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Author(s): Hong-Kyu Park

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American Invilvement in the Korean War

Hong-Kyu Park

Jarvis Christian College

THE KOREAN WAR (1950-53) was a unique crisis in the Cold War. The joint American-Russian occupation of Korea, a former Japanese colony, at the end of World War II was supposedly preliminary to the re-establishment of the country as a unified, independent, and democratic nation. Disagreements over how that was to be accomplished resulted in the division of Korea into communist and non-communist parts along the 38th parallel. By 1950, the Korean problem could not be separated from the Soviet-American rivalry. The outbreak of armed conflict in Korea on June 25 of that year not only forced the Americans into an unwanted military involvement but also led them to believe that any communist victory anywhere would threaten their vital interests.

More than thirty years have passed since scholars, journalists, and others began to examine the Korean conflict. The ensuing production of literature, both popular and scholarly, most of it by American writers, has brought to light various aspects of the war. Korean-language materials, also extensive, are more propagandistic than academic. The North Koreans have consistently maintained that the United States started the war, and many South Korean materials refute this claim. Like North Korean works, as one scholar has noted, Soviet writings on the war generally indict the Americans on charges of aggression in Korea.³ In any case, despite three decades of considerable attention, there have emerged no clearly defined schools of interpretation. This bibliographical note constitutes an introduction to selected works on the American intervention in Korea. The materials cited are limited to those that are

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readily available and should prove useful in integrating the Korean involvement into the writing and teaching of recent U.S. history.

There are two basic books on the subject: Korea: The Limited War by David Rees and Conflict: The History of the Korean War by Robert Leckie. A Rees considers the Korean conflict against the background of America's containment policy and shows how the limited war in Korea resulted from that policy. He develops more clearly than others the relationship between the Korean War and the defense of Europe. But Rees neglects much of the military material Leckie uses so well in his book. Leckie's account is a solid military history of the war, which concludes that the cease-fire at the end was the only settlement possible in Korea. These two books are essentially complementary. Each contains appendices that give the full text of the armistice agreement and estimated casualties by nations.

Joseph C. Goulden's Korea: The Untold Story of the War, published in 1982, is the latest and by far the most comprehensive work on the subject.⁵ Goulden is among the first persons to use the Freedom of Information Act to uncover the realities of American involvement in the Korean War. He brings to light many new accounts revealing, for example, MacArthur's suicidal tendencies. the U.S. plan to oust Syngman Rhee who was against the armistice negotiations. Truman's private musings on the possible destruction of major Soviet and Chinese cities by nuclear bombs, and conservative Republican John Foster Dulles' recommendation for Mac-Arthur's immediate dismissal. He shows that the actual cease-fire terms were those the United States had first offered under Truman in July, 1951, even though Eisenhower finally ended the fighting by threatening the Chinese with nuclear weapons. The genuine heroes of the Korean War, in Goulden's opinion, were General Matthew B. Ridgway who stabilized MacArthur's demoralized army and turned the tide of battle and marine commander General Oliver P. Smith who was instrumental in the Inchon landing.

Origins of the War

A satisfactory account of the causes of the Korean War has yet to be written. President Truman's position was that the North Koreans attacked South Korea under Stalin's order. "The attack upon Korea," Truman said, "makes it plain beyond all doubt that communism has passed beyond the use of subversion to conquer independent nations and will now use armed invasion and war." Why War Came in Korea by Robert T. Oliver, a former adviser to South Korean President Syngman Rhee, on the other hand, contends that the

United States virtually invited the Soviet-inspired North Korean attack on South Korea by publicly declaring the exclusion of South Korea from America's defense perimeter in East Asia.⁷ Oliver generally slights the complexities of the Korean scene on the eve of the war although presenting much pertinent background material.

Carl Berger's *The Korea Knot* maintains that the North Korean attack was Moscow's attempt to dominate all Korea and neutralize Japan.⁸ He focuses on the American role in the Korean conflict and devotes relatively little space to the activities of the Koreans, Chinese or Russians.

I. F. Stone, a well-known journalist, develops a different view in *The Hidden History of the Korean War*. Stone denies that the Russians instigated the Korean conflict. Relying exclusively on U.S. and U.N. documents, and on respected American and British newspapers, Stone charges that the United States, in conspiracy with the Rhee government, deliberately sought the war in Korea. Stone asks whether the failure of the Soviet representative to show up at the critical U.N. Security Council meeting which condemned North Korea and authorized U.S. intervention does not show that the Russians were taken by surprise in Korea.

