



## Irregular Warfare on the Korean Peninsula Thoughts on Irregular Threats for north Korea Post-Conflict and Post-Collapse: Understanding Them to Counter Them

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### Introduction

*There are only two ways to approach planning for the collapse of North Korea: to be ill-prepared or to be really ill-prepared.*

--Dr. Kurt Campbell, DASD, 1 May 1998<sup>1</sup>

What is going to happen on the Korean Peninsula? This is the question that plagues policy makers, strategists, and military planners in the Republic of Korea (ROK), the United States (US) and in Northeast Asia (NEA).

If this question can be answered, the next question is: How will the ROK, US and the international community deal with what happens on the Korean Peninsula?

The purpose of this paper is to explore *some* of the potential outcomes on the Korean Peninsula following either collapse of the Kim Family Regime or following conventional and unconventional conflict with north Korea as well as to examine some of the possible ways to prepare for and deal with those outcomes. While optimistic planners and policy makers hope for a co-called “soft landing” and peaceful reunification of the Peninsula, prudence calls for planning for the worse case scenarios. This contradicts the current focus of the United States on having to “win the wars it is currently fighting” as stated in the 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR). However, the worse case scenarios are, in the author’s opinion, at once both the most dangerous and the most likely threats in NEA and they should be considered. Therefore soft landing and peaceful reunification scenarios will not be addressed. (however, the author hopes they would become a reality). This paper is intentionally provocative, yet only focuses on one of the many complexities of the Korean Peninsula and Northeast Asia, namely Irregular Warfare.

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Kurt Campbell, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs – Asia Pacific (DASD-ISA-APAC), remarks to USFK planners during a briefing at the Pentagon, 1 May 1998.

This paper is written with the concepts of “military misfortune” in mind. In Eliot Cohen and John Gooch’s seminal work on military failures, they determined that militaries are generally unsuccessful for three reasons: the failure to learn, the failure to adapt, and the failure to anticipate. This paper will recommend that the ROK-US alliance learn from operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, adapt Irregular Warfare concepts to the security challenges on the Korean Peninsula and anticipate the collapse of the Kim Family Regime and the complex, irregular threats that collapse will bring.

The conventional wisdom would postulate that the worse case situation would be an attack by the north Korean military because surely the devastation and widespread humanitarian suffering as well as global economic impact would be on a scale that would far exceed any crisis that has occurred since the end of World War II. While that could very well be the case, there is little doubt about the military outcome of an attack by the north on the South and its allies and that would be the destruction of the north Korean People’s Army and the Kim Family Regime. Victory will surely be in the South’s favor; however, this paper will argue that the real worse case scenario comes from dealing with the aftermath; either post-regime collapse or post-conflict.

### **Assumptions**

The fundamental assumption for this paper is that the threats that may emerge following collapse or conflict on the peninsula will be characterized by being irregular and these irregular threats will pose a dangerous and complex situation that if not properly planned and prepared for could destabilize the Korean Peninsula and the Northeast Asian region for years to come. These threats will be a source of human suffering in the region, as well as cause significant security threats and economic turmoil, perhaps on a global scale. It is imperative that these potential irregular threats be identified and understood and that countermeasures be developed.

The second fundamental assumption is that the north Korean people will not welcome the Republic of Korea and its allies with open arms. They may be welcomed by some, perhaps many, but certainly not by all and therein is a significant threat. It should be recalled that an assumption regarding liberation of Iraq was made in 2003 that postulated the Iraqi people would welcome the US as liberators and this incorrect assumption led to years of insurgency that was only countered after belated recognition of the conditions of insurgency and then undertaking a significant shift in strategy.

