

WORLD

This Former US General Says The Only Way Forward With North Korea Is To Talk About The War

Former Air Force Lt. Gen. Dan “Fig” Leaf says he has the ingredient for lasting peace with North Korea — and everyone’s ignoring it.



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Courtesy of Dan Leaf

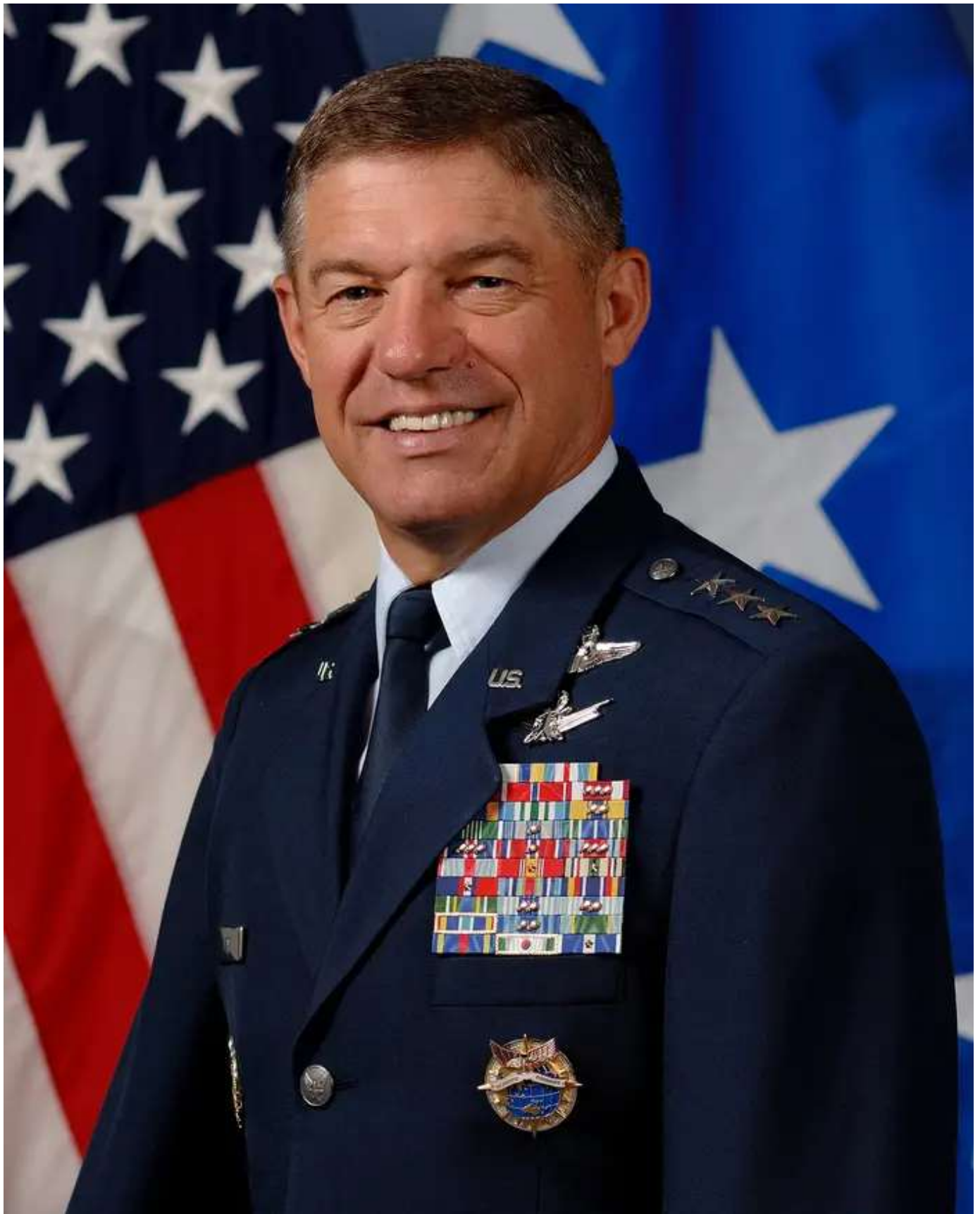
Dan Leaf has two obsessions — riding Harleys and talking about peace with North Korea.

