



The 2020 Commission Report on the North Korean Nuclear Attacks Against the United States: A Speculative Novel

Jeffrey Lewis

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“A brilliantly conceived page-turner.”—Eric Schlosser, author of *Fast Food Nation* and *Command and Control*

“I couldn’t put the book down, reading most of it in the course of one increasingly intense evening. If fear of nuclear war is going to keep you up at night, at least it can be a page-turner.”—*New Scientist*

America lost 1.4 million citizens in the North Korean attacks of March 2020. This is the final, authorized report of the government commission charged with investigating the calamity.

“The skies over the Korean Peninsula on March 21, 2020, were clear and blue.” So begins this sobering report on the findings of the Commission on the Nuclear Attacks against the United States, established by law by Congress and President Donald J. Trump to investigate the horrific events of the next three days. An independent, bipartisan panel led by nuclear expert Jeffrey Lewis, the commission was charged with finding and reporting the relevant facts, investigating how the nuclear war began, and determining whether our government was adequately prepared for combating a nuclear adversary and safeguarding U.S. citizens. Did President Trump and his advisers understand North Korean views about nuclear weapons? Did they appreciate the dangers of provoking the country’s ruler with social media posts and military exercises? Did the tragic milestones of that fateful month—North Korea’s accidental shoot-down of Air Busan flight 411, the retaliatory strike by South Korea, and the tweet that triggered vastly more carnage—inevitably lead to war? Or did America’s leaders have the opportunity to avert the greatest calamity in the history of our nation?

Answering these questions will not bring back the lives lost in March 2020. It will not rebuild New York, Washington, or the other cities reduced to rubble. But at the very least, it might prevent a tragedy of this magnitude from occurring again. It is this hope, more than any other, that inspired *The 2020 Commission Report*.

The 2020 Commission Report on the North Korean Nuclear Attacks Against the United States: A Speculative Novel Details

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Max says

A speculative novel, written by a nonproliferation expert, that deals with the simple question: How could an accidental nuclear war with North Korea happen, and what would it look like?

I made my way through the book in two evenings, foregoing most other activities, which should tell you all you need to know about this book. It is a well-written, sobering reminder that with nuclear weapons in the mix, we are always on the brink of killing large numbers of people because of misunderstandings, bad communication, and just plain old bad luck.

Speaking a few days after the release, in August 2018, the book is very much up to date, with Donald Trump and his cadre of officials (some of which are still those in power today, some their inevitable replacements) presiding over the debacle that occurs in this fictional version of year 2020. There are some nice touches, with Trump tweets playing a central role, but it never gets implausible.

I should note that while the book is written in the form of a report by a commission tasked with investigating the events of 2020 (hence the title), it contains graphic descriptions of what happens to victims of nuclear attacks, and as you might imagine, these are not for the faint of heart. I found this book to be yet another powerful reminder for why nuclear weapons are dangerous, and why we would all be better off without them in the mix.

If you are at all interested in nuclear weapons or foreign policy, read this book.

Pamela says

Terrific will do, for starters. Right out of the headlines will also do. **The 2020 Commission Report...** is written just as if it were an after-action report or investigation similar to The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States or The Warren Commission Report: The Official Report of the President's Commission on the Assassination of President John F. Kennedy. The author is a real-life nuclear arms expert especially on the systems of China and North Korea. This is a speculative novel that tries to answer the question of how we might end up in a nuclear exchange with North Korea and everything that is quoted or takes place up until August 7, 2018, is true and after that date, is the author's imagination. He has quite a good imagination.

The format he chooses, that of the report, seems to add to the tension and at times, gives such a flavor of reality that it takes reminding oneself that none of this has actually happened. It's all told by testimony from survivors, staff reports, interviews of military participants, President Trump's staff aboard Air Force One and survivors at Mar-A-Largo. The action is fast paced and scary. With two such major players as President Trump and North Korean President Kim Jung-un, it's easy to believe in this or a similar scenario. Scary or not, it was hard to put down!

