
the press, Congress, and most of the public, ignored the crucial differences between Vietnam and Korea. "Controlled escalation" theories so popular in universities could not be applied successfully in Southeast Asia, for the circumstances were strikingly divergent. The Vietnam War in 1961–65 was not a formal military confrontation launched by an invasion across a recognized border, confined to a peninsula, fought by organized armies, and supported by coherent populations on two clearly distinguishable sides. In Korea, a limited military success was possible. In Vietnam, it was not.



THE KOREAN WAR AND AMERICAN SOCIETY

by John E. Wiltz

In the week before the news flashed around the world that Communist tanks had crashed across the 38th Parallel in Korea, nothing seemed more remote from the minds of the people of the United States than the prospect that within a fortnight tens of thousands of their countrymen might be committed to bloody combat on a rugged peninsula in East Asia.

Brewers were worried about a decline in the consumption of beer, but the national economy in the week of June 18–25, 1950, was nearing the end of its most prosperous six-month period since the Second World War. Indeed, consumers were buying so many automobiles and television sets—largely on credit, a source of concern to Edwin G. Nourse, the former chairman of the Council of Economic Advisers—that the food and clothing industries were preparing a campaign to lure people away from auto and TV showrooms by reducing prices. Thomas E. Dewey announced that he would not run for a third term as governor of New York (a decision he would reverse less than three months later); Senator Joseph R. McCarthy (R.-Wis.) sought to explain a

payment of \$10,000 received from a prefabricated housing manufacturer for an article on housing he had written in 1948 while serving as vice chairman of the Joint Congressional Committee on Housing.

For the 33rd President of the Republic, the week before the Communist onslaught in Korea was most satisfying. Beneath a headline proclaiming, "The Sun Shines on Harry Again," *Newsweek* declared: "Just in case there was anyone who had forgotten November 1948, Harry S. Truman proved anew last week that it's always too early to count him out. No matter how bad a beating he's taking, he keeps coming back for more, boring in. And he doesn't seem to care how many of the early rounds he loses. In politics it's the last one that counts." Overcoming the conservative coalition of northern Republicans and southern Democrats on Capitol Hill, the President had secured an extension of rent controls and a displaced persons act, making it possible for additional refugees from communism to enter the country, and he seemed on the verge of winning passage of new social security legislation increasing benefits.

Life After Death

Elsewhere, 51-year-old Gloria Swanson continued to move about the country as an advance agent for her much-publicized "comeback" film, *Sunset Boulevard*, and the Cole Brothers Circus, featuring William Boyd (better known to legions of movie fans as Hopalong Cassidy), was preparing for a five-day appearance at New York's Yankee Stadium. A survey released by the *Christian Herald* disclosed that church membership had soared to an all-time high—81,862,328—and that 54 percent of the populace belonged to churches compared with 20 percent in 1880 and 35 percent in 1900. Finally, *Argosy* magazine reported the results of a poll in which 51 newspaper editors were asked to describe the news their readers would most like to see. Word that the Stalinist dictatorship had collapsed and that war had been permanently abolished, so the editors surmised, were the stories that would most gladden Americans. After that, they thought, Americans would like most to read that scientists had

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KOREA: A CHRONOLOGY

- 1945 U.S. and U.S.S.R. each occupy one half of Korea in accordance with Yalta and Potsdam agreements.
- 1947 *March* Announcement of Truman Doctrine of resistance to Soviet expansionism; Greece and Turkey get substantial U.S. aid. *June* Secretary of State George C. Marshall calls for a European Recovery Program (the "Marshall Plan").
- 1948 *February* Communists take power in Czechoslovakia. *July* Communists' Berlin blockade and U.S. airlift begin. *November* Truman re-elected in upset; the Democrats win both houses of Congress.
- 1949 *April* NATO treaties ratified by Senate. *June* Last U.S. occupation troops withdrawn from Korea.
- 1950 *January* Alger Hiss convicted of perjury in connection with his prewar membership in the Communist Party; Secretary of State Dean Acheson delivers speech omitting Korea from U.S. interests in Asia. *June* North Koreans invade South. *September* Congress, over Truman's veto, passes the McCarran Act requiring registration of Communists and "front organizations"; Inchon landings; rapid UN advance into North Korea. *October* Gen. MacArthur and Truman meet on Wake Island. *November-December* Chinese intervene in Korea; UN forces retreat; U.S. Marines fight through encirclement from Chosin Reservoir to the sea; Truman declares national emergency; Office of Defense Mobilization established.
- 1951 *January* Wage and price controls applied; Sen. Robert A. Taft (R.-Ohio) opens major foreign policy debate with harsh attack on administration policies. *April* Truman fires Gen. MacArthur. Gen. Matthew Ridgway takes command of counterattacking UN forces. *June* Draft extended; age limit lowered to 18½. *July* Truce talks begin.
- 1952 *March* Truman announces he will not run for re-election. *April* President orders government seizure of steel industry to prevent strike, but Supreme Court rules his action unconstitutional. *July* Steel strike ends after 54 days. *October* G.O.P. candidate Dwight Eisenhower says, "I will go to Korea." *November* With 55 percent of vote, Eisenhower elected President over Democrat Adlai Stevenson; G.O.P. also wins narrow congressional majorities.
- 1953 *February* President Eisenhower ends wage and price controls. *July* Armistice signed at Panmunjom.