Wilbur W. Hitchcock, a former member of the U.S. military government in Korea, also argues in an article in Current History that the Russians did not initiate the Korean War. 10 After analyzing all the possible effects of the North Korean aggression on East-West relations, Hitchcock concludes that Premier Kim Il-Sung of North Korea ordered the attack on South Korea without instructions from Moscow. Charles E. Bohlen, then a State Department counsellor, labels these arguments as "childish nonsense." In his memoirs, Witness to History, 1929-1969, Bohlen maintains that the North Korean forces, armed and trained by the Russians and utterly dependent upon Moscow for supplies, could not have moved without Soviet authorization. 11 Karunakar Gupta's 1972 essay in the China Quarterly repeats some of the arguments made familiar by I. F. Stone and presents others to show that the South Koreans started the war. 12 Gupta's argument is that South Korea's attack on the North Korean border city of Haeju on June 25, 1950 was the immediate cause for a northern counter-attack.

Two interesting commentaries on Stalin's role in the origins of the Korean War may be cited. Despite their questionable origins, the Krushchev memoirs include a basically convincing remark.¹³ Krushchev says, "I must stress that the war wasn't Stalin's idea, but Kim Il-Sung's. Kim was the initiator. Stalin, of course, didn't try to dissuade him." According to a former confidant of Kim Il-Sung,

who now lives in the Soviet Union under the pseudonym Lim Un and has recently published Kim's biography in Japanese in Tokyo, Kim visited Moscow "three times" to obtain Soviet approval for his projected war against South Korea and began his war preparations "long before" receiving "the go-ahead from Stalin" on his third visit in March, 1950. Lim reveals that "Stalin emphatically told Kim" that the Russians would not fight the Americans even if the United States became involved in the war. "To Kim," Lim says, "the warning appeared to be of a minor nature not worth being taken into consideration." Lim's account, above all, indicates that the Soviet Union was unaware of Kim's timing of the invasion. 15

Robert R. Simmons, in *The Strained Alliance*, contends that the Korean fighting is best viewed as a civil war. ¹⁶ Thus he also disagrees with the widely held view that the Soviet Union was directly responsible for the Korean crisis. A professor of political science at the University of Guelph in Canada, Simmons argues that although the Soviet Union armed the North Koreans and expected a war, local Korean factors determined the timing of the attack. The internal political conditions on the peninsula prompted Kim Il-Sung's decision to invade South Korea earlier than Moscow or Peking had anticipated. The indigenous conditions included Kim's desire to "out-nationalize" his rival Pak Hun-Yung's domestic faction, the expectation that the Americans would not intervene in Korea, and fear of South Korea's increased military capabilities with American help. The book contains a challenging hypothesis which requires further investigation.

In the first of a projected two-volume work entitled *The Origins of the Korean War*, published in 1981, Bruce Cummings of the University of Washington makes another revision of the conventional interpretation of the causes of the war.¹⁷ Like Simmons, Cummings treats the Korean conflict as a civil war. He argues that the start of the Korean fighting on June 25, 1950 has to be seen as a continuation of a civil and revolutionary struggle that began in 1945, when Korea was liberated from Japanese colonial rule but divided into American and Soviet zones of occupation. Cummings uses an extraordinarily large range of sources, including Korean-language materials from North and South, heretofore classified documents, and American military government sources. His detailed but provocative analysis of Korean politics will attract further scholarly attention.

American Intervention

The American decision to intervene in Korea has been the subject of several articles 18 and a full-length book, *The Korean Deci-*

sion, by Glenn D. Paige of the University of Hawaii.¹⁹ Paige's splendid day-by-day reconstruction of the first week of the Korean War is based upon published sources and on personal interviews with eleven key participants in the decision-making process. In addition to providing details on the first seven days of fighting, Paige describes the varied circumstances from 1945 to 1950, which provided the antecedent conditions for the Korean decision. President Truman, in Paige's view, played a dominant role in creating an atmosphere conducive to the American intervention in Korea.