Charles says

For some time now, I have been telling my children, none of whom have ever lived through any event that significantly harmed America, that sooner or later, history will return. The older ones roll their eyes; the younger ones have no idea what I mean. This book shows what I mean, through a fictionalized look at a 2020 nuclear attack by North Korea on South Korea, Japan, and the United States.

The book is an imagined report, probably a lot less dry than most actual official reports, written by a 2023 bipartisan commission examining why the conflict had occurred. It is very well written by Jeffrey Lewis, a California academic focused on foreign affairs. In short, what happens is that the North Koreans shoot down a South Korean airliner full of children, mistakenly believing it to be a United States bomber on a provocation run, at the same time annual South Korean/United States war games are being conducted. Instead of coordinating with the United States, which has a history of de-escalating and requiring the South Koreans to follow our lead, the South Korean prime minister uses missiles to destroy the North Korean Air Defense headquarters and one of Kim Jong Il's palaces. With communications largely cut off because of inferior infrastructure, and figuring this is the prelude to a full-scale invasion by the United States, Kim sends short-range nuclear weapons against Japan and South Korea, killing two million people. The United States begins a conventional attack; Kim, deciding to survive he must up the ante by showing he's willing to keep escalating, sends long-range nuclear missiles against the United States, destroying Manhattan, Honolulu, northern Virginia, and Jupiter, Florida (near Trump's Mar-a-Lago). Four million Americans die (and North Korea is promptly defeated, and Kim killed, by American and South Korean conventional forces).

So history, in this telling, returns. Verisimilitude is high. The technical details seem accurate and are compelling, even ones that are somewhat speculative, such as North Korean use of drones to blind antimissile radar. The role of rumors and how Kim might view the same events differently from us is well drawn—he can't know that the Americans aren't actually planning to invade, though the Americans know, and in the typical American way, think that should be obvious. Other details are also gruesomely fascinating, such as the possibility that the cladding put on modern high-rise buildings for environmental reasons will burn when exposed to nuclear heat, turning, in this case, Tokyo into a series of torches (like the Grenfell Tower fire in London last year). Thus, the book is a real page-turner, though not one calculated to make you sleep better that night.

Various real people appear, drawn incisively, along with a few fictional people. All Americans profiled are Republicans; there are some side references to partisan conflict occurring after the war, but no Democrats are mentioned, which makes sense, since the decision making all takes place within the Trump administration during a forty-eight hour period. The portrayal of hawkish behavior, with the same men responsible for the Iraq debacle (and the Libya debacle) still pushing a policy of American hegemony in a world that has moved on, seems quite accurate, and the depiction of decision making is interesting, in part because it shows what was also on display after the September 11 attacks, that people at the top of government act just as muddled and confused as you and I would if put in the same position—it's not like the movies, where crisp, decisive debates and decisions feature. Oddly, an old acquaintance of mine even appears—Jon Lerner, a man who is apparently now Nikki Haley's deputy. I'm at the age when I now have a fair number of such acquaintances—not famous, exactly, but known in certain circles. Not me, though. Nobody knows who I am. Sad!

Anyway, my point is that while several of the real people profiled in this book are portrayed as having

dubious characteristics, especially Nikki Haley, only one person is portrayed as having no redeeming characteristic whatsoever. That's Donald Trump, who is portrayed as one hundred percent fool, and an unintelligent, tone-deaf coward to boot. Not only are his actions portrayed as stupid, he is portrayed as, among other things, demanding his golf score on the day in question go into the Commission's report, leaving his staff behind when Air Force One lifts off ahead of the nuclear blasts, and saying only "Absolutely beautiful!" when he sees the mushroom cloud. This portrayal seems wildly unlikely, although I suppose I can't say for sure, since I don't know Trump and it seems nearly impossible to get a straight, unbiased opinion about him, something for which he surely bears a lot of the blame.

