

## **How the Korean War Started**

The Korean War was the first war waged against an aggressor state by the United Nations in the twentieth century. It was unlike any other major conflict, in that there was no formal declaration of war to mark its beginnings and no peace treaty to mark its end. Casualties for the Korean people and for the United States and communist armed forces were horrific; and for the British and Commonwealth forces, it was their third biggest conflict in the twentieth century (Alexander, 1986). Unlike any previous war, Korea provided a complicated scenario of advance and retreat during 1950-51, followed by a deliberate decision to fight a “static war” throughout 1951-53, while negotiations between the delegates of the armed forces proceeded fitfully, first at Kaesong and then at Panmunjom. These negotiations often revolved around the prisoner of war issue, for Korea was the first war in which westerners were subjected to barbaric forms of imprisonment, ameliorated only when they responded positively to intensive indoctrination (Alexander, 1986). Many writers on the Korean War, when commenting on overall strategy and tactics employed by the two sides, lament the absence of a positive victory. However, it is important to stress the effective domination of the coasts of Korea by United Nations’ navies throughout the war; and the overwhelming victory achieved by United Nations’ air power, a victory that helped to bring an end to the conflict (Alexander, 1986). There is much that we still do not fully understand: the real motives of the Chinese in 1950 when they suddenly withdrew from the battlefields of North Korea; and when they hesitated to prevent the withdrawal of X Corps from northeastern Korea in December 1950 (Alexander, 1986). Most of all, for many years, there

was an extraordinary lack of recognition the political masters of both sides accorded to those who fought for principles enshrined in the constitutions of communist nations and the Charter of the United Nations (Alexander, 1986). Many people fought and died in Korea, and their sacrifice needs to be recognized. This essay will examine how and why the Korean War began within the context of the greater Cold War. From this it will be clear that the Korean War erupted as a microcosm of the greater Cold War, and Korea was very much used as the battleground for conflicting ideologies: Soviet-style communism versus Western-style democracy.

Prior to the end of the Second World War, Americans had little knowledge of Korea. The Allies had agreed at the 1943 Cairo Conference that Korea should be freed from Japanese occupation; at Potsdam in 1945 they noted that Korea would be the demarcation area for Soviet and American air and sea operations once Stalin had entered the war against Japan. It was not anticipated that Allied ground troops would ever be involved in Korea. However, the sheer speed of the Red Army advance after 8 August 1945 led to the Soviet occupation of Manchuria, the capture of four Japanese islands in the Kuriles and the penetration of north-east Korea (Cumings, 1981). Stalin's tactics had transformed the situation in East Asia and Truman promptly issued General Order No. 1, defining the 38 degree parallel as the line separating the interests of Russia and the United States in Korea. Stalin accepted this arrangement and the first American troops arrived in Inchon, Korea under the command of Lt. General John Reed Hodge, US military governor, on 8 September 1945 (Cumings, 1981).

Hodge was a veteran of the war in the Pacific and had led XXIV Corps through the Okinawa campaign during 1945. He was appointed military governor of the island

and was still based there when he was transferred to Korea as the nearest available senior officer. He had no experience of either politics or Korea. His Russian counterpart was Colonel General Ivan Chistiakov, a veteran of Stalingrad and formerly based in the Soviet Far East (Cumings, 1981). Both men encouraged the formation of political parties in their respective zones, though Hodge refused to tolerate the People's Republic movement, even though it encompassed most shades of political opinion and was a possible vehicle for the ultimate independence of a united Korea. Similarly, both military governors encouraged the return of Korean political leaders in 1945: Kim Il Sung, destined to become the first premier of North Korea; and Syngman Rhee, who would become the first President of South Korea. Chistiakov and Hodge first met in the Joint Commission in Seoul on 16 January 1946, charged with the creation of democracy in Korea but neither could agree on a definition of the term (Cumings, 1981). It soon became clear to Truman that Chistiakov was creating a communist state north of the 38 degree Parallel. Truman's personal adviser, Edwin A Pauley, entered the Soviet zone May-June 1946 and reported that Russian propaganda was brainwashing the Korean people with slogans such as, 'The Soviet government is the highest form of democracy,' and, 'For the Fatherland, for the party, for Stalin' (Cumings, 1981: 201). The Red Army was running the country's transport and economic infrastructure and was promising the people a golden future under communism. Pauley was convinced that, because most people were peasant farmers who had previously been denied the right to vote, they would back the North Korean Communist Party. According to Pauley, communism had a better chance of establishing itself in North Korea than anywhere else in the world (Cumings, 1981).