Both are increasingly frustrating for the retired three-star Air Force general and former number two at US Pacific Command (PACOM), who goes by "Fig" after his call sign from his days flying F-16s as a combat pilot.

Living on the island of Oahu, far from the endless stretches of road on the mainland, he can only drive his motorcycles "clockwise and counter-clockwise." And when it comes to North Korea, everyone — military officials, diplomats, analysts, people on the street — only wants to talk about nuclear weapons, as if eliminating them will erase the long shadow cast by the brutal, forgotten war that created the intense hostility between the countries in the first place.

Leaf knows "reconciliation" isn't a sexy term — and one that few people expect from a weathered general with a booming voice, who flew missions over Serbia and Kosovo, Iraq and Kuwait, before becoming a top official at US Air Force Space Command and PACOM, which oversees all military operations in a region spanning almost half the globe.

But he talks about it to everyone who will listen, when he's not running his conflict resolution and security consulting firm in Honolulu. He brings it up to strangers sitting next to him on airplanes and works it into speeches and op-eds. And he thinks without a formal process for Americans and North Koreans to talk about the war and mend fences between the two countries, any eventual summit between President Donald Trump and North Korea's Kim Jong Un — a still uncertain prospect even after Trump abruptly said on Friday that the June 12 meeting was back on after the US canceled it last week — won't lead to a lasting resolution.



Lt. Gen. Dan "Fig" Leaf as deputy commander of US Pacific Command.

US Air Force

“I guess I’m an unlikely peacenik,” he told BuzzFeed News in a phone interview last week, the first of several conversations for this article.

When it comes to North Korea, Leaf believes that the US, whose military openly admitted that they bombed “everything that moved in North Korea, every brick

standing on top of another,” and killed up to 20% of the population, has not dealt with the war or its own 36,000 dead the way it has in other conflicts.

The fighting from 1950 to 1953 led to the permanent partition of North and South Korea, originally proposed by the US as a way to maintain its influence on the peninsula, which bordered Russia. But while an armistice stopped the active fighting, the Korean War never formally ended. Tens of thousands of US troops remain in between the Koreas, a situation that North Korea finds untenable and South Korea has long seen as necessary for its survival.

Despite the ongoing troop presence, the American public was all too eager to forget the conflict when it was over. Meanwhile, North Korea’s leaders built their regime on just the opposite, inserting anti-US propaganda into every level of society.


“North Koreans think about the war every day and it’s a very big part of the North Korean worldview, especially of the US,” said Charles Armstrong, a historian and professor of Korean studies at Columbia University.

As deputy commander of PACOM from 2005 to 2008, Leaf became fascinated with how, in contrast, after a period of severed ties, US and Vietnamese soldiers who had shot at each other during the Vietnam War developed a working relationship.

North Korea is “an unprecedented situation in American history — some of the strongest ties the US has are with former enemies such as Great Britain, Germany, Japan, and even Vietnam,” said Leaf, who won the Oslo Forum 2017 Peacemaker Prize for a paper he wrote on the issue. “Now the US wants to go, declare victory, and walk away — but as long as there’s no real reconciliation process, it won’t last.”

North and South Korea have vowed to negotiate a formal end to the Korean War, but the US needs to work on reconciling its own underlying issues because “the dangers of 2018 go far beyond the issues of 1953,” he said.

In Leaf’s view, the problem both sides have is in seeing each other as real people, which allows Trump and Kim to revert to the kind of vitriol and insult-hurling that would be unthinkable with any other country,

But  ing that is “really difficult to do when both countries have psychologically established each other as sort of the quintessence of evil,” Leaf said.



Leaf, then-commander of the US Air Force 20th Fighter Wing, at Incirlik Air Base in Turkey in 1998.

Courtesy of Dan Leaf

Leaf has been working with NGOs and other interested groups on a workshop he hopes to put together by the end of the summer. It will bring together a group he calls his “co-conspirators” — a diverse set of Americans who share his views and want a real solution to the North Korea crisis — that he’s met in the course of traveling, speaking at panels, and writing opinion pieces about the issue.

