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Author(s): David S. McLellan
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Dean Acheson and the Korean War

DAVID S. McLELLAN
Centre d'Études de l'Université de Californie à Bordeaux

Until about the time of the Inchon landing the announced purpose of United States intervention in Korea was to punish the aggressor and bring about a restoration of the independence of South Korea. This was entirely consistent with the prudent policy which the administration had previously adopted with regard to Red China. Dean Acheson had made it the premise of his Far Eastern policy that there was more likelihood of conflict in the long-run interests of China and the Soviet Union than between China and the United States. On the basis of that premise Acheson had fought for eighteen months to disentangle the United States from Chiang Kai-shek's regime on Formosa, and scrupulously to refrain from appearing to thwart the ambition of the Communist government in Peking to achieve "the political independence and territorial integrity" of all of China. Even after the North Korean attack on South Korea Acheson took the lead within the administration in opposing any action that might bring on a war with Red China or the Soviet Union.

Having initially declared that the United Nations were fighting in Korea "solely for the purpose of restoring the Republic of Korea to its status prior to the invasion of the north,"[1] and having con-

[1] *State Department Bulletin*, XXIII (July 10, 1950), 579-80. "I wanted it clearly understood that our operations were designed to restore peace there and to

sistently opposed any act likely to provoke Chinese or Soviet intervention, why then did Acheson agree to permit the United Nations forces to undertake the unification of all Korea?

I

While fundamentally cautious and calculating in his diplomacy toward the Communists it was not in Acheson's nature to pass up an opportunity to enhance the strength and stability of the non-Communist world. After the Inchon landing Acheson reasoned that if MacArthur's victories had completely demoralized the North Koreans, the occupation of the northern half of Korea might be accomplished by the simple process of South Korean units moving into the no-man's land between the narrow waist of the Korean Peninsula and the Yalu. By limiting the means employed to ROK forces in regions bordering on Manchuria and Russia, Acheson hoped to accomplish unification without triggering a strong, undesired reaction, that is, Soviet or Chinese intervention. Acheson also thought that he was controlling the risks by having it understood that MacArthur was not to send his forces north should Chinese or Soviet forces occupy North Korea. Should Soviet or Chinese forces enter North Korea the United Nations Command would simply break off operations and repair to a suitable defense line, there to await developments.

While "pushing to the limits" and "pursuing" a retreating foe are the essence of this strategy for optimizing gains, it is equally important to "know when to stop." To calculate the risks in an optimizing strategy of this type requires that one "understand the opponent's interpretation of one's own signals, as well as the motives behind his."[2] Unfortunately Acheson's evaluation of Peking's behavior was carried on from the beginning to the very end in almost total incomprehension of Communist China's frame of reference.

Acheson's stress upon Chinese national interest led him to overestimate (at least in the short run) the potential for conflict between

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restore the border." Harry S. Truman, *Memoirs* (Garden City, N. Y., 1956), II, 341.

[2] Alexander L. George, *The "Operational Code": A Neglected Approach to the Study of Political Leaders and Decision-Making*, RAND Document, D-15669-RR (Sept. 1967).

Communist China and the U.S.S.R.[3] Allen Whiting has summed up this well-nigh fatal predilection:

> Judgments in Washington reflected a belief in basic conflicts within the Communist world that if properly exploited would inhibit Peking's actions in Korea. One such conflict was seen in a supposed clash between "innately Chinese" qualities and "alien Communism". This theory comfortingly left intact the presumed bonds of "friendship" between "the Chinese and the American peoples". Another clash was seen in Peking-Moscow relations, where "Chinese national interests" were thought to conflict with "Russian domination".... Such assumptions consistently attributed to the Chinese Communists a benevolence they were far from feeling.[4]

On the other hand Acheson fatally underestimated the threat to Chinese national interest that would appear from the advance of foreign armies up the Korean invasion corridor bordering Manchuria. Acheson made a considerable verbal effort to reassure Peking of America's benign intentions, but his campaign was doomed to failure because he never asked himself if his words meant the same thing to Peking as they meant to him.

In making judgments about another state's possible behavior two criteria are normally considered: capabilities and intentions. In the case of China, Acheson rather consistently underestimated China's war-making capacity. Had he not told a gathering of Republican congressmen on February 7, 1949, that China would remain weak even under the Communists? He urged his listeners not to exaggerate the magnitude of America's reversal in Asia—China was not a modern centralized state and the Communists would most certainly face as difficult a time in governing China as had the previous regime.[5]

Acheson also appears to have been betrayed into discounting Red China's capacity for action by his preoccupation with Moscow (not dissimilar to present hopes regarding Moscow's dissuasive capacity vis-à-vis Hanoi). Since Moscow had not been willing

[3] This is not to denigrate the shrewdness of Acheson's judgment that the national interests of China and Russia would sooner or later come into conflict and lead to schism.

[4] Allen S. Whiting, *China Crosses the Yalu, The Decision to Enter the Korean War* (New York, 1960), 169-70.

[5] Bradford Westerfield, *Foreign Policy and Party Politics* (New Haven, 1955), 347.

to risk general war in July when the United States was unprepared and when United Nations forces could have been evicted from the peninsula, the Kremlin would certainly not risk enlarging the war when United States forces were so much better prepared. "They [Acheson and the President's other National Security Council advisers] reasoned, it appears, that mainland China was dependent on the Russians and that more ambitious wants [more than a buffer zone along the Yalu] would mean that *Russia* was courting war."[6]

United States intelligence estimates also appear to have played a role here, although to what extent they may have reinforced Acheson's predisposition to downgrade the menace of Chinese intervention is problematical. The initial reaction of the intelligence community to North Korean aggression was a rather panicky assumption that the Soviet Union might be willing to risk a general war and that the United States, being militarily unprepared, must take whatever precautions to avoid precipitating Soviet actions. By the end of September the intelligence community had reversed its earlier estimates and ruled out the likelihood that the Soviets were ready to risk a general war. Since it was the Soviet threat with which Washington was primarily concerned, the assumption being that Red China was militarily too weak and ill-organized to risk engaging a well-equipped Western army in all-out combat, intelligence reports to the National Security Council in September and October had the effect of down-grading estimates that the Chinese would intervene.

