



# Korea and America 1950–1978

Twenty-five years ago this summer, the guns finally fell silent in Korea, ending a bitter 37-month “limited war” that cost 34,000 American lives and engendered fierce political controversy at home. America’s Korea veterans are now well into middle age, their efforts against the Chinese and North Korean invaders seldom remembered. But they succeeded in repelling Communist aggression, and the shock of that aggression changed modern American attitudes toward national security. The war’s legacy in 1978 includes a big Pentagon budget, a continuing U.S. military commitment to South Korea, and, of late, the unfolding “Koreagate” scandal in Washington. President Carter has vowed to pull out all U.S. ground forces by 1982, while asking Congress for an initial \$800 million in compensatory arms aid for Seoul; both proposals stir debate. Here four historians—Samuel Wells, John Wiltz, Robert Griffith, Alonzo Hamby—look back at the war and what it did to America. Retired diplomat Ralph Clough examines the two Koreas today.



## THE LESSONS OF THE WAR

*by Samuel F. Wells, Jr.*

For most Americans over 40, the bitter conflict on the Korean peninsula from 1950 to 1953 evokes memories and lessons that differ from those of other wars. The Korean War had special, ironic qualities from the start. American intervention had little to do with prior U.S. plans or interests in northeast Asia;

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the future development of Korea itself was largely irrelevant to many of Washington's critical war decisions; the clash of conventional armies ended amid secret U.S. threats of atomic holocaust. The accepted "lessons of Korea" have changed with each new generation of statesmen and scholars, but Korea is still recognized as a major turning point in the evolution of America's approach to peace and war in the nuclear age.

During the winter of 1949-50, responding to the recent Communist victory in China and the Soviet detonation of an atomic device several years earlier than predicted, President Harry S. Truman and his principal advisers developed a set of austere, clearly defined international policies.

They assumed that the United States would face a protracted but peaceful war of nerves with the Soviet Union and its satellites. They saw the major dangers to the Republic as those of losing our sense of purpose, allowing our economy to stagnate, and accepting Communist penetration of Western Europe. The administration decided to step up the development of a hydrogen bomb to maintain our lead in technology, and it relied on air power to deter Soviet aggression. Added emphasis was put on the new NATO alliance in order to stem Communist political, not military, challenges in France and Italy.

#### **At the Bottom of the List**

One broad review of national security policy produced the now-famous NSC-68 memorandum, which called for vastly increased U.S. military preparedness and more aggressive action to break up the Communist bloc. But Truman refused to approve the extra spending required; he ordered his Secretary of Defense, Louis Johnson, to keep the defense budget under a low \$13.5 billion ceiling for the 1951 fiscal year.

In East Asia, the Truman administration decided to encour-

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age the tensions already evident between Moscow and the newly victorious Chinese Communists in Peking. Seeing American interests in the Korean peninsula as minimal, Washington decided to avoid any significant support for the one-man regime of Syngman Rhee in the South. The United States had already pulled its troops out of South Korea by the autumn of 1949. Only an advisory group remained behind. With regard to Soviet intentions, Major General W. E. Todd, director of the Joint Intelligence Group of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that in any ranking of Soviet targets for aggression "Korea would be at the bottom of that list. . . ."

### **The Acheson Speech**

To make all this clear to both friends and adversaries, Secretary of State Dean Acheson spelled out the administration's Asian policy before the National Press Club on January 12, 1950. He defined the United States defensive perimeter as running from the Aleutians through American-occupied Japan and the Ryukyu Islands to the Philippines—a line which, significantly, excluded Taiwan, Indochina, and South Korea.

In an often neglected section of his speech, Acheson emphasized that the recent dominance of the Soviet Union in absorbing large sections of the four northern provinces of China was "the single most significant, most important fact, in the relation of any foreign power with Asia."\* He then warned: "We must not undertake to deflect from the Russians to ourselves the righteous anger, and the wrath, and the hatred of the Chinese people which must develop. It would be folly to deflect it to ourselves."