One of them is Robert Bleu, the president of True World Group, a seafood distributor with 1,500 employees in seven countries who also owns sushi restaurants and small Asian markets in the US. They met at a recent business forum in Seattle that included a panel on North Korean sanctions with policy analysts and former State Department and defense officials, including Leaf.

The seafood industry cares because “we can’t legally buy fish cut by North Koreans,” which proves complicated to untangle given that many of them work for Chinese fish plants, Bleu told BuzzFeed News.

Bu [↑] Leaf moved on from sanctions and brought up the history of US enemies becoming allies after wars, and the need to create a dialogue, Bleu found himself

nodding along.

“I think we can make a really big difference in how this thing turns out,” Bleu said, referring to people like himself, for whom North Korea is not so remote. With a business focused on East Asia, he has a lot of Korean team members, including a number from North Korea.

Bleu has gotten to know many of them and heard their stories. One that really stuck with him was the memories of the North Korean wife of the sales manager of one his companies. She fled to South Korea as a small child, and remembered her mother crawling across the border with her, a hand pressed to her mouth because “if she made any noise they thought she would be killed.”


“It’s human beings on each side, and I think many Americans are not thinking about it that way,” Bleu said.

Leaf says his old military buddies, some of whom are still on active duty, will often roll their eyes when he first brings up “reconciliation” and “humanization.” But he is adamant that, like a military operation, this is serious business — there needs to be a real plan, a formal process with results.

“This is not a Pollyanna view, it’s a practical view,” Leaf said. “Military people with real combat experience tend to be quite receptive to this notion because we understand the nature of conflict.”

“This is not a Pollyanna view, it’s a practical view.”

If the summit still happens on June 12 in Singapore, which Trump on Friday said was back on, Trump and Kim will have to stick to their talking points. But the two countries — or more importantly, their citizens — coming to terms with each other can be a parallel track that avoids getting tangled in some of the other issues.

“Yes it’s the most important issue, but denuclearization is an outcome,” said Leaf, who served as vice commander of Air Force Space Command and has long been pushing for the Defense Department to upgrade Hawaii’s missile defenses to protect ag  North Korean missiles. “[It’s] our most important and immediate goal, but it

won't happen without any real progress towards US and North Korean reconciliation.”

The official negotiations are more constrained, with US officials under pressure to address North Korea's human rights abuses. Human rights groups have denounced the hype over "peace talks" that they say legitimize a regime that has brutally oppressed its people, sentenced tens of thousands to prison camps, and continued to pour its resources into its nuclear weapons program during times of mass famine.

But that's why the reconciliation building process has to start between private citizens and nongovernment actors, said Leaf.

That kind of dialogue and exposure could do more to create internal pressure for the Kim regime than official representatives of the US government “scolding them for human rights, [which] will have no effect,” said Armstrong, the Columbia University historian.

“If we really want to address the issue of human rights in North Korea we'd give people a greater understanding of the outside world that can lead to change,” including the kind of interaction with Americans that Leaf is talking about, Armstrong said. “This is a pretty awful regime but it's still the government of a country of 25 million human beings who have their own thoughts.”



Leaf discusses pilot training with staff instructors during a visit to the Vietnamese air force academy at Nha Trang Air Base.

US Air Force

Leaf says the most realistic, achievable goal that could come out of an official summit would be establishing a permanent diplomatic presence in each country — not formal diplomatic recognition, but some kind of liaison in Pyongyang and Washington.

As for his back-channel reconciliation efforts, he envisions a series of meetings where each side begins by expressing their perspective of the other. Then a series of gatherings, a formal document, and “a practical path” to reconciliation — maybe with Vietnam as an example.

On his bookshelf, Leaf has a Vietnamese history of the war that he is waiting to have translated into English. Despite the long, bitter war and two decades of severed ties, Vietnam is now one of the most pro-US countries in Southeast Asia. That didn’t just happen, Leaf says, it took work.