In "Lessons" of the Past, Ernest R. May of Harvard shows how American policy makers inevitably used analogies from the 1930's in reaching the Korean decision in 1950.20 Prior to the outbreak of the Korean War, the United States seemed to have ruled out a military engagement in Korea on strategic grounds. However, when the fighting began, the Truman administration decided to defend South Korea, as May suggests, "primarily because the President and his advisers perceived a North Korean attack on South Korea as analogous to instances of Japanese, Italian, and German aggression prior to World War II." If the aggression went unchecked, it was thought, the communists would be encouraged to set into motion a series of actions that would eventually force the Americans into a total war with the Russians.

James I. Matray's 1980 article in The Historian reassesses the American decision to fight in Korea.²² Matray shows that Truman was initially reluctant to authorize a complete commitment of U.S. ground forces and did not decide to defend South Korea with American troops until almost one week after the outbreak of the fighting. In Matray's view, American policy in Korea before the communist attack explains Truman's reluctance to immediately dispatch troops, since containment on the Korean peninsula stressed the building of South Korea's native capacity for self-defense. Until General MacArthur reported that territory lost to North Korea could be regained only by the use of U.S. ground troops, the Truman administration was unwilling to become fully involved in the conflict. Truman and his advisers were convinced that the North Korean aggression was a part of the Soviet attempt to achieve global domination through military action. But it was only South Korea's inability to defend itself, which subsequently led to the U.S. military intervention. Truman's decision "marked the beginning of America's reluctant crusade to ensure worldwide peace and stability through military means."23

America's initial objective in the Korean conflict was to restore

South Korea's border at the 38th parallel. However, after the Inchon landing of September 15, 1950, the United States decided to cross that parallel and unify Korea through military action. ²⁴ This change of policy prompted direct Chinese military intervention. A plausible explanation of Chinese motives in Korea is given in Allen S. Whiting's *China Crosses the Yalu*, a volume prepared for the Rand Corporation, which specializes in background studies for government policy makers. ²⁵ On the basis of English, Russian, and Chinese sources, Whiting suggests that the Chinese intervention was defensively motivated and only a reluctant last resort to prevent the threat to China's security and the undermining of Chinese prestige through the loss of a communist neighbor.

The Truman-MacArthur Controversy and the Strategy of Limited War

The Chinese intervention turned Korea into a "new war," which in turn led to the Truman-MacArthur controversy. Much has been written about this crucial episode of the Korean War. The Truman-MacArthur Controversy and the Korean War by John W. Spanier of the University of Florida is perhaps the best monograph on the subject. Spanier examines the Korean conflict within the broader framework of U.S. foreign policy, and the complexities of domestic politics. He shows that no government can allow a military officer to challenge its foreign policy publicly without undermining its authority to determine the nation's policy, dividing the domestic support it needs, and alienating the allies it desires. MacArthur's personality contributed to his dismissal but more important was his pressure to change a limited effort into a total war for complete military victory, an objective the civilian government could not embrace.

One important incident precipitating controversy was the publication by Congressman Joseph W. Martin of Massachusettes of a letter to himself in which MacArthur (responding to the Congressman's request for his views on Truman's conduct of the war) agreed with Martin that Chinese Nationalist troops should be used in Korea and emphasized that there was "no substitute for victory." Martin was then the Republican minority leader, and in his memoirs, *My First Fifty Years in Politics*,²⁷ he explains his role and his decision to publish MacArthur's letter as expressing "a voice of authority" that "needed to be heard." ²⁸ The dismissal of MacArthur which followed led to an investigation by a joint session of the Senate's Armed Forces and Foreign Relations Committees. The five volumes of these hearings (*Military Situation in the Far East*) are an indispensable source of information on America's involvement in Korea.²⁹

The Truman Administration feared that MacArthur's policies would spread the war beyond the limits of Korea to China which, as General Omar N. Bradley, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, observed, would be "the wrong war, at the wrong place, at the wrong time, and with the wrong enemy." Truman's own version of the dispute is given in his *Memoirs* (cited earlier) in which he contends that all of the actions of his administration were intended to isolate the conflict and to prevent Soviet intervention. MacArthur's *Reminiscences* present his own defense.

One of the most interesting and important results of this controversy was the emerging discussion of the theory and practice of "limited war." In Limited War, Robert E. Osgood includes a provocative chapter on the Korean crisis.³² He calls the Korean conflict "the single most significant event in the development of American postwar strategy."33 He also makes a strong plea for public acceptance of limited warfare. Henry Kissinger's Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy is a penetrating study of limited war and other concepts of military tactics.³⁴ This work is an outgrowth of three years of intensive discussion with a task force of experts convened by the Council of Foreign Relations. Kissinger believes that the United States must be prepared to meet an all-out attack as well as limited aggression. He also believes that an all-out attack must be met with an all-out counter-attack and a limited aggression with limited warfare. In each case the United States should use the most appropriate weapon for the task. Kissinger regards the popular American philosophy of either total abstention from power politics or total destruction of the enemy as a basic problem.