In Lewis's telling, it's Trump's tweets that are the real cause, if there is one, of the war. One part of the reason Kim launches nuclear weapons is because, when he hears about the airliner shootdown and before Trump knows about the South Korean prime minister's launching missiles, Trump tweets that "LITTLE ROCKET MAN WON'T BE BOTHERING US FOR MUCH LONGER!" This makes Kim conclude, contrary to what the South Koreans claim, that the missiles are merely the spearhead of a coordinated invasion by the United States and South Korea. Certainly, this seems like a plausible result of such a tweet by Trump. But is it a plausible tweet by Trump? I have heard a lot about Trump's tweets, and, like everyone else, I read the ones that are highlighted by the media. However, those are the only ones I see; like most people, I don't read or even see the others. So I went and read the past few months' worth. Trump sure tweets a lot. But none of his tweets seem unhinged or even stupid, which is the certainly the impression one gets from the few tweets that get wide play in the media (which is probably why they get wide play in the media).

For example, in a typical missive, yesterday Trump tweeted (and then re-tweeted), "Presidential Approval numbers are very good—strong economy, military and just about everything else. Better numbers than Obama at this point, by far. We are winning on just about every front and for that reason there will not be a Blue Wave, but there might be a Red Wave!" As far as I know, most or all of that is true, or a reasonable prediction. I went back a long way in Trump's Twitter feed, and no tweet seemed in any way particularly odd, or showing any evidence of stupidity, foolishness, or any other notable vice. Yes, the limitations of the medium make some statements seem half-developed, and Trump's phrasing is very informal. And unfiltered, personal tweeting is not something any other President has done. Certainly Obama, a disciplined man, didn't do it. So why does Trump do it?

The answer traditionally given seems to be he lacks self-control, wants the attention, and gets a feeling of aggrandizement from tweeting. These seem unlikely to be the primary reason (even if all those things are true, which they probably are). A much more likely primary answer is that Trump realized, early on, that Twitter is the only way he can talk directly to the public, who get most of their news filtered through the Left's organs (which no longer even pretend to objectivity). He knows that any interview he gives with any mainstream television or print reporter will be used for one purpose, and one purpose only—to attempt to destroy him, by suppressing anything positive, playing up anything negative, using out-of-context (or wholly made up) quotes to paint him in a bad light, and pairing the writing with unappealing visual images. He knows this treatment is the precise opposite that given to any politician of the Left. Trump seems like a man with a nose for weakness and a fondness for aikido moves. Simply avoiding the hostile media, and forcing them to cover all of what he really says by making it short, rather than allowing them to edit it, is the answer. Frankly, it strikes me as genius, even if it may come from a form of instinctive low cunning, rather than the 3D chess that people like Scott Adams ascribe it to. (And if Trump really is such a fool as portrayed in this book, he is blessed, so far, in both his enemies and circumstance.)

But tweeting is not without limitations, certainly. Why does Trump tweet without first getting advice or filtering his tweets through the State Department or other government functionaries? Probably because he's

figured out that would delay and neuter the effects he desires. Why does he tweet himself, given that he could have hired consultants to write and post tweets for him? I imagine for the same reason, and because that's what Jeb Bush did. Remember him? Maybe realizing that Trump's actual tweeting suggests discipline, not lack of control, Lewis makes up more extreme future tweets from Trump, including attacking Kim's sister, making unflattering remarks about her physical appearance and suggesting she would grant him sexual favors. I suppose Trump might do such a thing, and if you're a dictator who thinks that removing your family from power is the goal of your enemies (about which he's not wrong), that would go down poorly and increase paranoia. But as far as I know, such tweets are far removed from anything Trump has ever tweeted. Along the same lines, Lewis reaches too far in his desperation to smear Trump, and erodes the realism of his book, by accusing Trump on no evidence of having an affair with Nikki Haley. He claims all his pre-August, 2018 facts are supported by endnotes, but this is often false, and when it's true, for anti-Trump statements it's usually to an "anonymous source" repeated in some unhinged anti-Trump outlet. Really, Lewis makes out Trump as more of a villain than Kim, even ending the book with a caricatured unhinged "statement" from Trump attacking the 2020 Commission. It gets tedious.