found a cure for cancer, that Jesus of Nazareth had returned to earth, and that science had proved the existence of life after death.

Sugar and Nylons

“The news hit the United States like lightning out of a clear sky.” So went one report of the initial response of Americans when, on Sunday afternoon, June 25, 1950, broadcasters interrupted regular radio programs—in much the same way as they had done on an epochal Sunday afternoon eight and a half years before—to report the first fragmentary dispatches disclosing that the Communists had invaded South Korea. For tens of millions of Americans whose memories reached back over the previous two decades, the dispatches brought forth visions of doomsday. Clearly the Soviets, who, in the view of most Americans (70 percent according to a Gallup poll taken six months before), were conniving to become “the ruling power of the world,” were behind the North Korean attack. Just as the Japanese and the Italians and the Germans had begun their play for world conquest during the 1930s by armed aggression in Manchuria and Ethiopia and Czechoslovakia, so the Soviets were making their play in Korea.

Most of the citizenry grimly approved when President Truman, enjoying a quiet weekend in Independence, Missouri, rushed back to Washington and over the next few days committed American air and naval units and then Army troops to combat in Korea. Columnists Joseph and Stewart Alsop seemed to catch the popular mood: “The whole momentous meaning of President Truman’s decision to meet force with force in Korea can only be grasped in the light of what would surely have happened if he had decided otherwise. For there can be no doubt that the aggression in Korea was planned as only the first of a whole series of demonstrations of Russian strength and Western weakness, designed to lead to the crumbling of the Western will to resist.”

About the only discordant notes came from Senator Robert A. Taft (R.-Ohio), the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, and the American Communist Party. Taft complained that Truman had violated the Constitution by sending American forces into combat without consent of Congress; the *Tribune* charged that the Communist aggression in Korea was an inevitable consequence of a decade of woolly-headed and even treasonous appeasement of the Soviets by the Democrats; and at a rally in Madison Square Garden in New York, some 9,000 Communist Party members

and friends demanded "hands off Korea."

Such broadsides stirred hardly a ripple of interest. The Republic was caught up in a crisis variously called a war, a conflict, and a police action; in the view of 57 percent of the populace, so a Gallup poll revealed, the United States was engaged in the opening round of World War III. In such circumstances a patriotic citizen rallied around the flag—and also looked out for himself.

Fearing that a new period of shortages might be at hand, Americans went on a buying orgy. A special object of their attention was sugar, and sales skyrocketed. A New York housewife who had placed two large orders for sugar in a week explained, "I'm trying to get some before the hoarders buy it all," and in Plainfield, New Jersey, shoppers snatched up six tons of sugar from a single grocery store in four hours. Shortening, canned goods, soaps, and cleaning agents also disappeared from grocery shelves. Scare buyers meanwhile were zeroing in on furniture, bedding, linens, towels, deep freezers, television sets, refrigerators, tires, nylon hosiery, and razor blades; inevitably, scores of thousands of Americans made their way to automobile dealers.

Several department stores took out full-page advertisements in newspapers to appeal to customers to refrain from scare buying. Macy's in New York moralized: "Every decent American should look on hoarding with revulsion! It always plays squarely into the hands of our enemies." But to little avail. Only when fears of an expanded war diminished and hoarders found themselves short of money did the buying binge of 1950 run out of steam.

While scare buyers were making their own special preparations against the possibility that the affair in Korea might escalate into a global crisis, the Truman administration was making preparations of a different sort. Foremost, it was setting in motion a dramatic expansion of the national defense establishment.

Cheering for Taxes

The first action came in the last days of June 1950, at the same time that American air and naval forces were moving into the Korean combat zone. Because the statutory expiration date (June 14, 1950) of the Selective Service Act had already passed, Congress—unanimously in the Senate and with only four dissenting votes in the House of Representatives—extended selective service for a year. Congress also gave the President something he had not requested: the authority to call to active duty,



"Candidate for a back seat" was the title of this July 1950 Christian Science Monitor cartoon by Carmack.

with or without their consent, units or individuals of the National Guard and other reserve components.

