DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

for Robert Egan’s *Eating with the Enemy*

Modern Korea/Pacific Lutheran University

J-Term 2012

Professor Cathcart

Key characters:

**Robert Egan**

DPRK Counselor **Han Song Ryol**

1. Talk a little bit about Egan’s background and personality. In what ways would he, with his passion for international exchanges, fit in at our university? On the other hand, does someone who “acts first, plans later, then sees what happens,” or, as Egan describes himself, a person with an “enjoyment for things that spin out of control” fit in at a purposefully staid private college?

2. Discuss his view of U.S. intelligence and diplomacy toward the DPRK. (On page 76, for instance, he writes of North Korea: “How can they be a[n] [intelligence] black hole? They’re on 72nd St.!”). In what ways is his view overly simplistic? In what ways is he supremely realistic?

3. Talk about the role of “sports diplomacy” in this text. Is it just comical that the New York Giants and New Jersey Nets play a role in this book, or can such institutions be useful instruments of “soft power” in coercing North Korea to join the world community?

4. Discuss the level of public knowledge of North Korea in the United States. Is Egan correct in implying that, in so many words, “No one really knows anything about North Korea or has a good reason to hate them, so why not have diplomatic relations?”

The salient referential anecdote: At a basketball game in New Jersey, Robert Egan describes the advantages of the DPRK being a *tabula rasa* or blank slate to most Americans. The announcer says: “Let’s give a warm New Jersey welcome to our friends from the U.N. -- the representatives from the DPRK!” (p. 46-47). Egan says: “It was obvious most of the fans in East Rutherford couldn’t have told you (or cared) whether DPRK stood for an unpredictable nuclear-armed country or a small-town charity organization.”

5. On page 279, on a trip to the U.S., the North Korean women’s soccer team goes on a shopping extravaganza at Walmart. Later, however, the DPRK team goalie collects all of the TV cables in the hotel so that her players can’t watch television. How do these two actions symbolize the contradictions of North Korea’s emergence into the world, or interactions with the outside? Does it seem to you that no matter how much diplomacy we do with North Korea, they are going to go their own way irrespective?

6. When Egan has Counsellor Han over to his house for a party, why does the restaurateur describe how music selection was of such paramount importance (p. 66)? Why, especially in the case of the DPRK, is it so hard to get it right and play something “neutral”?

7. How does the Korean War and conflict on the DMZ serve as a recurrent shadow in this text? In what ways does Egan’s background with POW issues make him both a “good fit” as a citizen diplomat but also a volatile player? Discuss the Korean War museum in Pyongyang and what happens there.

8. Discuss Egan’s first trip to Pyongyang. Although he is often on the verge of insulting his hosts – a girl with a pin has “commie pout” (p. 74), Egan says “pretend it’s Jesus” as he bows to Kim Il Sung’s statue (p. 79) and asserts that “Kimchee is for sissies,” (p. 81) -- somehow he helps to negotiate a DPRK presence at the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta, Georgia. What about that?

9. The North Koreans take Egan sufficiently seriously as an emissary that they put him on a military train he rides to a nuclear weapons site over 30 hours from Pyongyang. What is his stance on the North Korean nuclear issue? What does it tell you about the state of affairs that the DPRK is using a restaurant owner from Hackensack to deliver such important messages to Washington?

10. What does Egan think about North Korea’s inclusion in the “Axis of Evil” in 2002 (p. 243)? What is the impact, do you think, of the Iraq war on North Korean views of the world? (Egan watches the bombing of Baghdad on television with Counsellor Han on p. 270-71). Then, surveying the post-9/11 worldview on page 245, Egan writes the following:

“We could have worked together to fight terrorism,” I said. “It would have completely changed our relationship. It’s like a couple that has great sex after an argument, you know what I’m saying?”

Vice Minister Kim smiled. “You do?” I asked. “Good. Because that’s like us. Or it could be. Your country and my country, we always fight, but we never get around to the great sex.”

The colorful language aside, what is Egan talking about? Was it ever really possible during the Bush administration for North Korea to work with the United States? Why, for example, could the KPA not send troops to help with the mission in Afghanistan?

11. What did this text teach you about negotiating with North Koreans? Do you ever see yourself “eating with the enemy”?