The third assumption is that while Irregular Warfare is the current 21<sup>st</sup> Century term of art for the conflicts that the US is likely to face, planners and policy makers do not appear to view the Irregular Warfare (IW) Joint Operating Concept (JOC) (Irregular Warfare: Countering Irregular Threats 2.0 dated 17 May 2010) as applying to the problems that can be expected to be posed by a post-Kim Family regime north Korea. While the IW JOC appears to be pre-disposed to countering the violent extremism of non-state actors as well as asymmetric threats from state actors, a post Kim Family Regime north Korea will at once have many characteristics of violent extremism (though based on a different ideology: the religious-like Juche ideology) and at the same time use many of the already existing asymmetric capabilities developed by the north Korean state. Additionally, and perhaps most importantly the assumption is made that remnants

of the north Korean military, Communist Party and population will oppose the introduction of non-north Korean forces and conduct a uniquely north Korean insurgency to accomplish the classic insurgent goal of ridding a land of an occupying power. Additionally, it should be noted that the term irregular warfare in Korean is the same as unconventional warfare and this breeds confusion within the alliance.

The fourth assumption is that despite wishful thinking otherwise, China is going to intervene during a crisis in the north in order to protect four major interests. It must prevent the spillover of any conflict into China. Second, it must prevent the flow of refugees into an area where there are already some 2 million ethnic Koreans. Third, it will want to prevent not only the loss of control of nuclear weapons, but also prevent nuclear weapons from falling into ROK hands and simultaneously securing any information and evidence that might demonstrate Chinese complicity in the north Korean nuclear development program. Finally, China will want to ensure access to the natural resources that it has already secured through multi-year leases (in some cases 100 years) with the north Korean government. These interests will drive Chinese actions in the event of crisis, either conflict or collapse.

The fifth and final assumption is that while some planning has taken place to deal with north Korean instability and the effects of Kim Family Regime collapse, there has been insufficient *preparation* for collapse. Furthermore, in addition to planning for collapse, actions can and should be taken *prior* to collapse in order to mitigate the conditions and deal with the effects of collapse of the Kim Family Regime. Unfortunately, despite some planning efforts to counter specific irregular threats, the ROK, and the US in particular, has been distracted by the very real and dangerous threat of north Korean nuclear weapons and delivery capabilities and the proliferation of same while at the same time ensuring deterrence of an attack by the north. Deterrence is paramount and the nuclear problem is a critical international problem; however, successful deterrence over time will likely result in the eventual collapse of the regime and the associated security and humanitarian crises that it will bring.

### **Irregular Warfare and an End State for the Korean Peninsula**

*If you concentrate exclusively on victory, while no thought for the after effect, you may be too exhausted to profit by peace, while it is almost certain that the peace will be a bad one, containing the germs of another war.*

--B.H. Liddell-Hart<sup>2</sup>

The remainder of this paper will examine the above assumptions from the perspective of the IW JOC with the purpose of looking at the Korean Peninsula from the perspective of Irregular Warfare. Therefore it is necessary to begin with the common and accepted understanding of both IW and counterinsurgency as defined in the IW JOC and because the definitions of both IW and counterinsurgency apply to the north Korean problem:

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<sup>2</sup> B.H. Liddell-Hart quoted in "Balancing the Trinity: The Fine Art of Conflict Termination". by Susan E. Strednansky, MAJ, USAF. Air University Press, Maxwell AFB, Alabama. February 1996. 1.

**Irregular warfare.** A violent struggle among state and non-state actors for legitimacy and influence over the relevant populations. Irregular warfare favors indirect and asymmetric approaches, though it may employ the full range of military and other capabilities, in order to erode an adversary's power, influence, and will. Also called IW. (JP 1-02)

**Counterinsurgency.** Comprehensive civilian and military efforts taken to defeat an insurgency and to address any core grievances. Also called COIN. (JP 3-24)<sup>3</sup>

The post-Kim Family Regime north Korea is very likely to be a violent struggle between State actors on the one hand: the ROK, US and international community and non-state actors on the other: remnants of the north Korean People's Army (nKPA) and the communist party, and members of a thoroughly indoctrinated population. Responses will require indirect and asymmetric approaches; however, it not only may, but also most likely will, require the full range of military and other capabilities in order to erode and in this case defeat north Korean military remnants and the legacy of the Kim Family Regime's power, influence, and will over the former north Korean population. Furthermore, it will most likely be necessary for the ROK to conduct a counterinsurgency campaign in the north to defeat an insurgency being executed by remnants of the north Korean military and elite with the support of the coerced people of the north.

