staff, Reiss holds a rank equivalent to assistant secretary of state but requires no Senate confirmation.

Santoli and others argue that the Reiss policy in North Korea was a naïve operation that produced the opposite of its intended effect: It gave Kim years to manufacture plutonium in secret and build nuclear bombs and provided him with large quantities of oil so that costs could be diverted into the crash nuclear program — all at U.S. taxpayer expense.

Bolton appears to agree. "Since 1994, billions of dollars in economic and energy assistance have flowed into the coffers of Pyongyang to buy off their nuclear-weapons program," Bolton told a July 31 East Asia Institute meeting in Seoul. "Nine years later, Kim Jong Il has repaid us by threatening the world with not one but two separate nuclear-



Nuclear protest:
South Koreans carry a mock missile during an anti-North Korea rally on July 10.

weapons programs — one based on plutonium, the other highly enriched uranium. If history is any guide, Kim Jong Il probably expects that his current threats will result in newfound legitimacy and billions of dollars of economic and energy assistance pouring into his failed economy. In this case, however, history is not an especially good guide — a page has been turned."

While KEDO was delivering the goods to Kim, Reiss was bragging to Congress in 2000, "With no clear road map to follow, KEDO has shown it is possible to engage Pyongyang in ways consistent with U.S. national-security inter-

ests." Meanwhile, Kim secretly was building his nuclear bombs.

Reiss even told lawmakers that it was the Americans and their allies, not the North Korean communists — who technically still are at war with the United States on the Korean peninsula — who were to blame for certain breakdowns in the KEDO process. "Although it is easy to blame the North Koreans for many misdeeds," he said in testimony before the House International Relations Committee on March 16, 2000, "the truth is that the stalemate in the negotiations was at times due not to the North's belligerence but to disagree-

Lock and load: South Korean soldiers train near the DMZ. North Korea's nuclear ambitions are raising tensions on the Korean peninsula.

ments among the KEDO parties — the United States, South Korea and Japan — over what to horse-trade. Significantly, when KEDO has reached an agreement with the North Koreans, they have largely kept their side of the bargain.”

In a nine-lesson treatise on dealing with North Korea, published by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Reiss continued to stress that the North Korean regime should be distrusted and offered some tough observations, but continued to insist that “you can do business with North Korea” because “by and large” the regime has “honored” its KEDO agreements. Reiss swiped at national-security hawks, insisting that it was a “myth” that the Clinton administration’s nuclear deal with North Korea “can be attacked without harming U.S. national-security interests.” He continued:

“Despite all the criticisms of the Clinton administration’s handling of North Korea, the reality is that the next administration, whether Democrat or Republican, is unlikely to substantially change U.S. policy. If there is a Republican administration come next January [2001], I would expect to see important changes in policy style and policy execution, but few changes in policy substance (with the exception of addressing the North’s military posture along the DMZ). Indeed, leading Republican foreign-policy experts advising Gov. Bush have already gone on record saying that it would be difficult for a Republican administration to overhaul the current U.S. approach to North Korea.”

That didn’t happen. After being elected, President Bush completely overhauled the U.S. approach, dumping the Clinton policy of unilateral action toward the regime in favor of a coalition of the willing that includes South Korea, Japan, China and Russia, and putting the onus on Beijing and Moscow — the parents of the North Korean regime and its weapons programs — to help solve the problem that to date they have only fueled.

In the heat of the 2000 presidential campaign, Reiss spoke out to undermine the argument that the Clinton policy simply oiled the North Korean military, bailed out the regime with material



YONHAP/AP

support and bought time for Kim to breed enough plutonium to build a nuclear arsenal. (By contrast, Pentagon sources tell *INSIGHT* that Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld made an applicant’s demonstration of political support to Bush in the fight against Clinton, an early factor in his continued hiring considerations.) Instead, Reiss told

the installation of the nuclear plants.