Estimates of intentions constitute another important criterion for risk-calculation. Previous to the Inchon landing no government leader had been more concerned than Acheson to provide a reassuring image of American intentions vis-à-vis mainland China. Now by a curious inversion of reasoning, with United Nations forces advancing into North Korea, Acheson persuaded himself that the United States had given the Peking regime enough tokens of America's good will and restraint so that it would have no reason to distrust its intentions in Korea.

"No possible shred of evidence could have existed in the minds of Chinese Communist authorities," Acheson later declared, "about the intentions of the forces of the United Nations. Repeat-

[6] Richard Neustadt, *Presidential Power* (New York, Signet ed., 1960), 136.

edly and from the very beginning of the action it had been made clear that the sole mission of the United Nations was to repel the aggressors and to restore to the people of Korea their independence."[7] Had not the United Nations made it abundantly clear that it wished to localize hostilities in Korea? Had not the UN resolution of October 7 explicitly stated that "United Nations forces should not remain in any part of Korea" once its objectives were attained? And had not the administration disentangled itself from Chiang Kai-shek and refused to go back on its wartime pledges that Formosa must ultimately revert to China? If the exigencies of the war in Korea had made it necessary for the administration to protect Formosa by interposing the Seventh Fleet between the island and the mainland, Acheson professed himself unable to see the provocation: ". . . the President neutralized it [Formosa] by saying that the Seventh Fleet would prevent any attack upon Formosa, and Formosa should not make any attack upon the mainland. There was a fair proposition. . . ."[8] Had not the United States kept the war scrupulously limited to the Korean Peninsula, *despite incentive to bomb Rashin and points bordering on Manchuria?* Since American and UN declarations of good will were judged to constitute sufficient assurance to China's Communist leaders, the latter's threats of intervention were considered as a bluff. "I should think it would be sheer madness," Acheson declared on September 10, "on the part of the Chinese Communists to intervene and see no advantage to them doing it."[9] This presumption led Acheson to dismiss too readily warnings relayed from Peking by the Indian ambassador, K. M. Panikkar, that China would feel obliged to intervene if the Americans advanced to the Yalu or even crossed the 38th Parallel.[10]

[7] *State Department Bulletin*, XXIII (Dec. 18, 1950), 963.

[8] CBS Interview, *ibid.*, 463.

[9] John W. Spanier, *The Truman-MacArthur Controversy and the Korean War* (Cambridge, Mass., 1959), 95. Contained in directive to MacArthur of Sept. 15, 1950.

[10] K. M. Pannikar, *In Two Chinas* (London, 1955), 108. Both Truman and Acheson had acquired a prejudice against Panikkar because of his seeming subservience to the Chinese Communist position. Pannikar states that Chou made a distinction between ROK and non-South Korean forces. He was emphatic: "The South Koreans did not matter, but American intrusion into North Korea would encounter Chinese resistance" (p. 110). D. Rees, in *Korea: The Limited War*

There is too lengthy a pattern to such utterances on Acheson's part to assume that he did not sincerely believe what he was saying or to doubt that it did lead him fatally to minimize the risk being run in attempting to unify all Korea. Just as Acheson earlier had assumed that America's policy of moderation and hands off Formosa would show Russia to be the principal threat to China's integrity, so in Korea his unguarded optimism concerning the unlikelihood of Chinese intervention betrayed a curiously naïve faith in the currency of his own verbal assurances. Convinced of his own good will toward China, Acheson downgraded the importance which Peking would attach to the loss of prestige and security if it permitted the Western "imperialists" to advance unhindered to China's borders. The importance of North Korea as a historic invasion route into Manchuria and North China seems to have figured scarcely at all in Acheson's deliberations with his staff. Rees notes that "like the Russians in 1904, Communist China was now making the crossing of the 38th parallel a *casus belli*,"[11] but there is no evidence that Acheson considered this historical precedent until very late in the game. Nor does it appear to have crossed Acheson's mind what Peking might make of the many hostile and threatening statements being made by Syngman Rhee, MacArthur, and others whose authority the Communists had reason to believe was as valid as that of Secretary Acheson, especially when nothing had been done to punish MacArthur for his previous insubordination. Time and again Peking pointed to their utterances as evidence of America's hostile intentions without prompting any off-setting reaction in Washington.[12] Peking was to show confidence in a general who, in the words of the Joint Chiefs of Staff at the MacArthur hearings, was "not in sympathy with the decision to try to

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(New York, 1964), writes that a general U.S. Eighth Army advance across the Parallel began on the morning of October 9. Chinese troops reportedly began crossing the Yalu on October 14. J. M. Macintosh, *Strategy and Tactics of Soviet Foreign Policy* (New York, 1963), 48. What is interesting is the direct correlation between the restraint which was originally imposed upon MacArthur to rely primarily upon ROK troops in making his advance to the North and Chou's emphasis upon the threat posed by the non-ROK forces.

[11] Rees, 107. At a meeting with his staff on November 21 Acheson finally mentioned the possibility that Russia and China might be concerned over the use of Korea as a route to Manchuria.