When he was deputy commander of PACOM in 2006, meetings with their Vietnamese military counterparts required careful orchestration. They would recognize each other's distinguished combat record — even when it meant that the person across from them had shot down several US warplanes.


“Thank you, but I'm here to talk about the future, not the past,” People's Air Force of Vietnam Lt. Gen. Nguyen Duc Soat, a one-time fighter pilot ace, told Leaf during a 2006 visit, he remembered.

However, that attitude was often the exception, not the rule, when it came to smoothing military-to-military relations. Initially, things were tense between the two countries' representatives. One senior Vietnamese officer in particular was notoriously difficult to work with for the Americans. In one exchange at a dinner, tempers flared and almost caused a scene when Leaf wouldn't give him a definitive answer on what the US planned if China became more aggressive in the South China Sea.

“At this point I got heated too, and he is spitting, his veins are popping, and he grabs my knee,” Leaf said. “I told the interpreter to repeat this word for word — if we had these plans we sure as fuck wouldn't tell you what they are.”

Later that night, the Vietnamese official had a massive heart attack that nearly killed him. With the rest of his team having to go on to Washington to meet with then-secretary of defense Donald Rumsfeld, he was left alone. PACOM got him a 24/7 interpreter so he would be able to communicate. US military officials visited to check in and talk. When they found out that his main concern was that the health care costs of his emergency surgery would bankrupt his family, they negotiated for the State Department to pay the medical bills, and sent him back home in a medevac helicopter.

That Vietnamese officer, who the US officials had privately nicknamed with a term Leaf asked BuzzFeed News not to print, became one of the biggest advocates for US-Vietnam relations, Leaf says. And Soat, the fighter pilot who met with US Vietnam veterans and called his former enemies his brothers, became “one of my favorite guys in the world,” he said.

“A  Orange, unexploded ordnance, the war crimes committed — all of this had to be addressed,” Leaf said. “It was in fits and starts, but you moved forward. With North

Korea too, it's going to take 20 to 40 years of hard work. It's not going to happen rapidly, but it will stop us from constantly backsliding into the same dehumanizing rhetoric, and the same old shit."

"Killing people leaves a mark. I've done it. To me, it's not philosophical. You gotta do the hard work of dealing with it afterwards."


Of course, North Korea is not Vietnam. Evans Revere, a former senior diplomat who dealt with North Korea under former president George W. Bush, pointed to the Kim regime's nuclear weapons, which it has threatened to use against the US, and its goal is to unite the Korean Peninsula under its rule.

"I don't see how a Track II reconciliation process helps resolve any of those challenges," he told BuzzFeed News.

The process also needs the cooperation of South Korea and Japan — the former seemingly ready to move much faster than the US toward a peace deal, the latter desperately trying to pull on the reins.

"I think reconciliation dialogue is helpful to the healing process, but first you need a decision to heal and a willingness to not allow the past to overcome the future," Ralph Cossa, president of Hawaii-based Pacific Forum and a former special assistant to PACOM, told BuzzFeed News in an email. "Depending on the outcome of the Kim-Trump Summit, this could be a useful next step and a way that Track II could assist the official effort, assuming both sides are open to this sort of discussion."

Leaf believes they are. With Trump and Kim officials in a frenzy of planning and negotiations ahead of a potential meeting between the two leaders, he says he will continue to focus on pushing for a frank dialogue about the war that could do more to shed decades of bitterness and suspicion.

When people ask him whether anyone is surprised to see a former fighter pilot with such a long career in the US military talking about reconciling with North Korea, Leaf co  rs, "Why wouldn't I be?"

“I see it as a calling. I’ve seen war. I’ve been in on the start, and I know how they finish or don’t finish,” he said. “It’s a serious moral business — killing people leaves a mark. I’ve done it. To me, it’s not philosophical. You gotta do the hard work of dealing with it afterwards.”

Summit or no summit, Leaf hopes the recent breakthrough when it comes to communicating with North Korea will mean an opening for the reconciliation process.

And then he can get to his other lifelong goal — riding his Harley down the coast of Vietnam. •



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