According to a Gallup poll taken in late August 1950, while hard-pressed United Nations forces in Korea were defending the Pusan perimeter, two-thirds of the citizens believed the United States had not erred in projecting itself into the Korean conflict. Few young men, however, felt much zeal. Or as Major General Lewis B. Hershey, director of the draft, put it, "Everyone wants out; no one wants in." Reservists and National Guardsmen who received orders to report to active duty and had served in World War II complained that it was unfair that they should be summoned in advance of younger men who never had answered a call to the colors. As for young men who were eligible for the draft, they maneuvered as best they could. Many joined the National Guard in the hope that their units would not be ordered into active service; others made sudden decisions to enroll in colleges or universities. Because most draft boards would not take men out of college, they could thus gain security from the draft at least until the following spring, by which time, they hoped, the police action in Korea would be over.

In July 1950, as the rusty selective service mechanism was beginning to turn and reservists were packing duffel bags, President Truman requested an emergency appropriation of \$10 billion for the national defense establishment and removal of the

statutory limit of 2,005,882 on the manpower of the armed forces; increased military assistance to the NATO allies and "certain other free nations whose security is vital to our own" (including Taiwan and the French in Indochina); authority to establish priorities and allocations to prevent hoarding and nonessential use of critical materials; curbs on consumer credit for commodity-market speculation; increased taxes to pay the defense bill and restrict inflation; authority to impose price controls and rationing; and authority to make federal loans and guarantees when needed to stimulate military production and stockpile strategic materials.

The response to his proposals on Capitol Hill must have startled the man in the Oval Office. Or perhaps they prompted a sly grin. Republicans as well as Democrats stood and cheered when the clerks completed the reading of his message. In the words of one observer, "Republicans were tripping over Democrats in their eagerness to give President Truman what he thought he needed to win in Korea and prepare for the next Korea, whenever or wherever it might turn out to be."

The words and directives of the President and acts of Congress triggered what the news media called "mobilization." Partial mobilization would have been a more precise term. Semantics aside, the United States was girding itself to meet the challenge in Korea—and a much larger challenge if events came to that. What if the conflict in East Asia should come to an early end? It would make no difference. Or so insisted leaders in Washington. The United States, they emphasized, was committed to a permanent build-up of its armed forces to a level of 3.2 million men and women. Never again would the country drop its guard.

A Grim Sophistication

In the end, one may say that except for those dark weeks at the end of 1950, when it appeared that the Chinese might kick UN forces off the Korean peninsula or, worse, that the combat in East Asia might escalate into World War III, the conflict in Korea from 1950 to 1953 was a frustrating but not particularly traumatic interlude in the life of the people of the United States. About 34,000 Americans died in battle during the 37 months of fighting in Korea—less than a fourth as many as died on the nation's streets and highways during the same period.* Thus, the agony of armed conflict directly touched only a fraction of

* About 46,500 Americans died in combat in Vietnam, 1961-73; there were more than 10,000 additional "non-combat" deaths.—ED.

the citizenry. As for the 1.4 million young men who were tapped by their "friends and neighbors" (so stated the "Greetings" that draftees received when ordered to report to active duty) to serve in the armed forces, a majority of them never heard a shot fired in anger. Nor were more than a small percentage marked by psychological or physical scars when they returned to civilian life. On the contrary, the great majority of men who served in the armed forces from 1950 to 1953 slipped with comparative ease back into their former lifestyles. Nearly a fourth of them took advantage of Public Law 550, the Korean GI Bill of Rights enacted in 1952, to attend college or to receive vocational or job training.

Nor were Americans on the home front unsettled, as they would be a decade and a half later during the conflict in Vietnam, by antiwar students' angry demonstrations and charges that the United States was carrying on an inhumane and indefensible military campaign in East Asia. Throughout the Korean conflict, a majority of Americans remained convinced that their cause in East Asia, however frustrating, was just. And the students? Their most raucous activity came during the spring of 1952, when on campuses from Maine to California young men invaded women's residence halls in celebrated "panty raids."

The Korean conflict nonetheless left its marks on American society. On the plus side, America's participation provided a further economic stimulus and, as a consequence, the level of prosperity reached a new plateau. The MacArthur-Truman controversy of 1951 caused Americans to ponder anew the national tradition of civilian ascendancy over the military; the outcome, it is clear in retrospect, was a decided reinforcement of that tradition. Likewise, the MacArthur-Truman controversy compelled citizens to reconsider time-honored ideas about total victory in war. The result, it seems fair to say, was a certain grim sophistication in the United States about the nature and purpose of armed combat in the nuclear era.

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