[12] Rees, 106.

limit the conflict to Korea" and not "responsive to control from Washington."[13]

The other means by which Acheson may have hoped to exercise control and minimize risks was through the President's authority over the commander in the field. But for Acheson to have reposed trust in MacArthur after all the chicanery and deceits which the State Department had suffered at his hands seems an act of unbelievable innocence.[14]

II

In the directive of September 14 MacArthur was told to restrict the operation of his non-Korean forces to a line south of Chonju-Yong Won-Hungnam, running across the narrow neck of the Korean Peninsula. Acheson also thought that he was minimizing risks by having it understood that MacArthur was not to send his forces north in case of Chinese or Soviet occupation of North Korea and that should *strong* Chinese Communist units penetrate south of the 38th Parallel, the United States "would not permit itself to become engaged in a general war with China." Unfortunately, the circumstances under which Soviet or Chinese Communist intervention might occur were never thoroughly explored. The military campaign unfolded in a fatal state of ambiguity in which the only authoritative evidence of Chinese determination to intervene would be an all-out attack upon the United Nations forces.

[13] U.S. Congress, Joint Senate Committee on Armed Services and Foreign Relations, *Hearings, Military Situation in the Far East*, 82d Cong., 1st Sess., 1951, pp. 325, 878-79.

[14] By remaining in Japan after the war and never returning even for a visit, MacArthur had enhanced his legendary stature. Furthermore, his insistence upon ruling Japan with a completely free hand and the failure of the Department of State to establish an effective control over Japanese decisions—as had been done in Germany by the McCloy appointment in 1949—gave MacArthur a virtual monopoly over authoritative judgments about the Far East. When Acheson had proposed to begin negotiation of a Japanese Peace Treaty the previous year, MacArthur let it be known through various emissaries sent out that he was opposed to it. He had labeled the proposal a smart-aleck propaganda trick on the part of the State Department to put the Soviet Union on the spot, since the latter would hardly desire an unfettered Japan; but he refused to consider any request to treat it seriously since that would mean giving up America's military mastery over Japan. The State Department's relations with MacArthur in Japan had always been a one-way street, with MacArthur acting in Japan with very little regard—when possible, none—for the State Department's suggestions or wishes. See Rees, 66-72.

Perhaps the most critical fault on the part of Acheson and the President's military advisers was their failure to keep Truman adequately informed of the risks. While this fault had much more disastrous consequences in November when the President was not informed of the military imprudence of MacArthur's reckless advance to the Yalu, it was already manifest in October. Because of inadequate intelligence the administration did not know that tens of thousands of Chinese troops were crossing the Yalu by mid-October. Nevertheless, by mid-October Chinese intervention was being discussed as a real, albeit unlikely, possibility. Logically this should have prompted a much greater assertion of control over MacArthur's opeations. Instead, a further extension of MacArthur's discretion was contained in a directive of October 9. MacArthur was now told that even if Chinese intervention occurred, he should continue operations "as long as, in your judgment, action by forces now under your control offers a reasonable chance of success."[15] Nothing Truman's advisers told him gave him any reason for questioning these instructions. Yet the directive of October 9 constituted a dangerous derogation of the President's authority to the theater commander, a general whom the men in Washington had every reason to know was malevolent in his predisposition toward them, unreliable by virtue of his vanity, and hell-bent on a showdown with communism in Asia.

Knowing MacArthur to be an unpredictable and avowed opponent of the administration, why did Acheson acquiesce in this delegation of authority? Like everyone else Acheson shared the conviction that the war was practically over, that if the Chinese happened to intervene it would not be on a significant scale, and that MacArthur was amply instructed about how to respond to such an eventuality. Being rational men themselves, it was simply inconceivable to Truman or Acheson that MacArthur might act in ways which would violate the restraints to which they had subjected him or imperiously transgress the canons of ordinary military prudence. They were in no state of mind to examine critically the mentality or the personality of the general to whom they were entrusting the final delicate military phase of the operation.

The victory celebration on Wake Island (October 15), from

[15] Truman, II, 362; *Hearings*, 720.

which Acheson unfortunately absented himself, only confirmed the President in his confidence in MacArthur.[16] "Nothing said by anybody at Wake Island on October 15th qualified their delegation to MacArthur; indeed, it was confirmed by the prevailing atmosphere of confidence in him."[17] Against this almost universal confidence the President had only vague estimates that Peking could mount an offensive but probably would do no more than covertly assist the North Koreans. Here was no pressure on the President from a war-minded Pentagon, simply a vacuum created by the absence of any serious appreciation of Chinese motives.

Now began a series of events in which the ungovernable MacArthur, taking advantage of the authority and discretion handed to him by a negligent administration, brought his armies to the brink of destruction and the administration to the brink of disaster.

III

On October 17, upon his return from the Wake Island Conference, MacArthur extended the restraining line to a line from Chongju on the west to Songjin on the east coast, well north of the "only really defensible line north of the Parallel." On October 24, MacArthur erased the restraining line altogether. He advised his field commanders that the initial restrictions had been based upon "the possibility of enemy capitulation." He now authorized them to use *any and all* ground forces at their command, as necessary, in order to capture all of North Korea. On October 25, MacArthur's headquarters denied "that 'foreign' United Nations [non-Korean] troops had been ordered to halt their advance 40 miles south of the frontier to minimize the international tension over a Red 'counter-invasion' of the North Korean Communist state." There was no intention, MacArthur's headquarters added, "of establishing a formal 'buffer territory.' "[18] The JCS warned MacArthur

[16] Halle emphasizes MacArthur's threat to Truman's political position: "The President had reason to believe that if he attempted to discipline his subordinate . . . he would be committing political suicide." Louis Halle, *The Cold War as History* (London, 1967), 219. If Truman really feared a disaster which he could do nothing about, why was he so cocksure and insouciant, especially upon his return from Wake Island?