Truman feared the Russian propaganda might even undermine the military government he had established under Hodge in South Korea. Syngman Rhee warned Hodge that this propaganda, coupled with the failure to deal with the effects of floods, poor harvest, and the mass exodus of refugees from the North, could lead to civil war. Indeed, there were many violent demonstrations in South Korea against the American presence and in favour of independence during 1946-47 (Millett, 2005). Not all of these could be attributed to communist agitation. Truman had to balance such difficulties against his wish to contain the danger of communist expansion in Korea, and this is why he proposed to the Russians that a Joint Conference be held with the aim of creating a united Korea as quickly as possible. He offered to hold secret elections with universal suffrage for the Korean people. Naturally the Russians refused to accept the terms of the proposal in August 1947, because they knew they would be defeated in a secret ballot: they assumed that as most Koreans lived south of the Parallel the majority would vote for a western-style democratic government (Millett, 2005). Russia's response was to accuse the Americans of being in breach of existing agreements, reminding them that in Moscow on 27 December 1945, the United States had agreed to establish a democratic government (Millett, 2005: 104) for all of Korea prior to the recognition of Korean independence. But neither side could agree on a political process to achieve a democratically elected Korean government. However, the Russians did propose that all occupation troops be removed from Korea during 1948. Truman's Chiefs of Staff gave tacit approval to this by stating that there was little strategic interest in maintaining 45,000 troops and their expensive bases in South Korea (Millett, 2005).

In a final effort to hold elections before pulling out US troops, Truman took the problem to the United Nations which in turn created the United Nations Temporary Commission on Korea (later replaced by UNCOK – the United Nations Commission on Korea). This commission met in Seoul on 12 January 1948, but the Russians refused to let it cross the Parallel to let it hold elections in the North. It therefore supervised free elections in South Korea on 10 May 1948, and the newly elected National Assembly in turn selected Syngman Rhee as President of the Republic of Korea (Millett, 2005). On 15 August, with General MacArthur, Supreme Commander Allied Powers in attendance, the new republic came into being with its capital at Seoul. This event terminated the American military government and General Hodge, having overseen the transition to civilian political control, left Korea for a new command at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. In the North the communists proclaimed the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (9 September 1948) with its capital at Pyongyang. Russian armed forces withdrew from Korea in December and in June 1949, all US troops (apart from a 480-strong US Korea Military Advisory Group) left the South. So the attempt to create a unified Korea had totally failed; instead, there now existed two, ideologically-opposed Koreas, divided by the 38 degree Parallel, both the protégés of the two most powerful nations in the world and separated by a profound disagreement over the meaning of the word “democracy” (Millett, 2005).

Truman had been far from happy with the outcome. He had very little confidence in Syngman Rhee's narrow-minded, right-wing beliefs and realized that South Korea was rapidly turning into a police state, controlled by a dictator with a large armed National Constabulary and a small but growing army. But Korea was one of many locations

where the tensions of the Cold War nagged upon his mind and so he remained anxious to prop up Rhee's South Korea with economic and military aid. Congress was less willing and deliberately dragged its feet so that US military support to South Korea was minimal at this point (Cumings, 1981).

The news that North Koreans with tanks and air support had crossed the 38 degree Parallel and were rapidly advancing on Seoul was a considerable shock to President Truman. There had been earlier rumours of war: in March 1950 the Central Intelligence Agency had spoken of a possible North Korean invasion in June 1950. This obviously made little impact on Truman, for on 1 June he had told the Press that conditions for world peace were better than since the end of the Second World War (Blair, 1987).

Truman held his first war conference on the crisis in Korea after dinner at Blair House, a mansion being used by his family while apartments in the White House were undergoing renovation (Hickey, 1999). US Ambassador John J. Muccio had sent a report from Seoul based on information filtered through from members of the US Korean Military Advisory Group: Ongjin, Kaesong and Chunchong had all been attacked and there had been a North Korean amphibious landing near Kangnung. Muccio was certain that the attack had been initiated by North Korea. Truman also had a message from John Foster Dulles who was in Tokyo and had just returned from Korea. He was in no doubt that North Korea was the aggressor and urged the immediate use of American armed forces, suggesting that the Security Council of the United Nations should call for UN members to aid South Korea. Truman agreed (Hickey, 1999). North Korean aggression had to be blocked, and blocked quickly. He had been contemptuous of British and French appeasement of Nazi Germany in the 1930s. If Kim Il Sung were appeased this