However, before the future problems can be addressed, a proposed answer to the "Korea Question" should be established. The 1953 Armistice Agreement recommended that the political leaders of all parties meet and determine a solution to the Korea Question – the division of the Peninsula.<sup>4</sup> Since no answer to this question has been forthcoming in some 60 years and it is apparent that there will be no capitulation by either the north or South, particularly as long as the Kim Family Regime remains in power, it is necessary to state a possible answer to the "question".

In June 2009 during a meeting between President Lee Myung Bak and President Barack Obama they reaffirmed the ROK-US Alliance and set forth an alliance vision:

Through our Alliance we aim to build a better future for all people on the Korean Peninsula, establishing a durable peace on the Peninsula and leading to peaceful reunification on the principles of free democracy and a market economy. We will work together to achieve the complete and verifiable elimination of North Korea's nuclear

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<sup>3</sup> Department of Defense, "IRREGULAR WARFARE: COUNTERING IRREGULAR THREATS JOINT OPERATING CONCEPT, VERSION 2.0," 17 May 2010

<sup>4</sup> The phrase "Korea question" is derived from the 1953 Armistice Agreement, Section IV, paragraph 60, which states: "In order to insure the peaceful settlement of the *Korean question* [emphasis added], the military Commanders of both sides hereby recommend to the governments of the countries concerned on both sides that, within three (3) months after the Armistice Agreement is signed and becomes effective, a political conference of a higher level of both sides be held by representatives appointed respectively to settle through negotiation the questions of the withdrawal of all foreign forces from Korea, the peaceful settlement of the Korean question, etc"

weapons and existing nuclear programs, as well as ballistic missile programs, and to promote respect for the fundamental human rights of the North Korean people.<sup>5</sup>

This vision can and should be the basis for policy and strategy development. The foundation for any effective strategy is to have clearly defined end state and following the collapse of the regime it will be necessary to have an end state that will focus policy makers and military and civilian planners. A working proposed end state that would answer the so-called “Korea question” could be this:

A stable, secure, peaceful, economically vibrant, non-nuclear peninsula, reunified under a liberal constitutional form of government determined by the Korean people.<sup>6</sup>

This is an end state that the ROK and international community should strive to achieve. It is an end state that the ROK and US alliance should agree upon and on which to base future planning. It is the end state that can ensure legitimacy of a reunified Korea in the struggle for influence over the relevant population: the Korean people. Irregular Warfare and Counterinsurgency are complex undertakings and made more complex as evidenced by the past 9 years of war in Afghanistan and Iraq when there is no clear understandable and attainable end state. There is an opportunity now to establish an end state for the Korean Peninsula that will allow for planning and preparation and when crisis occurs, policy makers and planners will have a clear understanding of what must be achieved.

### **Nature of the Kim Family Regime and its Influence over the north Korean People**

*War embraces much more than politics: it is always an expression of culture, often a determinant of cultural forms, in some societies the culture itself.*

--John Keegan in [A History of Warfare](#)<sup>7</sup>

Much has been written about the nature of the Kim Family Regime and its affect on the Korean people and their psyche. However, the most succinct, useful, and brilliant description can be found in the work of Adrian Buzo as he describes the beginnings of the “guerrilla dynasty” built around the cult-like worship of Kim Il Sung. The following paragraph provides the foundation for understanding how the north Korean elite as well as much of the population is likely to act:

In the course of this struggle against factional opponents, for the first time Kim began to emphasize nationalism as a means of rallying the population to the enormous sacrifices needed for post-war recovery. This was a nationalism that first took shape in the environment of the anti-Japanese guerrilla movement and developed into a creed through the destruction of both the non-Communist nationalist forces and much of the

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<sup>5</sup> White House Press Release, “JOINT VISION FOR THE ALLIANCE OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA AND THE REPUBLIC OF KOREA,” June 16, 2009, Washington, D.C., [http://www.whitehouse.gov/the\\_press\\_office/Joint-vision-for-the-alliance-of-the-United-States-of-America-and-the-Republic-of-Korea/](http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Joint-vision-for-the-alliance-of-the-United-States-of-America-and-the-Republic-of-Korea/)

<sup>6</sup> This end state was proposed in the author’s thesis in 2004. Maxwell, David S. “Beyond the Nuclear Crisis: A Strategy for the Korean Peninsula,” National War College, National Defense University, April 2004, p. 14.