That Trump can get around media gatekeepers using social media is a big problem for the legacy media and the Left (but I repeat myself). The Left realizes this truth, which is why they are at this moment aggressively and successfully moving to deplatform and censor conservatives across all alternative media outlets. For example, this week Google, Apple, and Facebook (but not Twitter, yet), in a collusive, coordinated attack, totally deplatformed conspiracy-monger Alex Jones. Sure, Jones is an idiot. But such deplatforming only ever attacks the Right, and the Lords of Tech (and their allies in Congress) are increasingly open about the goal of extending the deplatforming to all conservatives, other than those who are willing to be docile and obedient subordinates, such as Jonah Goldberg. Not to mention that since a lot of conservative figures on social media rely on that media to make a living, the chilling effect of deplatforming, even if they are not themselves directly targeted, makes them censor themselves. Which is the desired effect. The only answer is to curb these companies and their executives. A good start would be to immediately regulate them as public utilities, and subject them to rules that forbid any viewpoint discrimination in which the federal government could not engage under the First Amendment (yes, I know the First Amendment doesn't apply to private companies—this will be statutory). We can begin with a private right of action for violations (as well as government enforcement, including felony criminal penalties for deliberate or repeated violations), with minimum statutory damages of \$500,000 per violation, a second private right of action against their executives personally, and one-way fee shifting for all plaintiffs who bring any lawsuit determined to be non-frivolous, even if they don't prevail. Unfortunately, this sort of thing isn't what Republicans do; it's only Democrats that believe they need to actually attack and win battles. That needs to change—and Trump threatens to change it, which is why the Left knows it must destroy him.

At the end of the book, Lewis portrays an America in deep trouble, with its economy in tatters and facing a rebuilding cost of \$40 trillion. That seems an impossible amount to spend, given that it's more than ten times the current federal budget, much of which is already borrowed, and which absorbs more than twenty percent of the current GDP. And why would you re-build Manhattan? Or Northern Virginia, for that matter. I'd leave both in ruins, and use it as an excuse to rusticate all federal bureaucrats, scattering them around the country and wholly abandoning Washington, D.C. As Rahm Emanuel famously said, "You never let a serious crisis go to waste. And what I mean by that it's an opportunity to do things you think you could not do before." Moreover, events such as those portrayed in this book might be the fracture that jolts Americans into changing our entire system, or accepting a change given to them, such as the wholesale neutering of the federal government or, even better, the fragmenting of the country into multiple successor entities. I'm certainly not in favor of disasters; any person with children can't be. But whether we want it or not, disasters is what we will get, of this type or another, something we seem to have largely forgotten over the past several decades, and we might as well be thinking of to what advantage they can be turned.

Nick Black says

Incredibly disappointing. I've read Dr. Lewis's blog avidly for years (indeed, I cite it on my personal web page). His knowledge of nuclear/missile tech and especially the politics thereof is right on, hence the "armscontrolwonk" title. Unfortunately, none of that acumen or analysis is brought to bear in this "speculative novel", which isn't really much more than a skeletal draft written primarily, it seems, to take cheap and frankly grotesque shots at president trump. We get it; you don't like him. Few do. That doesn't excuse the incredibly tedious sense of historical exceptionalism with which people infuse their writing post 2016, as if they haven't spent their lives acting like every other Republican president was some kind of calamity.

Lewis's book is less successful a technothriller than Clancy, less successful a look at nuclear war and its effects than Hersey, and less successful an intriguing look at our times than any issue of the Economist. Quite a shame, really =].

Hruotland says

This is not a novel. This is speculative fiction in the style of a non-fiction book. No protagonist, no dialogue, just description. Trump did this Mun Jaein¹ did that, Kim Ch?ng?n² did that. The rule for novels is "show, don't tell". The rule here was "Tell, tell, tell. Then tell some details everybody knows. Then tell some unimportant detail you came across during research." That is how the whole book is written. "Now this politician decided this. That is like what happened before, in 2013 in Korea and in 2003 in Iraq.³" Again and again and again. It's quite tedious.

Let's take the first scene: in an airliner most of the instruments suffer a power failure. In a novel, you would start with one of the pilots thinking about this or that, maybe the young passengers going to live in yurts for a few weeks, and then you have em getting quite a fright when suddenly they whole aircraft is broken and ey has to work hard to keep it flying. Great drama. Nice opening scene.

