

Commentary: With North Korea, there's danger of losing a war by winning

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North Korea has warned of a war with the United States and the capitalist “puppet” state of South Korea. President Donald Trump has been bellicose in tweets about North Korea’s missile tests and nuclear arsenal and has spoken of a surgical strike against its bases.

Meanwhile U.S. Defense Secretary James Mattis warns that North Korea’s response would lead to “probably the worst kind of fighting in most people’s lifetimes.”

As we suffer through the intense heat of another Austin Saharan summer, how are we as citizens to make sense of all this? How can we really feel what the worst combat will be? We can start by reading “The Useless Servants,” acclaimed native Texan writer Rolando Hinojosa’s remarkable diarylike account of his service as an artillery soldier in Korea in the 1950s. If you do, you will feel the chill and the dread of what even World War II veterans among Hinojosa’s fellow soldiers agreed was the worst kind of fighting in their experiences.

From October 1950 through March 1951, Hinojosa offers many variations on a single theme: Korea is a deadly cold and miserable place to wage war. “Cold, cold days and night.” “Woke up next to guns. Sheet of ice over blankets; gun tubes look like big olive-green

popsicles.” “Very cold.” “This wind will cut your soul. It’s a tough place and time for a fight.” “These are Siberian winds up here and everything freezes.” “North Korea is an icebox.” That’s just late October to mid-November. True winter is still a way off.

Do we really want to wage any kind of war there? At some point, we will have to put boots on the ground — and our soldiers will be wearing them. Do national and international security considerations override concerns about our soldiers and any human beings on the Korean peninsula?

We should think rationally about what war with North Korea would look like. Once Kim Jung Un gets intercontinental ballistic missiles capable of reaching Alaska and Washington State, he is ruthless and reckless enough to start a war — even though it would mean the destruction of his own government.

As bad as that prospect is, we think there is a worse one for the United States: following against North Korea the policy of preventive war that we used against Iraq in 2003. Inflicting enough damage on North Korea to neutralize its army would cause the collapse of its economic and social structure. Available food and health care would go to the military, leaving millions of starving, homeless North Koreans to flee into China and South Korea. Neither country would be able to handle the influx of refugees — and each would resent the United States for causing the disaster. The refugees would probably not be able to return to their homes for years.

The world at large would likely blame the catastrophe on the United States. The United States could not expect sympathy or aid from other countries, since it has been following a policy of narrow self-interest at least since January. Even assuming military success, we would be morally bound to pay for the needed aid of the refugees we created — and also to rebuild the infrastructure of North Korea to a quality better than prewar. A devastated North Korea would be the sympathetic victim. North Korea would win by losing.

How might such a disastrous situation occur? If Kim's inflammatory rhetoric continues to be met with like rhetoric from Trump — and Kim's intercontinental ballistic missiles create fear in us as citizens, especially Trump's loyal supporters — Trump may think he has a mandate to attack first. The canny Kim could lure the United States to attack through saber-rattling. Trump would not be the first president whose proud self-image led him to a bad decision.

If the scenario just sketched seems unlikely, there is a kind of precedent: In the 1950s, the Duchy of Grand Fenwick, near bankruptcy, attacked the U.S., lost the war, and was financially compensated. It is all set forth in "The Mouse that Roared" by Leonard Wibberley. To paraphrase Karl Marx, history repeats itself — the first time as fiction, the second time as tragedy.