With the North Korean invasion of June 25, 1950 (Washington time), the Truman administration quickly reversed itself. The President committed first air power, then United States troops to help defend South Korea. The American decision to intervene rested on certain assumptions. Despite their awareness of Sino-Soviet friction, Truman, Acheson, and other Washington officials believed that Joseph Stalin and the Politburo not only sought world domination but controlled all major initiatives by Communist bloc governments, including China and

\* Acheson mentioned Outer Mongolia, Inner Mongolia, Sinkiang, and Manchuria. Outer Mongolia had been Soviet-dominated since 1921 and declared its independence from China in 1945. In Manchuria, Acheson cited the Soviet-administered Far Eastern Railway. (He cited no specifics regarding Soviet behavior in Sinkiang and Inner Mongolia.) At the time Acheson spoke, Sino-Soviet negotiations were underway which resulted in the Russians relinquishing control of the Far Eastern Railway, and in a Soviet commitment to evacuate Port Arthur in Manchuria.

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North Korea. Thus, virtually all the American policymakers assumed in June 1950 that the Kremlin had approved and directed the North Korean invasion.

Today, significant evidence from Soviet and North Korean sources indicates that Stalin had endorsed a limited North Korean military push across the 38th Parallel, but had urged that it come not before November 1950. There is good reason to think that Kim Il-sung, North Korea's strong-minded dictator, launched a larger invasion than Stalin authorized and on his own initiative advanced the schedule. But it is now apparent that Truman and his senior advisers, with a Cold War mindset shared by most Americans, did not perceive such possibilities or seek to exploit any potential differences between Moscow and Pyongyang.

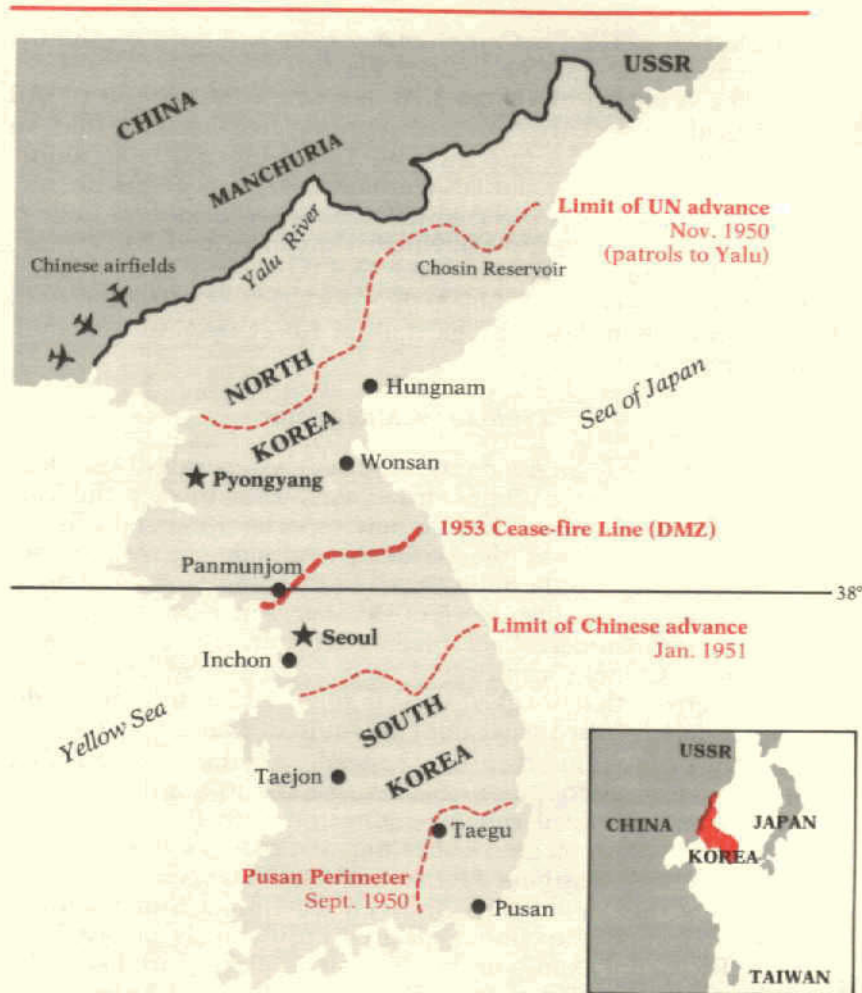
Convinced that the North Korean attack represented a coordinated Communist test of American will, Truman saw little alternative to intervention. In his memoirs, the President recalled his thoughts of how Nazi aggression, unchallenged in the 1930s, had led to World War II. "I felt certain that if South Korea was allowed to fall," he said, "Communist leaders would be emboldened to override nations closer to our own shores." Despite his inappropriate analogy to the Nazis and his simplistic view of the Communist bloc, Truman's instinctive decision to intervene was sound.