[17] Neustadt, 133.

[18] Rees, 127; Trumbull Higgins, *Korea and the Fall of MacArthur* (New York, 1960), 64.

that his order of October 24 was "not in consonance" with their directive of September 27.[19] In reply MacArthur referred to General Marshall's message of September 29 "to feel unhampered in his operations" and justified his action as militarily necessary to relieve the ROK forces which were being manhandled (they were encountering Chinese forces).[20]

Normally military commanders conduct their operations on the basis of intelligence and estimates of subordinate commanders. How did MacArthur treat these matters? The more serious reports from the front he dismissed as exaggerated; yet, unlike the State Department, which regarded Chinese intervention as essentially defensive, MacArthur felt that Chinese Communist activity had always been aggressive and offensive.

If that was not enough to forewarn MacArthur that greater uncertainties surrounded his advance to the Yalu than he had supposed, no sooner had ROK forces begun their advance away from the Chongchon River in the direction of the Yalu than they were pinned down and routed by remarkably effective operations which could only be coming from entirely new armies.[21] A Chinese prisoner was taken on October 25 and for several days UN forces were stymied in their advance. The wildly contradictory nature of MacArthur's reports and the inconsistencies between what he said and what he did raise serious questions as to his rationality throughout this period. Normal cautionary advice by the JCS at this time was greeted in Tokyo as evidence of a Washington conspiracy to bring on defeat and appeasement.[22]

While the full extent of Chinese intervention was still unknown, General Walton Walker interpreted the stiff resistance that his ROK forces were encountering as evidence "that China was in deadly earnest" and he was strongly against a hasty advance to the Yalu. With a gap of fifty to seventy miles between his Eighth Army on the west side of the peninsula and Almond's Tenth (Marine) Corps on the east, elementary military tactics dic-

[19] Quoted in Rees, 128.

[20] Higgins, 65; Lynn Montross and Nicholas Canzona, *U. S. Marine Corps Operations in Korea*, Vol. III: *The Chosin Reservoir Campaign* (Washington, 1954-57).

[21] S. L. A. Marshall, *The River and the Gauntlet* (New York, 1953). Marshall was operations analyst for the Eighth Army.

[22] Higgins, 68-72.

tated extreme caution until a link-up could provide accurate intelligence of what lay between the two forces. The JCS was generally aware of these dangers, but it hesitated to challenge MacArthur's authority and it did not broach the subject with either the President or his civilian advisers.

But even if Acheson was not *au courant* of the military deficiencies and risks of MacArthur's strategy, the latter's decision to advance to the Yalu was already evoking demands from him which were clearly not consonant with the political and military limitations which Acheson had assigned to the operations. For example, it had been understood that under no circumstances was the United Nations Command to bomb the bridges or power complex over the Yalu connecting North Korea and Manchuria. Consonant with this limitation, on November 7 the United Nations Interim Committee on Korea had declared that the United Nations troops would "fully support" (meaning respect) the Manchurian frontier; three days later a six-power resolution introduced into the Security Council reaffirmed that the United Nations would hold the frontier "inviolate" and "would fully protect Chinese and Korean interests in the frontier zone."[23]

Yet on November 6 Acheson succeeded only at the very last minute in halting a bombing mission to take out the bridge across the Yalu River from Sinuiju (Korea) to Antung (Manchuria) ordered by the Far Eastern Commander. As there still seemed to be no serious and immediate threat to American forces, the President vetoed the mission and MacArthur was ordered not to attack targets within five miles of the Manchurian border. These demands should have been a signal warning to the administration that MacArthur's operations had reached the point at which they could continue only by violating the self-imposed limitations beyond which it was feared the United Nations Command might precipitate Chinese or Soviet intervention.

Instead of having the requisite effect, two days later Truman succumbed to MacArthur's protests that failure to destroy the bridges would endanger his command. On November 8 the Far East Air Command knocked out the twin three thousand-foot spans, "although of course most of the Chinese Communist troops were already in Korea by this time."[24]

[23] Rees, 133.
[24] *Ibid.*, 131.

Acheson had another opportunity on November 9 to call a halt to MacArthur's offensive on the grounds that it was endangering the nation's political and strategic interests. MacArthur had just announced a final great offensive which would carry the United Nations Command to the Yalu. At the November 9 meeting of the National Security Council, General Bradley explained that the United Nations "*could hold its present positions* in Korea but beyond that, any advance would entail the possibility of the need for decisions by the United States for attacking Manchurian bases."[25] The threat to Acheson's policy of definite but limited and controlled risks from MacArthur's grandiose designs was now posed in political terms: either MacArthur's offensive must be halted forthwith or face the military necessity of having to extend operations into Manchuria. Typical of the failure of the JCS to perform its function at this time was the statement to Chief of Army General Collins by U. S. Army Director of G-3, Major General Bolte, that "it was easier to support MacArthur, since in any case he would not change his mind."[26]

It has been argued by Neustadt and others that Acheson hesitated to oppose MacArthur's offensive out of scruple at appearing to trespass into the field of military operations (unfortunately MacArthur suffered no such scruples about trespassing into the political sphere). But given the terms in which Bradley posed the alternatives, one can scarcely contend that Acheson would not have been on solid political grounds in opposing the offensive.

As if to underscore the likelihood that MacArthur would sooner or later have to have recourse to bombing Manchuria, the new Secretary of Defense, General George C. Marshall, "pointed out . . . that our eastern front in Korea was widely dispersed and thinly spread and that this represented an added risk. . . . Bradley replied that of course General MacArthur had done this in order to carry out his directive that he was to occupy the whole country and hold elections."[27] Acheson did ask "if there was any line that was better from a military point of view than the present one, and Bradley

[25] Documents, Princeton File. The Princeton File is a transcript of a seminar that was held by Acheson and his principal lieutenants after his retirement from office. It constitutes a combination debriefing and analysis of his decisions as Secretary of State.