Liberating the North Korean people from their Stalinist rulers — the regime change that Bush actively has embraced — just may not have crossed Reiss’ mind. Reiss encouraged Congress to help improve the Clinton administration’s North Korea strategy, but his policy prescriptions scrupulously diverted

Reiss Offers Policy of Giveaways to N. Korea

Mitchell B. Reiss, the new director of the State Department’s Policy Planning Staff, was willing to compromise with the regime that President George W. Bush called “evil.” Lobbying Congress for continued support for the Clinton administration’s failing North Korea policy in 2000, Reiss offered a list of policy questions for the legislative branch to consider. He made no mention of trying to solve the North Korean nuclear problem by trying to liberalize or change the North Korean regime, instead offering a menu of giveaways:

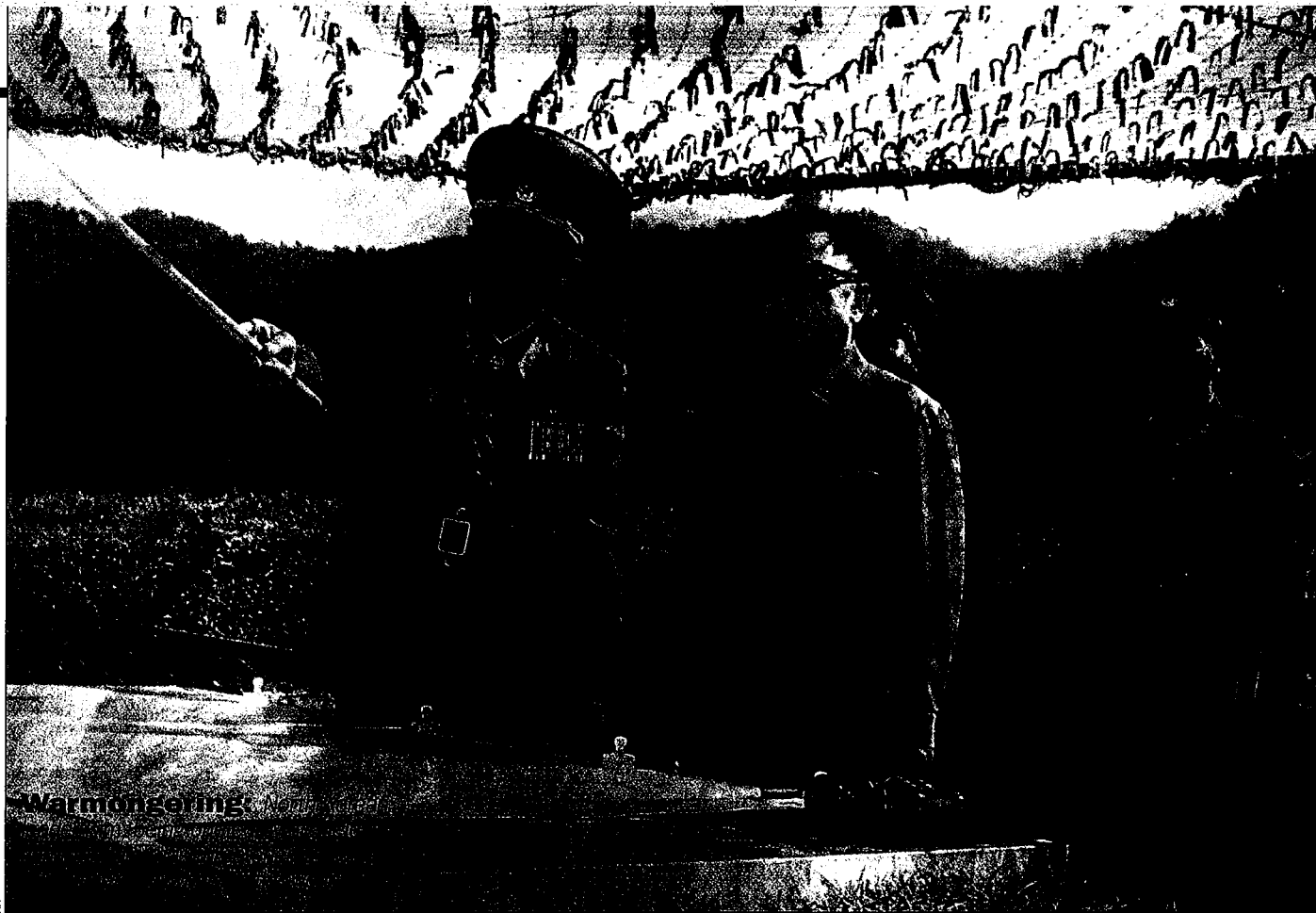
“Congress can and should articulate what it is willing to allow the Clinton administration to place on the negotiating table when it discusses these issues with the North. Are we willing to relax all economic sanctions? Are we willing to remove the North from the terrorism list? Are we willing to establish diplomatic relations and exchange ambassadors? Are we willing to officially end the Korean War and sign a peace treaty with