<sup>7</sup> John Keegan, [A History of Warfare](#), (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), 12.

leftist intellectual tradition of the domestic Communists. Kim's nationalism did not draw inspiration from Korean history, nor did it dwell on past cultural achievements, for the serious study of history and traditional culture soon effectively ceased in the DPRK [Democratic People's Republic of Korea]. Rather, DPRK nationalism drew inspiration from the Spartan outlook of the former Manchurian guerrillas. It was a harsh nationalism that dwelt on past wrongs and promises of retribution for "national traitors" and their foreign backers. DPRK nationalism stressed the "purity" of all things Korean against the "contamination" of foreign ideas, and inculcated in the population a sense of fear and animosity toward the outside world. *Above all, DPRK nationalism stressed that the guerrilla ethos was not only the supreme, but also the only legitimate basis on which to reconstitute a reunified Korea.*<sup>8</sup> (Emphasis added)

A close reading of the above paragraph reveals a number of insights that can foretell the actions of the remnants of the regime and the military and a vast amount of the population. Sixty years of political indoctrination emphasizing the myth of anti-Japanese Partisan Warfare and the guerrilla exploits of Kim Il Sung as well as the total hostility to any foreign influence has laid the foundation for a popular resistance to any intervention from outside of north Korea, to include Koreans from the South. An analysis of Buzo's will show that a defeated nKPA and the people may fight to the death or live to fight another day and in either case the result will be irregular threats against whatever outside force intervenes to attempt to stabilize the chaos that will follow wartime defeat or regime collapse.

Although the north Korea people are suffering horrifically from living under the harsh conditions of the past 60 years and since the mid 1990's after the fall of the Soviet Union and the loss of economic aid it provided, because of the indoctrination and mindset of the people, it does not necessarily translate that the people will welcome the collapse of the regime and reunification of the peninsula. For the past 60 years the people have been so thorough indoctrinated that they have tremendous fear of anything outside of north Korea and combined with the guerrilla mindset, it should be assumed for the worse case that the people will resist reunification that is not brought about by the Kim Family Regime. The "guerrilla mindset" will likely be the root cause of the irregular threats that occur in and emanate from north Korea.

### **Asymmetric Threats in north Korea**

Although the current focus is on north Korea's nuclear program, it should be remembered that the north has developed a range of asymmetric threats to support its campaign plans to reunify the peninsula under its control. First and foremost it has the largest Special Operations force in the world. The Kim Family Regime has invested heavily in its SOF and they have proven very adept over the years as illustrated by the numerous infiltration operations. Much has been written about north Korean SOF, but suffice it to say given the large numbers that have been trained over the years, combined with the "guerrilla mindset" indoctrination of the population prudent planners will recognize that this is a recipe for a significant threat during conflict as well as both post-conflict operations and a post collapse situation.

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<sup>8</sup> Adrian Buzo, *The Guerrilla Dynasty: Politics and Leadership in North Korea*, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999), p. 27.

In addition to the nuclear program, other weapons of mass destruction have been under development for years and these include large stockpiles of chemical weapons as well probably some limited biological capabilities. Nuclear, chemical and biological weapons and associated material pose not only direct threats to military and civilian personnel on the Peninsula and in the region, they potential can be sold on the global arms market to the highest bidder which could very well include terrorist organizations. The regime has a track record of proliferation of military hardware and remnants of the regime will likely exploit overseas contacts as a source of funding and leverage.

In addition to weapons of mass destruction, north Korea has worked hard to develop missile delivery capabilities that it has sold to clients particularly in the Middle East. The presence of these systems in north Korea could provide an insurgency with capabilities never before seen and would push the description of the insurgency toward the hybrid warfare model that the Israelis faced in dealing with Hezbollah and has been well described by Frank Hoffman, among others.