But no, we get about a page or two about how several A320s did In Real Life suffer this exact problem. I have the receipts! Here is when and where it happened. (But something's wrong there: a flight from London to Budapest had problems over Nantes?) There is something else odd in the scene, too: an aircraft leaving the planned flight path and flying towards enemy territory without answering the radio is reason to scramble some QRA-style interceptors, especially when the transponder is off.?

No, seriously. Don't print "novel" on the cover of works that are not novels. And don't spend something like half of your "novel" talking about past events only remotely connected to the plot.

There's a bunch of other stuff that would cost it one star (★★★★? instead of ★★★★★), some minor, some not so much. Who calls an A320 a "jumbo jet"? Why is nobody panicking because of fallout and radiation in chapter 6? Why isn't the whole post-attack horror show done then, but only in chapter 10, after America is attacked?

That said, yeah, looks like a nuclear war might break out this way. That leaves the question: how to get the

real politicians to be half as scared as this book has left me?

¹ In Revised Romanization, apparently the main Romanization in South Korea

² In McCune–Reischauer romanization, apparently the main Romanization in North Korea

³ And then there is an end note citing the sources to proof that those things in 2013 and 2003 really did happen.

? With the transponder on, you usually just have to re-establish communications(view spoiler).

Christopher says

I wish I could have given this book 4.5 stars. Dr. Lewis's writing is best when dealing with areas he is most comfortable: the technical and geopolitical dimensions of nuclear deterrence and war. It is weakest when it comes to projecting an essential character: President Trump. To be fair, the portrait of Trump's actions and emotions seem insightful and well-thought out. However, imagined tweets feel like they are almost spot on; his dialogue feels further from the truth; his "statement" included at the end of the report feels like a deep-learning AI was fed all of Trump's tweets, campaign speeches, interviews, and rally ramblings and spit out an amalgamation of all the well-known Trump cliches. Honestly, even with the few content errors that might be expected from a first release, I probably would have given the book 5 stars before I read the "statement by former president of the United States Donald J. Trump". Still, if you are a fan of speculative fiction, or government, or politics, or foreign policy, or nuclear disarmament, give it a read.

I promise you'll scare yourself more than once when you catch your mind thinking what's being reported is real...

Boris Feldman says

The Little Rocketman version of the 1962 novel, Fail Safe. Apart from touches of TDS, a good read about what happens if the fat finger pushes the red button.

AC says

Enjoyed this. Like a fast-paced thriller, but with political savvy. My only warning is that events will soon overtake the plot, and the book will soon lose some of its surface plausibility.

Marius Hoffbauer says

I really enjoyed the book, the way the author connected historical accounts and precedents to create a realistic path for something that could potentially happen was fascinating to read.

PvOberstein says

The 2020 Commission Report on the North Korean Nuclear Attacks Against the United States, a geopolitical horror story for the ages, is written by Jeffrey Lewis, a real-life nuclear weapons expert whose Arms Control Wonk blog I enjoy on a regular basis. It presents what is, in effect, the “nightmare scenario”: a perfect storm where a series of foreseen and unforeseen crises lead to a successful North Korean nuclear attack against the United States. The book uses the framing devices of a 9/11 Commission-style investigation, chaired by Lewis himself, exploring the diplomatic, geopolitical, and technical factors which lead to the attack. If you’re an IR wonk like I am, this is basically manna from the heavens.

The “plot” of the story is, unsurprisingly, dark. The crisis begins with North Korea shooting down a civilian airliner filled with schoolchildren, having mistaken it for a U.S. surveillance aircraft near the DMZ. In Seoul, President Moon, furious at the senseless loss of life, orders a limited retaliatory strike against North Korea, targeting an Air Force building and a leadership villa (though one where Kim Jong-un is, importantly, not believed to be in). Critically, he does not wait for authorization from United States Forces Korea before launching the attack, which causes a moderate amount of damage in North Korea.