[26] Quoted in Higgins, 73.

[27] Princeton File. See, also, Rees, 132.

replied that . . . the farther back . . . the easier it would be to maintain . . . however, he realized that any backward movement . . . might lose us the South Koreans will to fight."[28] Since this was a political judgment, here again Acheson was offered an opening to reconsider the merits of the offensive from the viewpoint of America's political objectives. It could hardly be seriously argued that South Korean morale would have fallen so much as to outweigh the risks of war with Red China. Instead of all these discouraging statements becoming the basis for a serious reconsideration of Chinese intentions and of the risks implicit in MacArthur's offensive, Acheson let the occasion pass. He seized upon a statement by Bradley that "if the Chinese desired only to set up a buffer area . . . negotiations might be fruitful"[29] and offered forthwith to look into that possibility.

Truman, who had to miss this meeting, records Acheson's summation of the Council's views:

> [Acheson] pointed out that it was agreed that General MacArthur's directives should not now be changed and he should be free to do what he could in a military way, but without bombing Manchuria. At the same time, the State Department would seek ways to find out whether negotiations with the Chinese Communists were possible. . . .[30]

Whatever prompted Acheson to think that he might try for a diplomatic understanding with Peking while MacArthur was left free "to do what he could in a military way"? It had not previously been assumed that ending the war would depend upon negotiations with Peking. All calculations up to this point had been made on the assumption that the Chinese did not intend to intervene, but if they did the United Nations would be able to break off military operations, repair to a good defensible line, and await developments. Now that the Chinese had indicated that they were not bluffing there was no reason for Acheson not to assume that they meant what they had said all along—that they intended to evict the United Nations Command from all of North Korea and that in some sense they had the means to do it. Besides, as Acheson told Truman, "the trouble with any such proposal for nego-

[28] Princeton File. See, also, Martin Lichterman, *To the Yalu and Back* (Inter-University Case Program No. 92), 36.

[29] Cited in Rees, 131-32.

[30] Truman, II, 378-80; *Hearings*, 619-20.

tiations . . . would be that the Communists would insist on all foreign troops leaving Korea, and thus abandoning Korea to the Communists."[31] Nevertheless he now permitted himself to believe that Chinese intervention could be parried diplomatically by negotiations for a ten-mile buffer zone south of the Yalu.

All evidence suggests that the participants in the meeting of November 9 knew that the military situation was uncertain and that depending upon Chinese strength it could quickly become desperate. Acheson had been told that unless the Chinese were weak and willing to accept a buffer zone the military situation might become so desperate as to necessitate bombing bases in Manchuria. Even if the Chinese had shown any inclination to negotiate, *which they had not*, would they be willing to accept a mere buffer zone? Moreover, such negotiations would take time in view of the non-existence of normal channels of communication between Peking, Washington, and New York. Now, if ever, would have been the time for Acheson to have notified the President that both the political and the military risks far outweighed the advantages of continuing the advance northward. Instead, the issue as it reached President Truman "wore a diplomatic face which fatally obscured the military risk, a reversal in effect of late September's situation."[32]

IV

Why, then, did Acheson not call for a re-examination of the political risks which he had a perfect right and duty to do. Neustadt suggests that Acheson, already under fire for his Far Eastern policy, was reluctant to appear to meddle in military strategy. "In immediate terms the risk was 'military'; if it justified reversing the commander in the field, then the Joint Chiefs must make the judgment and tell Truman."[33] But if that is the case Acheson never should have fostered or even permitted the idea to exist that it might be possible to reach an accommodation for some form of buffer zone.

Thanks to Neustadt and others a myth has been fostered that

[31] *Ibid.*

[32] Neustadt, 137.

[33] *Ibid.*, 139. But, as we have indicated, the immediate risk was not only "military"; it was "political" as well.

Acheson felt constrained by his role as Secretary of State and by his reluctance to bring down upon the administration the obloquy that would follow, should MacArthur's offensive be called off, from going to the President to tell him that the war was on dangerous grounds.[34] It is true that Acheson could not help but be influenced to some extent by the obvious price which both he and the President would pay should it become known that he had been instrumental in denying MacArthur "total victory." MacArthur had made it clear that if his command were ordered back to the waist of Korea north of Pyongyang-Wonson he would regard it as an act of appeasement, a defeat for the West, and a scuttling of United Nations objectives.

Despite these considerations it would be a mistake to believe that Acheson was a convinced opponent of MacArthur's campaign, constrained to silence by virtue of his civilian role or by political expediency. Quite to the contrary, in confidential meetings with his staff and in conferences with Marshall and Bradley *in the absence of the President,* at which Acheson might have made known his reservation without intruding upon military policy, Acheson does not seem to have expressed any serious misgivings about the consequences of Chinese intervention. For example, at a meeting of Acheson and his staff on the morning of November 21, Acheson noted the confusion in MacArthur's authorizations. On a straight military basis, Acheson noted, he was authorized to pursue the enemy forces north of the 38th Parallel and destroy them as a military force. If China intervened he was to pursue the mission until it was evident he could not succeed. Acheson felt that *no one should change this part of the directive* until MacArthur had had a chance to "probe" the situation, but there was no attempt to define what was meant by "probe" or to arrive at any conclusions on the basis of alternative outcomes.