Responding quickly during a Soviet absence, the United Nations Security Council endorsed a resolution condemning the North Korean action as "a breach of peace" and on June 27 called upon all UN members to assist Syngman Rhee's Republic of Korea in repelling the invasion.

### **Turning the Tide**

The big question for the United States, given the weak state of its military forces, was how to help. With North Korean troops advancing rapidly down the peninsula, Truman directed General Douglas MacArthur in Tokyo to provide air and naval support to the South on June 27. Two days later, acting without formal congressional authorization and expecting the conflict to be brief, the President ordered American ground forces to join this UN-sponsored "police action."

Under MacArthur's leadership, American troops turned the tide. Starting from a small, hard-pressed defensive perimeter around the port of Pusan, the general executed a classic envelopment of the North Korean forces with a daring amphibious landing at Inchon—near Seoul, the capital—on September 15.



The map of Korea became a familiar newspaper feature in 1950–53 as the battleline shifted—first south toward Pusan with the North Korean invasion, then north as the U.S. Marines landed at Incheon and retook Seoul, then south again as the Chinese Communists intervened to rout the overextended UN forces, which later counterattacked. By late 1951, the front line had stabilized above the 38th Parallel as truce talks began at Panmunjom. Peak U.S. strength: 302,000 men. Fourteen other nations (including Britain, France, Turkey, Ethiopia, and Colombia) sent 40,000 troops to fight under the UN flag (and U.S. command). The war saw the introduction of U.S. jet fighters in combat, the transport helicopter, the rifleman's nylon armored vest, and Koreans to fill out the ranks of U.S. units.

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Within two weeks the Communist armies had been decimated and driven from South Korean territory.

The euphoria of victory then led MacArthur into a fateful miscalculation. Disregarding a warning from Peking that an American advance across the 38th Parallel would bring China into the war, the five-star UN commander stretched his instructions from the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who set as his military objective "the destruction of the North Korean Armed Forces." To General George C. Marshall, who had become Secretary of Defense on September 21, MacArthur declared: "Unless and until the enemy capitulates, I regard all of Korea open for our military operations."

#### Truman vs. MacArthur

Against only slight resistance, widely-separated American and South Korean columns drove northward toward the Yalu River during October. Despite new reports of massed Chinese troops poised across the border in Manchuria, MacArthur pushed ahead, and the Joint Chiefs in Washington did not order him to stop. In the last week of October, American troops first encountered Chinese "volunteers." By late November, overwhelming Chinese armies had turned the UN advance into a costly retreat that shocked Washington and led to a major domestic debate over the wisdom of "limited" wars.

The Chinese intervention changed everything. It prevented a UN victory; a costly seesaw struggle led to a military stalemate that stabilized roughly along the 38th Parallel by late 1951.\* The common desire of Peking and Moscow to sustain the North Koreans postponed for several years an open Sino-Soviet split. And intense hostility between the United States and the People's Republic of China endured until shortly before President Richard Nixon's dramatic visit to Peking in 1972. The Chinese intervention also led MacArthur, in an effort to restore his military reputation, to challenge both the limited war strategy and the authority of his Commander in Chief. But President Truman, convinced that America's principal danger came in Europe from the Soviet Union, refused to adopt MacArthur's proposals to take the war into Chinese territory. In April 1951, he brusquely fired the great hero of the Pacific war and, in the face of a popular uproar, made it stick.