What should have been the tap in a tit-for-tat retaliation campaign, however, escalates dramatically and unexpectedly. Kim Jong-un misinterprets a Tweet sent by Donald Trump to mean that the United States Government attempted to assassinate him - in reality, neither the U.S. nor South Korea ever had that goal in mind. Believing an invasion is imminent, KJU plays pretty much the only hand he has - hit first and hit hard.

There’s a lot of attention paid to the deterrence theory, as one would expect from a nuclear weapons strategist. I’ve long argued that the risk of North Korea possessing nuclear weapons is probably over-exaggerated - using them would be suicide for the Kim regime, after all - but Lewis does an excellent job of supplying the most-likely scenario in which North Korea would actually dare use its nukes. With both South Korea and the U.S. expecting only a limited retaliation from the North, Kim surprises them both by launching a handful of nuclear-tipped missiles, obliterating Seoul, Busan, and Tokyo, but failing to hit either Guam or Okinawa.

North Korea’s strategy of a massive, first-strike attack relies on its adversaries then realizing something else - North Korea still has ICBMs capable of hitting even more targets, including in the United States. In effect, the goal is to blunt any attack on North Korea, and then sit tight and hope that the other sides sue for a ceasefire rather than risk continuing the nuclear war. I’ve never been optimistic that this strategy could work, even to save millions of lives - communication is too poor and tempers are too hot for cooler heads to prevail. But the diplomatic negotiations Kim needs to save his skin - conducted primarily around North Korea’s mission to the United Nations in New York - fall apart, and President Trump orders a retaliatory strike using conventional military forces.

Things fall apart from there. The intensity of the counter-attack surprises Kim, who now believes that he has nothing to lose by using the full extent of his nuclear arsenal. Despite the U.S. attack on North Korea, the DPRK is able to conceal its mobile missile launchers long enough to send several ICBMs sailing towards the United States. The Ground-Based Midcourse Defense (GMD) in Alaska fails utterly, and nuclear missiles strike Honolulu, Manhattan, northern Virginia, and just outside of Mar-a-Lago. While an air and ground invasion quickly topples the North Korean regime, millions of lives have already been lost.

Lewis spends a lot of time exploring various esoteric factors that would influence America's response to the crisis, including quite a few things that I'd never considered before (like how the layout of the Blue House - South Korea's executive palace - is ill-suited to quickly convening an emergency staff in, or how the geography of West Palm Beach scatters Trump's leadership team while he's in Mar-a-Lago). Lewis doesn't go into quite the technical detail of a Tom Clancy novel, but you're going to read more than your fair share of facts about Scuds, radars and satellites. But it is far more interested in exploring how to bring about a scenario where a stage of fully-rational actors manage to enact a nuclear war.

No doubt the most controversial part of the book will be the pseudo-psychoanalysis of many of the world's leading figures. Lewis spends much of the report assessing how real-world personalities would respond to the crisis. These include Donald Trump, Kim Jong-un, and Moon Jae-in, but also James Mattis, Nikki Haley, John Bolton, Keither Kellogg, and many lesser-known Administration figures. Predicting how anyone is going to respond in any scenario is a difficult task, and how Donald Trump would respond to a nuclear attack is obviously impossible to foresee. Lewis' assessment, though, is that it would be bad. Very bad. Lewis depicts Trump as being borderline incapable of functioning like an adult, unable to maintain focus or attention to detail, an erratic and unstable man. (I don't particularly disagree with the conclusion, though I'm sure many will disagree.) Lewis clearly dislikes Trump on a visceral level, however, and his Report manages to attack Trump on just about every conceivable weakness - from his geopolitical ignorance to his obsession with Fox News to his fear of descending stairs. It invariably politicizes the work - I can't imagine any #MAGA supporter reading page after page of infantile Trump - but at the same time, Lewis' depiction seems all-too-real.

Lewis' analysis relies a fair bit on data from the Gulf War, particularly for the effectiveness of Scud missiles and the (in)effectiveness of the USAF for finding and destroying them. For his depiction of the nuclear attacks themselves, he borrows heavily from the recollections of survivors of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, adding an eerie realism to the Report's first-person accounts.