[34] Neustadt goes to an extreme when he writes that "for Cabinet members and for military chiefs, a decision to go to the President is something like a government's decision to go to war; it is not something done each day on every issue." *Ibid.,* 140. This happened to be an issue of the gravest kind involving the likelihood of war with China. This seems to me a strange explanation for keeping the President ignorant of the risks and no justification whatsoever unless we are to assume that the President is the equivalent of the pre-war Japanese emperor. Unfortunately, it seems to be true that in this instance the President was not kept informed, with what consequences we all know.

Acheson noted the concern which China and Russia might experience over the use of Korea as a route to Manchuria. But he doubted that the Communists believed that the United States would use Korea in that way. Their fear may relate, he said, "to propaganda on the rearmament of Japan. . . . This might lead you to believe that there is more sensitivity here than the intelligence reports lead one to believe."[35] This observation does not appear to have led to any significant revision of his thinking, however. Acheson's concluding observations accepted by implication the possibility of Chinese intervention.

> If MacArthur is successful in repelling Chinese intervention and ROK takes over tension may ease, but if Chinese Communist forces cannot be destroyed and strong resistance is met there and we find ourselves with a long struggle on our hands we must turn to negotiation and their [Chinese] sensitivity becomes even more important.[36]

Secondly, Acheson showed very little knowledge or concern about MacArthur's actual military dispositions. That afternoon (November 21) when Acheson, Marshall, Bradley, and their advisers met at the Pentagon, Robert Lovett, Undersecretary of Defense, reported nothing from MacArthur to indicate that he could not accomplish his mission of getting to the Yalu. Acheson did not demur from that judgment. Whatever reservations he may have had, the minute of the meeting shows General Marshall expressing his satisfaction that Acheson had stated his belief that MacArthur should push forward his planned offensive. Attention was mainly centered on the modalities by which a buffer zone would come into being between the United Nations Command and the Chinese along the Manchurian border. But the unreality of this discussion for bringing the war to an end should have been enough to make Acheson wonder about the feasibility of the campaign itself. Discussion at the November 21 meeting went as follows. Should the United Nations attempt to negotiate a buffer zone or simply make an announcement of intent to practice self-restraint? General Marshall preferred a political announcement of intent *following MacArthur's success.* "The time for making political proposals would

[35] Documentation, Princeton Seminar. Meeting in Department of State, Nov. 21, 1960. Note that it is on the basis of a sensitivity *to Japan*, not to the American advance, that Peking might react.

[36] *Ibid.*

be after MacArthur had had such a success."[37] Acheson stressed the need for finding a way of terminating Chinese intervention in the war should it occur. The concept of a buffer zone *based upon the high ground along the Yalu* was finally agreed upon, with Acheson envisaging a demarcation line accepted tacitly by the Chinese and ratified by negotiation. When the decision to try to establish a buffer zone along the Yalu River frontier became known to MacArthur, he immediately branded it "a form of appeasement on the lines of the Munich Conference in 1938,"[38] and let it be known that "to give up any portion of North Korea to the aggression of the Chinese Communists would be the greatest defeat of the free world in modern times."[39] The possibility of Chinese involvement was now taken for granted within the administration, but it was assumed that with the success of MacArthur's offensive it would only require a measure of self-restraint in the approaches to the Yalu to establish a buffer zone which would be accepted by the Red Chinese either tacitly or after some brief period of skirmishing.[40]

There was something strangely unreal and inconclusive about this meeting. Reputedly the principal participants had been laboring for weeks under the dread of Chinese involvement; now it was simply taken for granted that whatever happened MacArthur's offensive would be a success and that hostilities would end with the Chinese accepting some form of demarcation line between the UN Command and the Manchurian frontier.[41] Far from revealing great anxiety or trepidation about MacArthur's advance to the

[37] Minutes of meeting in the Pentagon, 2:23 P.M., Nov. 21, 1950.

[38] Higgins, 72.

[39] *Hearings*, 1957-59; Truman, II, 379-80.

[40] True to form, when the Pentagon told MacArthur that he should hold his forces on the Yalu heights, dominating the river, principally with ROK troops, and that the advance in the northeast should be stopped at Chonjin, MacArthur bluntly replied that it would be "utterly impossible to stop his command short of the frontier because of the terrain." He also felt that the matter of the hydroelectric power would *not* be a major factor. Lichterman, 38.

[41] The estimated presence of some 100,000 frontline Chinese troops (there were actually 300,000) together with 40,000 guerrillas in the rear of the United Nations Command does not seem to have dampened the confidence with which the American high command plotted the final stage of the war. Large though the United Nations Command seemed (377,000 men), it actually consisted of only 100,000 frontline strength, which (as General Marshall noted) was already stretched thin and about to become even more dispersed as it fanned out toward the Yalu.

Yalu, Acheson seems to have shared the prevailing confidence that MacArthur could accomplish his mission and that Chinese intervention, if it did occur, could be contained within a buffer zone along the Yalu.

In the light of the minutes of the meeting cited above, and of what we know about Acheson, it seems hard to believe that he felt constrained by his role as secretary of state or by considerations of domestic politics from revealing any deep concern he may have had about MacArthur's campaign. This was not the time for Acheson, Marshall, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff to engage in some kind of Gaston-and-Alphonse routine about who would be the first to break the news to the President that his Commander in Korea was a dangerous plunger whose judgment could no longer be trusted.[42]

Acheson's misjudgment which he shared with all the other participants seems to have derived from wishful thinking. "Such a lack of realism is not at all rare. Psychologists have noted a general disposition in individuals to exaggerate gratifying features of one's environment and to overrate the probability of desirable events. . . ."[43] Acheson still clung to the rather benign view of Peking's motives and capabilities which had all along conditioned his thinking. He had hardly entered, if at all, into Peking's frame of reference. Having first adopted a prudent policy toward Peking, he failed to adhere to it when the temptation to unify Korea became too great. While aware that there was a certain level of risk in attempting to unify Korea, he completely underestimated the