In addition, to SOF and weapons capabilities, north Korea has developed an extensive global network to support the regime through a myriad of illicit activities which range from counterfeiting US currency to drug manufacturing and distribution to the counterfeiting of a range of goods from cigarettes to Viagra. The ability to manufacture and distribute such illicit goods provides the capability to raise funds to support an insurgency as well as a means to sell military technology as a source of income and of course that military technology could include WMD.

Analysis of the existing asymmetric threats shows that these capabilities will be well suited to insurgent operations by remnants of the regime and its military. These capabilities, if exploited, will be far more complex and dangerous than any capabilities that were present in Afghanistan and Iraq.

### **Dealing with the Worse Case: The Kim Family Regime's Legacy of Irregular Threats**

*If in taking a native den one thinks chiefly of the market that he will establish there on the morrow, one does not take it in the ordinary way.*

--Lyautey: The Colonial Role of the Army,  
Revue Des Deux Mondes, 15 February 1900<sup>9</sup>

While planning has taken place at various times over the years to allow the alliance to react to such threats as terrorism, use of WMD, humanitarian disaster and internally displaced persons/refugee flow and internal civil war two questions should be asked:

- 1) Has the alliance prepared for the worse case and the worse case being an insurgency that opposes reunification following collapse of the Kim Family regime?

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<sup>9</sup> Robert Debs Heinl, Jr, ed. Dictionary of Military and Naval Quotations, (Annapolis, MD: United States Naval Institute, 1966), 69.

2) What can and should be done prior to collapse to assist in mitigating the threats and shaping the outcome on the Peninsula?

Although the “to do list” is long, there are five immediate actions that the alliance should take to plan and prepare for the worse case.

There are five key fundamental tasks that the ROK –US alliance and the international community must do to prepare for the collapse of the Kim Family Regime. These are by no means all of them; however, focusing on these five tasks will provide the foundation needed to mitigate the effects of irregular threats and improve the conditions for successful alliance and international efforts to deal with the effects of regime collapse.

First, a decision must be made as to the end state envision for the Korean Peninsula. As stated the ROK-US alliance requires an end state that could be along these lines:

A stable, secure, peaceful, economically vibrant, non-nuclear peninsula, reunified under a liberal constitutional form of government determined by the Korean people.<sup>10</sup>

It is imperative that an end state be decided upon not only to provide focus for planners and policy makers but also to provide the foundation for an influence campaign that is critical to shaping the environment after the collapse of the regime.

Along with the establishment of the end state, a decision must be made regarding Alliance transformation and leadership of operations in north Korea. It is imperative that South Korea leads the effort in reunification and operations in the north because this will help to undermine the 60 plus years of propaganda in which the South has been portrayed as a puppet of the US. However, as evidenced by the so-called “OPCON transfer” that was originally scheduled for 2012 and was recently pushed back until 2015, the ROK military is not yet fully resourced to conduct independent operations. In addition, the reality of the OPCON transfer issue is not about solely about command and control of ROK military forces. This action is actually the dissolution of the ROK/US Combined Forces Command (CFC) which has been one of the most effective combined commands in the world since 1978. It is commanded by a US four star general with a ROK four star deputy. Rather than dissolve CFC perhaps CFC should remain in tact and the command should shift to a ROK four star general in command with a US four star deputy. In this way the ROK would be in charge of operations in the north and would still be able to exploit the expertise and full capabilities of the combined command.<sup>11</sup>

The second most important action is to execute an influence campaign focusing on the second tier leaders to maintain control of their organizations in order to prevent attack and a future insurgency. The second tier leaders are those corps, maneuver, and special operations commanders who control not only forces but also WMD capabilities. These leaders are key to maintaining control of the nKPA. In addition, an active influence campaign is necessary to

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid, Maxwell, 14.