My quibbles are primarily with the aesthetics of using the "Report" as a framing device. It does add a layer of realism to the writing, as it discusses interviewing survivors, POWs, and reviewing CIA memos.

Narratively, it's wonderful. The facade sometimes feels a little thin, though, particularly when depicting Lewis' personal attacks on Donald Trump. The level of detail the Report goes into varies considerably, sometimes pulling back the curtain as to the limited scope of the writing project. I personally feel that it might have worked better framed as a really long New Yorker or LRB essay, but that's a minor fault at most. Kindle also still has no idea how to deal with footnotes/endnotes. Readable even if you know very little about the situation in Northeast Asia, and a damning reminder that we need better leadership, now.

Review with some excerpts is available here: <http://pvoberstein.tumblr.com/post/17...>

Casper Veen says

Erg bijzonder boek, geschreven door een deskundige op het gebied van zowel kernwapens als Noord-Korea. Had wat mij betreft soms wel nog wat meer de diepte in gemogen, maar zeker een aanrader.

Mac says

Jeffrey Lewis developed an excellent idea for a book--a contemporary realistic international crisis that turns

into futuristic dystopian fiction. It's a good premise, but his execution is only fair.

First, the realism, then the fiction. By choosing 2020--and not say 2050--the people are today's government officials (or identifiable stand-ins), and the international threats to peace are today's threats ratcheted up to nuclear conflict levels. Here are the people and problems of 2018 on full display. These people and their problems create a horrifying nuclear confrontation just two short years from now. As an idea for a book, so far, so good.

But the execution of the idea is not so successful. The book doesn't sound or feel like a commission report. The narrator is "Jeffrey Lewis, PhD, On behalf of the 2020 Commission," which creates the problem. Lewis as narrator is part novelist, part newspaper reporter, part commissioner.

The blended points of view create reading confusion, not enjoyment. Sometimes, the narrator presents just the facts, sometimes he's offering tension-raising fiction, and sometimes he's Stanley Kubrick serving up Dr Strangelove satire pointed mostly at Donald Trump. So I wish Lewis had been more discriminating and consistent in his point of view.

As one possibility, Lewis could have made the book a pure commission report without the novelistic turns. For instance, he could have spoken as an unbiased commissioner, and his report could have included report section numbering for chapters (1.1...1.2...1.3...) as well as date stamped reference materials such as partially redacted document excerpts, emails, and phone intercepts. With these changes and others, the book could look and sound like a comprehensive report.

To summarize, Lewis's "speculative novel" is a good idea that could be even better as a pure novel. And the book might be better still if Lewis had been bolder, creating a mock report. That's because his hybrid point of view--novelist, newspaper reporter, commissioner--doesn't work for me.

Steve says

Interesting account of a *fictional* attack on the United States in March of 2020. Of course, it reads like a government report, and is very sparse on specific details after the attack, providing an overview of what happened in South Korea, Japan, and the United States. The amount of detail on true events going back to the Korean War was interesting, and the author tied it all together nicely in an extremely plausible account.

The only thing I really didn't like was President Trump's final statement included as a rebuttal to this report. Way over the top, and it added nothing to the overall story.

Carsten says

This novel, describing a speculative future war between the US, led by the Trump administration, and North Korea is an interesting idea. Facts about NK and its history are included (with references). As for the story itself and as the title suggests, a number of unfortunate coincidences lead to devastating nuclear attacks in March 2020 against South Korea, Japan and the US. I think the beginnings of the hostilities are very realistic. But I am surprised about the authors ideas on the later stages of the war, in particular what the US is (not) going to do. And what about the reactions of China and Russia?

What lets this book down is the author's distaste towards Trump. Yes, I can see Trump acting in a very non-presidential way (including his Twitter feeds at the time when it gets really hot), but I am hopeful that golf will not be on Trump's radar and that he will listen quickly to his advisors if something goes very wrong on the Korean peninsula....

Cj says

Frightening in its possibility. How I hope that some of the governmental antics are not true, but fear that they are. A well written speculative story. His incorporation of real survivor voices keeps it shockingly real and touching.