[42] It is also part of the myth that MacArthur's northward advance prompted trepidation and concern in allied chancellories. "From their forward positions on the Chongchou River to the Cabinet office in Whitehall, all were keeping their fingers crossed and hoping that the worst would not happen." Rees, 146. This seems to overrate the prevalent concern in foreign capitals. According to British Ambassador Sir Oliver Franks, "We did not perceive the crossing of the 38th parallel or the later November offensive as installments of MacArthurism . . . . No one really thought the Chinese would come in—I shouldn't say no one, but really one didn't consider it likely. Everybody thought the war was going well. MacArthur was in the process of ending the whole thing. If he was going beyond the limits set for him was it all that bad? That was the prevalent British view." Personal Interview, Worcester College, Oxford, June 27, 1964. In fairness, Rees does note that "like Truman and Acheson, Attlee and Bevin did not think that the objective of a united Korea would provoke a massive Chinese counteraction" (p. 147).

[43] Klaus Knorr, "Failures in National Intelligence Estimates: The Case of the Cuban Missiles," *World Politics*, XVI (1964), 455-67, quoted in Peter Toma and

incentive which China would have to protect its flank against a powerful foe to whom it imputed only the worst and most aggressive of intentions.

Secondly, Acheson was *not* well informed on the deficiencies of the military situation. There was no proper intelligence being received in Washington about the Chinese build-up, and what was being received was not being presented to the Secretary of State or the President by the JCS in such a way as to enable them to come to any very clear conclusions about the magnitude of the risks involved. Lichterman excuses the JCS by saying that "they were not sufficiently sure of their ground to be insistent."[44] But if, as reputedly they were, in a state of fear and trembling, why then did they have to be more sure?

The Joint Chiefs of Staff were rightly concerned about MacArthur's strategic dispositions, but their concern reached Acheson only in a muted form. MacArthur's violation of orders and his refusal to be guided or even influenced by recommendations from the JCS was essentially unknown to Acheson. The Joint Chiefs of Staff knew that MacArthur's forces were spread dangerously thin and that their disposition was faulty in the extreme but they were too intimidated and bamboozled by MacArthur to express their concern in an unequivocal or decisive fashion.[45] As a result, they put the best face possible upon the situation and let Acheson and presumably the President think that all was well. ("Lovett reported nothing from MacArthur to indicate that he could not accomplish his mission.") As in the subsequent case of the Bay of Pigs, the professional military passed over in silence miscalculations and risks which eventuated in "one of the great historic examples of human fallibility."[46] Here, too, the blame is attached to an impersonal phenomenon called role function. The Joint Chiefs

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Andrew Gyorgy (eds.), *Basic Issues in International Relations* (Boston, 1967), 343.

[44] Lichterman, 42.

[45] Bradley admits that MacArthur's stature was so great that the Joint Chiefs of Staff felt literally incapacitated to deal with him. Personal interview, Department of Defense, April 25, 1963. When Truman finally decided to remove MacArthur neither Marshall nor Bradley had difficulty convincing themselves that MacArthur had violated orders on countless occasions and should have been removed much earlier.

[46] Rees, 137.

of Staff, it is said, were reluctant to question the military feasibility of the political goals that MacArthur had been set and at the same time they were reluctant to interfere with the theater commander's authority. In point of fact, MacArthur was determined to carry out his plans despite JCS admonishments and the JCS were too weak to impose their collective judgment upon MacArthur or to bring to the attention of the President the obvious military risks inherent in what MacArthur was doing.

V

The meeting at the Pentagon on November 21 was the administration's last chance to stop MacArthur. On November 24 MacArthur launched his fatal "end-the-war" offensive. Hardly had the advance begun when the United Nations Command was struck by the full fury of the Chinese armies massed in the mountains. Within two days the advance which MacArthur had launched with such high hopes had become a defeat and within four days a total rout.

There is a refreshing candor in Acheson's subsequent statements about his and others' responsibility for misjudging Chinese intentions. "They really fooled us when it comes right down to it, didn't they?" asked Senator Saltonstall of Acheson in the course of the MacArthur hearings. "Yes, sir."[47]

Such candor is all very well, but it should not be allowed to divert our attention from the analysis of the mistakes themselves because there is always the danger of their being repeated. Characteristically, Acheson has been most forthright in pinpointing the initial error. In a cable of December 7, 1950, to William J. Sebald, MacArthur's political adviser, Acheson explained that Sebald must not let the notion exist that the Chinese intervention was due to the late November offensive. The department considers it important, Acheson wrote to Sebald, that

> when you encounter such explanations you make it clear that it is wholly at variance with fact, it is [the] unanimous considered judgment of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, supported by information from field commanders, the present Chinese offensive planned and staged over considerable periods of time. . . . Appearance on Korean front of Chi-

[47] *Hearings*, 1835.

> nese Communist troops . . . began during initial Korean assault and long before return to 38th parallel *indicating Peiping would in any case feel free to assert itself in Korea regardless of military situation.*[48]

Why was this not apparent to Acheson at the time? All previous experience forewarned that China would not willingly tolerate the presence of hostile armies in its backyard. The United States had not hesitated to resist aggression eight thousand miles from its shores; why should China not be expected to react to MacArthur's hostile campaign in similar fashion? With logic and history to guide us, what can possibly account for such a monumental aberrancy? The explanation seems to lie in the pervasive American tendency, shared by Acheson and his critics alike, to believe that somehow the canons of international politics are suspended when it comes to China. We have already indicated that China invoked in Acheson an image which was quite at variance with the facts and quite at variance with the way Acheson conducted diplomacy when he was dealing with the Soviet Union. Acheson's image of the Peking regime was that of a docile puppet of Moscow without a will of its own.