Morton H. Halperin, in *Limited War in the Nuclear Age*, uses the Korean conflict as a case study.³⁵ The purpose of this study, narrower than the title suggests, is to examine how the most powerful nations, the United States and the Soviet Union, may use force without undue risk of a total nuclear war. Halperin's method is partly historical but largely speculative. He begins by analyzing the motives for limiting war and the process by which limits are established. He then applies his hypotheses to the Korean War. Halperin suggests that each side's estimate and interpretation of the other's intentions influenced the limitations placed upon the war in Korea.

The Peace Negotiations and the American Prisoners of War

In discussing American negotiations for an armistice in Korea, it should be noted that contrary to a widely held view that the communists first proposed to end the fighting by negotiation, the initiative to enter into cease-fire talks came from the United States. As

Dean Acheson states in his memoirs, *Present at the Creation*, about a year after the war began, George F. Kennan, then on a leave of absence from the State Department, contacted Jacob A. Malik, the Soviet ambassador to the United Nations, and the two diplomats discussed possible avenues of ending the Korean War. ³⁶ Malik then threw out a hint that the Korean conflict could be settled if both sides so desired. The Malik statement led to the armistice negotiations.

The Korean armistice, which was signed at Panmunjom on July 27, 1953, is still in effect, now longer than any other in history. William H. Vatcher's *Panmunjom: The Story of Korean Armistice Negotiations* is a documented study of the cease-fire talks.³⁷ Vatcher, a former staff member of the U.N. delegation at the armistice conference, describes the truce talks with emphasis on the North Korean and Chinese use of negotiations for propaganda purposes. Based on the official documents and intimate personal experience, the most important part of this study is the account of the prisoner-of-war issue which delayed and almost ended the discussions. This work will be helpful not only to students of the history of the Korean War but also to all who are concerned with understanding the negotiating with the communists.

Admiral C. Turner Joy, who was the senior delegate of the U.N. delegation at the armistice conference until he was succeeded by Major General William K. Harrison, Jr., in May 1952, tells of his experience in *How Communists Negotiate*. 38 Joy points out that negotiations, to the communists, were not a means of bargaining but a scene set to make world propaganda and to demand a political price. To this end, communist negotiators manufactured evidence to discredit the U.N. Command, as in the case of their germ warfare charges. They broke promises as soon as made, traded on Western concern for human suffering, and yielded a point only when the U.N. threatened their military position. All this, Joy implies, was little understood in Washington. The communists regarded any concession made by their opponents as a sign of weakness. 39

Truce Tent and Fighting Front by Walter G. Hermes is an official monograph on American negotiations for the Korean armistice.⁴⁰ This study is the second volume in an official series on the United States Army in the Korean War, covering the last two years in the war.⁴¹ This and other official histories prepared by other branches of the U.S. armed forces represent the most extensive work of the historical profession. Comprehensive and accurate, they are absolutely essential for any serious study of American military intervention in Korea.⁴²

The literature on American prisoners of war in Korea is well summarized in H. H. Wubben's 1970 article in the American Quarterly,43 and only a few works will be cited here. An excellent journalistic account of the treatment of war prisoners in both camps in Korea is given in William L. White's The Captives of Korea.⁴⁴ General Dean's Story by William P. Dean is a facinating narrative of what happened to America's most famous prisoner-of-war in Korea. 45 Eugene Kinkead's In Every War But One argues that to that date it was only in Korea that captured Americans had not behaved honorably. 46 American prisoners in the North Korean and Chinese hands, in Kinkead's view, had been morally weak and uncommitted to traditional American ideals. Consequently, they were unwilling to aid each other in their hard labor and succumbed easily to the pressures of their captors to engage in collaborative behavior, including informing on each other. Kinkead attributes the demoralized behavior of American prisoners primarily to the moral, physical, and intellectual weakness of the prisoners rather than to coercion or maltreatment by their captors. Albert D. Biderman, a professional sociologist who has made a specialty of studying the prisoner-of-war behavior patterns, has attempted to correct the misleading impressions engendered by Kinkead's work. In The March to Calumny: The Story of American POW's in the Korean War, Biderman demonstrates that most "collaboration" was either inconsequential or cooperation of the sort which no prisoner can avoid.⁴⁷ The overwhelming number of American prisoners, he insists, became extremely anti-communists.