North Korea? Are we willing to ‘buy out’ the North’s ballistic-missile program and, if so, for how much? Are we willing to establish confidence-building measures, such as establishing hot lines between military commanders on either side of the DMZ [Demilitarized Zone]? Are we willing to consider redeploying U.S./ROK [South Korean] forces if the North agrees to redeploy its forces?

“During the past five years of dealing with the North, the Clinton administration has not even asked many of these questions, let alone come to some consensus on answering them. ... But if the United States is serious about addressing the threat posed by the North, we must first of all decide what price we are willing to pay.”

— JMW

SOURCE: MITCHELL B. REISS’ TESTIMONY BEFORE THE COMMITTEE ON INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES, MARCH 16, 2000.



AP

attention from the underlying problem, which isn't the weapons but the regime that owns them (see sidebar). Earlier this year in his Carnegie Endowment report, Reiss admitted that "we would all be much better off if the regime did not exist," but added the self-defeating caveat, "Unfortunately, that is unlikely to happen tomorrow or any time soon."

His view of dealing with North Korea hasn't made room, so far, to hasten the end of that regime. To the contrary: Within two weeks of Reiss' arrival at the State Department, Secretary Powell hinted that the United States might be willing to compromise on a security pledge that Pyongyang long had sought — namely, a promise to ensure that the United States never would attack.

By contrast, human rights and freedom are steady staples of Undersecretary Bolton's view of North Korea. Daily life in North Korea is "a hellish nightmare," Bolton said recently in Seoul. "We believe that some 400,000 persons died in prison since 1972 and that starvation and executions were common. Entire families, including children, were imprisoned when only one member of the family was accused of a crime."

He went on to detail horrors occurring in North Korean

prison camps. Kim builds nukes, Bolton says, because he fears freedom. Pyongyang hurled insults at Bolton — a nemesis of traditional arms-controllers — and demanded he never be included in talks. Powell made no official comment at first. But Bush stood by Bolton, saying that the top conservative diplomat represented his own views and that he, not the North Koreans, would choose who would represent the United States.

Reiss is careful, his critics say, not to seem a complete wimp. For years he has warned that "you must stand firm with the North Koreans," that "constant vigilance is warranted in dealing with the

A diagnosis: Bolton says Kim builds nukes because he fears freedom.



ANDREW WONG/REUTERS

North Koreans" and that "it is therefore essential that anyone negotiating with the North not be afraid to walk away from the table. The United States should never be, or seem to be, more eager than the North to reach a deal."

But in the context of such an argument, Reiss counseled, "The United States should never be less eager than North Korea to craft a more stable and secure Korean peninsula." Freedom wasn't on the menu with stability and security. However, he called for resoluteness and warned that critics of the policy were playing with fire unless they offered solutions of their own. He repeatedly cautioned that the North Koreans might not keep their side of the bargain, but never offered a detailed solution for what the United States should do if that ever became the case.

The moment of truth has arrived. And now, in what some have called an astonishing move, Mitchell Reiss has been put in control of foreign-policy planning for the United States, scrambling to find a new bargain with a North Korea threatening to attack with nuclear weapons assured to it by the hands-on policy of that same Mitchell Reiss.

J. MICHAEL WALLER IS A SENIOR WRITER FOR *Insight* MAGAZINE.