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**Mr. Wilson Goes to Pyongyang**

A congressman's trip to North Korea.

**O**n his first day in North Korea last month, Joe Wilson spotted a billboard bearing an astonishing image. "We were traveling on a bus in Pyongyang, and our guide tried to call our attention to something on the other side of the street," says the Republican congressman from South Carolina. "So I missed it." On a subsequent excursion, Wilson had his digital camera ready to go. "I sat in the front of the bus waiting like a birdwatcher for my chance." Zipping by the billboard at 40 mph, he snapped this picture.



Joe Wilson was one of six members of Congress making a rare visit to North Korea, a charter member of the "axis of evil." At a meeting with top diplomats, including foreign minister Paek Nam Soon, the North Koreans complained to Wilson and his colleagues about that famous label. "That's when Rep. Curt Weldon spoke up," says Wilson. "He told them that the difference between North Korea and the United States is that in Washington, D.C., we don't have billboards of Americans spearing North Koreans with bayonets."

For Wilson, the three-day visit to Pyongyang from May 30 to June 1 was a learning experience. "I expected to see motor-scooters on the streets and bikes everywhere," he says. "But I didn't see a single motor-scooter and noticed only a few bikes." Even more surprising were the roads. "We would travel on these six or eight lane boulevards with almost no cars on them. In Seoul, we saw more cars in a glance than we saw during three whole days in Pyongyang." There were some streetlights, but they weren't working.

From his first moments in North Korea, the congressman knew he was going to glimpse a

portrait of economic failure, even as his group's handlers led him around on a propaganda tour. "Our orientation meeting at the airport was in a room without lights, indicating the reports of electrical shortages were correct," he says.

One of his first visits was to a school for gifted children. "The classrooms had no electricity, except to power the computers," says Wilson. Despite all the scarcity, there was no shortage of pictures of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il. They hung from a wall in each room.

"Everywhere we went, we saw huge monuments of failure — evidence that North Korea's economy is not functioning," he says. These sights included an abandoned factory, a vacant amusement park, and a massive hotel in downtown Pyongyang that's supposed to be able to hold thousands of people but in fact is empty. Wilson's handlers didn't point out any of these places to the American entourage, but they were plainly visible to anybody who kept his eyes open.

There were little monuments of failure as well. "I was astonished not to see a single newspaper being sold, distributed, carried, read, posted, or left in view," says Wilson. "I went to East Germany and the Soviet Union before the collapse of Communism. Newspapers were everywhere. They were propaganda newspapers run by the state, but they were everywhere. In North Korea, they are nowhere."

Another image struck him. On Sunday morning, the congressmen attended a service at a non-denominational church in Pyongyang — apparently the only church in the whole country. "A lot of things didn't seem right," says Wilson. "The church was maybe two-thirds full, but the choir was full. Also, the choir was one of the best I've ever heard. I don't want to accuse anybody, but I thought they might be actors."

Something else bothered him, too. "I go to the First Presbyterian Church in Columbia, South Carolina. People bring their Bibles. When services let out, everybody gathers outside to mingle and socialize. At the church in Pyongyang, nobody carried Bibles in or out and everyone left in a hurry. Maybe it's their culture, but it sure was a strange experience."

The bipartisan trip was arranged by Rep. Weldon, a Pennsylvania Republican. Joining Smith and Weldon were Eliot Engel of New York, Jeff Miller of Florida, Solomon Ortiz of Texas, and Silvestre Reyes of Texas.

"The visit reaffirmed much of what I was already thinking about North Korea," says Wilson. "You would think people couldn't be so controlled, and then you see them controlled in every way imaginable."

Wilson says he won't forget the experience. In case his memory fades, a souvenir now sits in his office on Capitol Hill: a bronze elephant. "A wanted to bring home a symbol of the Republican party from North Korea," he says with a smile. "I like the unexpected."

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