Impact of the War Upon the United States

The prolonged Korean fighting was widely unpopular in the United States and generated discontent with the Truman administration. The Republicans made it a central issue in their campaign for the presidency in 1952. One would expect, and indeed one finds, considerable disagreement concerning the role and importance of the Korean crisis in the 1952 presidential election. According to such pollsters as Lubell and Harris, the war was the greatest single issue making for a Republican victory.⁴⁸ But the conclusions reached by Angus Campbell and others of the University of Michigan's Survey Research Center were far different. This Michigan group found domestic issues to be of much greater concern to the voter than foreign policy, or more specifically, than the Korean War.⁴⁹

In *The Korean War and American Politics*, Ronald J. Caridi examines the Republican party's response to the Korean conflict.⁵⁰ Relying upon the *New York Times* and the *Congressional Record*, plus some published memoirs, Caridi indicts the Republicans for being inconsistent and insincere in their response to the war. They first supported the Truman administration, but they later fluctuated between suggesting that intervention had been an error and that the U.S. should withdraw completely, and supporting MacArthur's concept of "no substitute for victory." In 1952 they nominated Dwight D. Eisenhower who rejected this latter viewpoint and supported the strategy of limited war.⁵¹

According to Richard F. Haynes, Truman's Korean policy had tremendous impact upon the growth of presidential power, thus creating a new constitutional situation. In The Awesome Power: Harry S. Truman As Commander in Chief, Haynes notes that "The exclusive power of the Congress to declare war is a largely illusory constitutional check on the sweeping military powers of the modern presidency."52 Truman made the United States a policeman of communism. He set a significant precedent by committing American troops in Korea as commander-in-chief and without the formal consent of Congress. Havnes faults Truman for allowing the U.S. forces to cross the 38th parallel in an attempt to unify Korea, thus deviating from the policy of containment. But, in his opinion, Truman's other actions were wise and necessary. Haynes maintains that conditions arising from the Cold War required an expansion of the president's powers as commander-in-chief, and Truman was not reluctant to exercise them.

In Presidential Power: the Politics of Leadership, Richard E. Neustadt provides an analysis of Truman's frustrations in Korea. 53 Neustadt, who served on Truman's White House staff and is now Lucius N. Littauer Professor of Public Administration at Harvard, gives Truman high marks for presidential ability. Nevertheless, he believes that Truman heeded the military too long in setting his war aims, particularly when he listened too readily to confident discounting of danger by his advisors and thus accepted for a time the goal of unifying the country under non-communist rule. The sphere of personal power of the President was so great that the problem of how he should obtain advice not influenced by that power was neglected.54

The least discussed side of the Korean involvement is the war's social and economic impact upon the United States. John E. Mueller's War. Presidents and Public Opinion concludes that both

the Korean and Vietnam wars were supported to much the same degree and largely by the same segments of the population, which never rose above fifty percent. In *Desegregation of the U.S. Armed Forces*, Richard M. Dalfiume discusses the change in the racial policy of the military services during the Korean War. He maintains that the resistance against, as well as the pressures for desegregation in the armed forces, were both civilian inspired. Bert G. Hickman reports in *The Korean War and United States Economic Activity* that the war strongly influenced the trend of American economic activity during 1950-52. According to Alonzo L. Hamby's *Beyond the New Deal*, Truman's Fair Deal program was shelved as Truman appeased conservative southern Democrats in order to unite the Democrats behind the Korean conflict and as the Republicans began to break with the administration.55

Despite the extensive work accomplished during the past thirty years, the whole story of the Korean involvement has not yet been told. While the U.S. decision to fight in Korea, the Truman-MacArthur dispute, and American negotiations for the Korean armistice have been fairly well reconstructed, there are exciting possibilties for further study of the origins of the war, the domestic implications of the war, and the Sino-American confrontation in Korea. In all likelihood, however, any conclusions will remain tentative and many questions unanswered or even unasked as long as much of the American and most of the Soviet and Chinese evidence remains hidden from view.

Notes

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