could mark the beginning of a Third World War. To prevent the further expansion of communist power, Truman was ready to change American foreign policy. He authorized the use of US air power against the invading North Korean tanks and ordered the US Navy to patrol the straits between Taiwan and mainland China (Hickey, 1999). Next day, on 27 June, Truman and Acheson met US Congressional leaders and confirmed that America would defend South Korea. As a member of the United Nations and of the Security Council it was America's duty to do so. At that stage, when diplomatic and military intelligence available to the President was, to say the least, imperfect. Truman and Acheson instinctively held the Soviet Union responsible for the North Korean attack. Acheson advised caution and recommended that the President should not publicly brand the Soviet Union as the evil genius behind the invasion but should try to contain the crisis as a local war in the Far East (Hickey, 1999). When, on the same day, Stalin received a polite diplomatic note from Washington asking him to confirm that he had no responsibility for the invasion, the Soviet dictator responded simply by saying that it was improper for foreigners to become involved in Korea's internal matters. Acheson was not impressed: he privately believed that Kim Il Sung was a "proxy of the Soviet Union" (Hickey, 1999). In light of Stalin's reply, and in the interest of world peace, both Truman and he favoured handling the Korean affair as a local issue. Such a policy, unprecedented in the brief history of the Cold War, might prevent its sparking a Third World War against the Soviet Union and the newly established People's Republic of China (Hickey, 1999).

It is important to note that a previous UN General Assembly resolution dated 21 October 1949 defined the Republic of Korea as a lawfully established government. The

Security Council now viewed “with grave concern the armed attack upon the Republic of Korea by forces from North Korea.” It stated that North Korea’s action constituted a breach of the peace. Voting was 9-0 in favour, with one abstention (Yugoslavia) and one member absent (USSR) (Brady, 1990).

On June 27, Dean Rusk had stated that “a South Korea absorbed by the Communists would be a dagger pointed at the heart of Japan” (Brady, 1990:74). The Americans did bring pressure on the Security Council to act in this emergency according to UN principles. America’s representative informed the Council that the President of the United States had authorized US naval and air forces to give cover and support to ROK troops resisting the invasion. Moreover, the US Seventh Fleet was now patrolling the straits between the People’s Republic of China and Taiwan (Brady, 1990). He then provided a draft resolution adopted by the Security Council – now in receipt of three further UNCOK cables. This was adopted by the Security Council, which then invited General Assembly members to “furnish such assistance to the Republic of Korea as may be necessary to repel the armed attack and restore international peace and security in the area” (Brady, 1990: 75). Normally, this would have failed, vetoed by the Soviet Union. However, the Soviet delegate, Jacob Malik, had been conspicuously absent since February 1950 in protest against the UN refusal to admit the unrepresented People’s Republic of China in place of the Chinese Nationalist Government on Taiwan, then occupying a permanent seat on the Security Council. (Brady, 1990).

It was a Franco-British draft resolution to the Security Council on July 7 that proposed a Unified Command to oversee developments in Korea; and asked that the United States should provide the commander of the United Nations’ forces (Hickey,

1999). This draft resolution was adopted; it noted that governments and peoples of the UN, in support of the two resolutions to help South Korea in defending itself against armed attack and have made offers of assistance. Later, the Soviet Union's delegate, returned to the Security Council (1 August 1950) and argued that the Council's resolutions were null and void because of their earlier absence. However, the Security Council held that if a member wished to block a resolution it must be present to veto it (Hickey, 1999). To be absent was to decline to use the veto and in that sense, an absent member was held to concur in the passing of a resolution. On 3 August 1950, the Soviets changed their tack: their argument was that the Korean War was really a civil war being fought to secure unification of that country. UN intervention was therefore illegal, a point that the Security Council found untenable (Hickey, 1999).

This essay has examined how and why the Korean War began within the context of the greater Cold War. We examined the political chess that was played by both sides, and how efforts to avoid war were unsuccessful. There are many theories about who actually instigated the war, but as was described in this paper, it is generally thought, at least by the majority in the West, that it was North Korea's aggression that spurred it. From this it is clear that the Korean War erupted as a microcosm of the greater Cold War, and Korea was very much used as the battleground for conflicting ideologies; Soviet-style communism and Western-style democracy.

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