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In My View

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IN MY VIEW

NO GUN RI

Madame:


Speaking not for AP but as a secondary participant in the project, I share my colleagues’ exasperation with the persistent and willful distortions of their work on No Gun Ri by a clutch of self-interested critics, who mainly recycle each others’ opinions about a story that few of them seem ever to have actually read.

While Bateman did that much, he remains deplorably ill informed about basic journalism. His absurd claim that AP published its story knowing the information was “inconsistent or incorrect,” and reviewer Davis’s suggestion of a “free press run amok,” represent an affront to all AP staffers, for whom professional integrity is no less important than it is for military people.

AP is not a supermarket tabloid; it’s a global organization responsible to thousands of newspaper members and other subscribers. It doesn’t take sides, conduct crusades, or gratuitously smear institutions such as the U.S. military. The arduous two-year No Gun Ri project is fully described in The Bridge at No Gun Ri, a 2001 book by the same reporting team, and its basic findings were affirmed by the Army inspector general’s report in January 2001.

While Davis calls it “interesting” that Bateman made no effort to contact Korean survivors or witnesses, “appalling” might be a better word for purported “historical research” that totally ignores the victims of a mass killing. Bateman’s “translation problems” excuse is beyond lame, but it pales beside his unsupported, and truly repugnant, allegation that Korean peasants who suffered
grievously in war spent the next fifty years creating “tainted testimony” and demanding compensation out of sheer greed.

Had reviewer Davis thoroughly compared Bateman’s book with the AP stories it tries to debunk, he would have found, as we did, more than a hundred factual mistakes, irrelevancies, significant omissions, misquotations, and other failings—in sum, a sloppy mishmash that wouldn’t get past any marginally competent copy editor. Limited space permits only a few examples.

First, to support his contentions, Bateman shamelessly invents people—South Korean “guerillas” (sometimes “guerrillas”), a GI “platoon,” an “excitable” officer who “garbled” a phone message (he may have meant “excited,” but either way he could not know this). Wannabe “war hero” Edward Daily was never AP’s “main witness” but an incidental figure deep in the story and was elevated to No Gun Ri poster-boy by others—two major newspapers that showcased his melodramatic words on page 1 and a TV network that flew him to Korea for an interview. (Daily had managed for years to dupe other 7th Cavalry veterans, including Bateman, about his Korea exploits before the media ever heard of him.)

Bateman’s claims that two other ex-GIs lied about being at No Gun Ri are groundless. One man’s medical records show he remained on duty despite a minor wound, and in the other case, Bateman misread a morning-report entry of “eff” (effective date) as “off.”

Bateman conjures up imaginary “armed men” hiding among refugees and attributes the finding of two weapons—a Japanese rifle and a Soviet-type submachine gun—to a “nearby platoon” of GIs making a “sweep of the refugees” to create what he strangely calls “some of the only documentary evidence” of an enemy presence at No Gun Ri. In fact, neither Korean survivors nor U.S. unit records confirmed any local guerrillas (or “northern infiltrators”) at No Gun Ri. As for the weapons, the sketchy report does not say who found them, when, where (“nearby” with respect to . . . what?), or even whether they were in firing condition. Amazingly for a historian, Bateman makes no attempt to corroborate these details or the actual existence of his mystery “platoon” but leaves readers to puzzle over the rest of his “documentary evidence.”

Bateman all but ignores AP’s discovery in U.S. archives of numerous high-level orders to stop civilian movements at all costs in the war’s early months, and he never mentions the key fact that a 7th Cavalry regimental log that would establish whether such orders were received at No Gun Ri is inexplicably missing from government archives.

While AP never said how many died at No Gun Ri but cited various U.S. and Korean estimates ranging from under a hundred to four hundred, Bateman uses tortured reasoning—but no evidence—to settle on “around 25,” including “at least two guerrillas,” although none were identified.
Rather than accept that similar memories might simply reflect shared experience at No Gun Ri, Bateman advances another unsubstantiated theory of Korean survivors “contaminating” each other’s minds with recollections either false or a “montage” of other, unrelated events. Nor, apparently, does it occur to him that former soldiers might conveniently forget or even lie about an incident that conceivably could return to haunt them legally after fifty years.

Some of Bateman’s assertions are outrageous, as when he says AP “inflated the amount of research” it did. The AP team used computer-assisted reporting techniques, and a staff researcher spent months filing Freedom of Information requests, exploring official archives, and tracking down sources in several states. Some assertions are fantasy, as when he transforms a battalion commander’s report of “a vehicle, possibly a tank,” into “a section of tanks [that] blasted through” his position. Some are just silly, as when he chides AP for claiming to have interviewed “more than 24 generals”—actually a college reporter’s mistake.

Finally, questioning deaths at No Gun Ri by saying that aerial photos didn’t show bodies or graves, he ignores villagers’ statements that bodies collected outside the railroad tunnel were stacked inside, covered with dirt, and buried later. Nor does he mention annual memorials in local villages, something he could have witnessed if he had ever gone there.

RICHARD PYLE

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