<sup>11</sup> Bechtol, Dr. Bruce, Defiant Failed State: The North Korea Threat to International Security, Potomac Books, 2010, 165-174.

prepare the north Korean population for a post regime end state that results in a reunified Peninsula. This is the most difficult, complex and time consuming effort but one that is critical to beginning to undo the sixty plus years of political and social indoctrination that has used the Juche ideology as a de facto religion as means of social control. Additionally, this indoctrination has developed the highest levels of distrust and fear of outsiders which will make any stability operations extremely difficult and makes the population ripe to support an insurgency especially, if that insurgency continues to perpetuate the Kim Family regime myths of the legitimacy of north Korea being based on anti-Japanese partisan warfare. Following regime collapse anti-Japanese will be substituted with anti-foreigner.

Furthermore, a decision must be made to avoid the mistakes of the Iraq War. The north Korean military must be kept intact, as it is one of the very few functioning institutions and can be a critical component for maintaining internal stability as well as executing support and stabilization operations. Most importantly an intact military is one of the best methods to prevent a future insurgency. However, keeping the military intact requires a successful influence campaign to lay the foundation for influencing those commanders who can and should maintain control of their forces and work with the ROK military and civilian leadership.

Eight years after Operation Enduring Freedom began in Afghanistan, the “Afghanistan-Pakistan Hands” program was developed. This was in recognition of the importance of having planners, both military and civilian, with sufficient cultural expertise to understand the problems in the region and allow for effective plans and policies to be developed that are informed by cultural awareness and understanding. The same mistake should not be made in terms of north Korea. Existing ROK and US military and civilian north Korean experts should be brought together and dedicated to planning for north Korean collapse. An investment should be made in developing younger “north Korea-hands” to be ready to deal with the aftermath of the Kim Family Regime. A competent staff and organization of experts cannot be created rapidly after the crisis occurs. A ROK-US “north Korean- hands” program should be established immediately to develop the expertise that will be required among ROK and US military and civilian security practitioners before the crisis occurs. These north Korean Hands need to be from across the professional spectrum and assist in the development of policy and strategy as well as the development of the campaign plan to deal with collapse. They will also be able to assist in the training and readiness of the military forces and civilian agencies that will execute the operations to achieve the end state of a reunified Korea.

Lastly, an international coalition must be established to support reunification of the Peninsula. Most importantly, the ROK and the US must engage with China. Chinese actions will play a critical role in the outcome of crisis on the Peninsula in either post-conflict or post-collapse. The ROK-US alliance and China must find common ground in interests and through engagement and transparency develop plans and methods for minimizing the potential for conflict between the alliance and China.

Efforts to build an international coalition and engage with China must be undertaken prior to the crisis of regime collapse. Reunification, while the responsibility of the ROK, will require enormous resources not only in terms of manpower and material but also in terms of funding. There are numerous studies attesting to the huge costs of reunification, costs that are likely to

make German reunification pale in comparison because of the vast differences in infrastructure and standards of living between north and South. However, failure to support reunification efforts and quell an insurgency in the north will, as already stated, likely bring instability in terms of security to Northeast Asia but also have global economic impact. It is in the interest of the regional powers as well as the global economic powers to support reunification. But the effort to build this coalition must occur now even if it is done behind closed doors in order to prevent political conflict prior to the collapse of the Kim Family Regime.

In conclusion, the irregular threats that will be present on the Korean Peninsula when the Kim Family Regime collapses will be extremely complex and dangerous. While the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have been difficult, the worse case scenarios on the peninsula will be far more difficult. The threats must be understood and planners and policy makers must take an objective and realistic look at the problems that will have to be faced. While everyone may hope for a “soft landing” and peaceful reunification, the alliance and international community needs to prepare for the most likely and most dangerous outcomes. This requires active preparatory actions by the ROK-US alliance across the instruments of national power. Planning is good, but preparation is better. While the Kim Family Regime has demonstrated enormous resiliency muddling through severe internal crises since the death of Kim Il Sung in 1994, a course of action cannot be to hope that it will continue to survive. The pressures on north Korea are likely to someday cause attack or collapse, either of which will be catastrophic for the ROK, the region and international community.

A briefing that accompanies this paper can be found at the following link: <http://dl.dropbox.com/u/6891151/nK%20IW%20Threats%20Brief.pps>

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*Note: This paper will appear as a chapter in an upcoming book to be published by the Marine Corps University Foundation, edited by Dr. Bruce Bechtol.*

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