Characteristically, Acheson denigrates the importance of public opinion and insists that governments alone constitute the only meaningful agent in international relations. But in the case of China, Acheson denied that the regime in Peking represented in any real or ultimate sense the will of China and that somehow the stronger affinity of the Chinese people for democratic forms and for America would triumph over the malevolence of their leaders. It is difficult to excuse Acheson's judgment that the United States could conduct an offensive designed to wipe out China's North Korean ally and not expect Peking to react with the maximum force at its command.

If Acheson miscalculated Peking's intentions, MacArthur and the JCS miscalculated China's capabilities. The Joint Chiefs of Staff were under no obligation to be bound, as Lichterman points out, by the State Department's notion that "it was more likely that [the Chinese] would not come in than that they would."[49] Furthermore, a number of inhibitions had been set upon Mac-

[48] Quoted in Courtney Whitney, *MacArthur, His Rendezvous with History* (New York, 1956), 447.

[49] Lichterman, 42.

Arthur's conduct of the war, designed to limit the political and military risks of the campaign, such as halting at the waist, advancing to the Yalu with ROK troops only, and the like. These were as valid militarily as they were politically, because it was a prime military objective to avoid becoming entangled in a general war with China. Had MacArthur been held to these limitations his armies would not have been so vulnerable to the Chinese onslaught and it would certainly have prevented the campaign from becoming an unmitigated disaster whose consequences have weighed fatefully on Sino-American relations ever since.

Instead of removing MacArthur when he disobeyed orders (in the matter of using non-ROK troops in the border regions) and instead of being more specific in their directives to the theater commander, the JCS merely cautioned him and did not reveal to either the President or the Secretary of State the full extent of the military risks involved in MacArthur's gamble. The argument that the JCS did not want to interfere in the theater commander's conduct of the war is itself dubious when the theater commander was violating orders. Chains of command exist not as an abstraction but as a means of bringing the largest possible intelligence to bear upon the conduct of operations. The argument that the JCS had to respect the discretion of the theater commander has been invoked to excuse the fact that the JCS and the Secretary of Defense lacked the will to impose their better judgment upon MacArthur. General staffs and civilian secretaries of defense exist under a responsible system of government precisely for the purpose, among others, of coping with imperious, romantic, and irresponsible military figures such as MacArthur.

Nor does it appear that Acheson and his civilian associates were deterred from opposing MacArthur's campaign out of fear of the reaction in the Pentagon. On the contrary, General Bradley and other members of the JCS shared completely Acheson's view of grand strategy, that is, that a war with Red China would be the wrong war in the wrong place at the wrong time. Far from exploiting their political leverage, Bradley and the Joint Chiefs were so in accord with Truman and Acheson that they earned from Senator Taft the epithet of "political" generals. The Achilles heel of American policy in this instance lies elsewhere. It appears to lie in the comparative insouciance with which the conduct of policy

in the concluding phase of the war was left to the determination of the military campaign.

VI

Perhaps the case of Korea represents, as Alexander George says, "a sorry example, indeed, of narrow bureaucratic role playing at the highest advisory level."[50] But to leave it at that is not enough. The breakdown of the advisory function in this case revealed an intolerable divorce between the theater commander and the general staff and between the general staff and the President as commander-in-chief. But this breakdown was accompanied by an equally egregious tendency on the part of Acheson and his civilian associates to take the assumptions, claims, and estimates of the military at their face value. Once war begins, there may be a greater propensity than we care to admit for America's civilian leaders to accept the judgments of their military advisers with a mimimum of skepticism, to assume that military calculations are based upon more objective and rational criteria than prevail in other spheres. The frequency with which the military succeed in repeating the errors of the past, for instance, in their claims for the bombing of North Vietnam in the light of demonstrated limitations in the strategic bombing campaign in World War II and of the interdiction campaign in Korea, gives one pause.[51] It would be an exaggeration to say that there is in America an inadequate institutional subordination of soldiers to civilians, but there may be a more subtle danger of undue weight being given, in policy decisions, to technical military claims at the expense of general political considerations. After all, America has not lost many wars, and there may be an exaggerated confidence in the promises of the American military which only time will deflate.

Acheson assumed that winding up the war was a technical military problem well within the reach of the military. He was inadequately concerned, until it was too late, with the risks involved. He placed an implicit confidence in the military chain of com-

[50] Alexander George, *Presidential Control of Force: The Korean War and the Cuban Missile Crisis*, RAND, P-3627 (July 1967), 8.

[51] Despite an all-out interdiction campaign sustained over many months the U.S. Air Force and Navy were unable to prevent the Chinese command from supplying the ninety divisions deployed on the Korean front. Rees, 382-83.

mand. What was the reality of this chain of command?—a theater commander who, in the words of General Matthew Ridgway, had an unusual capacity for "discounting or ignoring all unwelcome facts," and a JCS that was incapable of either disciplining or firing MacArthur and which lacked the gumption to tell the President that he must do so.

There is a real danger of attributing the Korean tragedy to a deadlock in role-playing and thereby of ignoring the part which human passion and prejudice play in political affairs. There is also a danger of minimizing the limitations of American experience and of overlooking dangerous underlying social and psychological tendencies in American foreign policy. The advance to the Yalu is a prime example of an American propensity to take the righteousness of its actions for granted and to ignore the objective reality which its behavior represents to others. Overweening confidence in the judgments of military men may be another fault. Better organization for decision-making will not redeem a defective view of the universe or of America's place in it.