The Korean War spurred a massive U.S. rearmament effort and a major shift in defense policy. Consistent with its assump-

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\* See David Douglas Duncan's photo-narrative *This Is War!* (1951) and combat historian S. L. A. Marshall's *The River and the Gauntlet* (1953) and *Pork Chop Hill* (1956).

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tions about the war's origins, the Truman administration put the lion's share of its increased defense outlays into programs directed against the Soviet Union. The budget for defense and international affairs climbed from \$17.7 billion in fiscal 1950 to \$52.6 billion in fiscal 1953. The new departures included the development of tactical nuclear weapons, the rushed construction of numerous air bases at home and overseas, the dispatch of four additional Army divisions to Europe, the rearmament of West Germany within an integrated NATO force, expanded military help for other allies, and the inauguration of a more ambitious economic aid program. A new venture into psychological warfare was launched with the creation of the inter-agency Psychological Strategy Board in 1951. Covert operations increased, including the recently disclosed CIA mail surveillance (begun in 1952) and the American-supported coups in Iran in 1953 and Guatemala the following year. Additional U.S. commitments in Asia, aimed at containing China, included a pledge to defend Taiwan and sharply increased military aid to the French fighting Ho Chi Minh in Indochina.

#### **An End to Relaxation**

As Americans have had further opportunity to learn in recent years, it is much easier to intervene in a small distant country than to withdraw. After the Chinese indicated (via the Soviets) a willingness to discuss terms, truce talks began in July 1951. But peace did not come easily. The Chinese proved to be as uncompromising at the negotiating table as on the battlefield. Differences arose over the withdrawal of all foreign troops from Korea, the compulsory repatriation of prisoners, and Syngman Rhee's efforts to prevent the signing of any agreement. As casualties continued to mount, American opinion turned increasingly against this limited war. Truman's popularity plummeted; the Republicans shrewdly chose Dwight D. Eisenhower, the hero of the European war, as their 1952 presidential candidate and ran him on a platform dedicated, in part, to ending the fighting in Korea. Early in his administration Eisenhower indicated the seriousness of his purpose by conveying through the Indian government a message to Peking: Continued deadlock at the truce talks could lead to American use of atomic weapons against China. With this incentive—possibly enhanced by the death of Stalin in March—negotiations at Panmunjom moved to the signing of an armistice in July 1953.

The most significant immediate results of the Korean War were a vast increase in American defenses against the Soviet

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Union and a marked improvement in the power and morale of the NATO alliance. American leaders took a number of lessons from the war. Despite the “no more Koreas” consensus in Washington, Congress demonstrated a new willingness to combat Communist influence wherever it appeared. Under the Eisenhower administration, United States security interests were to be maintained by increased use of covert operations, by a “New Look” military establishment with a much smaller Army, and by greater reliance (“More Bang for the Buck”) on the deterrent effect of nuclear weapons within a strategy of Massive Retaliation. Never again were U.S. defenses to be reduced to the low pre-Korea level.

The Korean experience also served to bolster the authority of the President in foreign affairs and to increase the weight of national security arguments in public debate. In dealing with a Communist opponent who disregarded the established rules of international conduct, so the thinking went, the President had to have the authority to respond quickly and in kind to undeclared wars and covert operations. Since the Communists would exploit any weakness and would seldom negotiate in good faith, the United States must remain powerful and should never negotiate except from a position of strength. The MacArthur imbroglio showed that civilian authority must (and could) be maintained over the military. The North Korean attack and the Chinese intervention showed the importance of demonstrating the American will to resist Communist aggression. And most citizens agreed that the United States had to pursue a bipartisan approach to vital questions of national security.

### **History Misread**

By 1960, the policy implications of the Korean War had changed significantly. The outcome came to be viewed as a Cold War victory, and American leaders—including the “defense intellectuals” in academe—concluded that limited war could be successfully pursued by a democracy. Democratic politicians noted that Truman had demonstrated the resolve to meet force with force under adverse circumstances; many believed that any successful future president would have to adopt the same firm posture. Generals Maxwell Taylor and James Gavin persuaded President John F. Kennedy that the United States could avoid political difficulties by training Special Forces units for guerrilla warfare and by devoting greater effort to winning and maintaining popular support at home.

But the energetic leaders of the New Frontier, along with



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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