KOREAN CONFLICT

AMERICA’S “FORGOTTEN WAR”
TURNING POINT

- The Korean Conflict is one of the least publicized and discussed wars in American history, save for the television series *M.A.S.H.*. For too long it has been overshadowed by the Allied triumph in World War II and the tragedy of the Vietnam War. It has been ignored because when the conflict ended in 1953, Americans longed to return to a sense of normalcy.

- Notwithstanding the Korean War marked a turning point of the twentieth century. It was the first direct military confrontation of the Cold War, the first limited war of the nuclear age, the first United Nations war, and the first war the U.S. did not win. The scourge of war left Korea destroyed and divided. The conflict helped to create the Cold War national security state as it led to the rearmament of the U.S. and dramatic rises in the defense budget. The U.S. emerged from the Korean War with the most powerful military in the world. The war hastened the racial integration of the armed forces, which in turn served as a catalyst for the later civil rights movement. The conflict solidified the role of the U.S. as the world’s police power. Intervention was the first expression of the newly expansive foreign policy outlined in NSC-68. America heightened its backing of NATO, Taiwan, and the French in their war in Indochina. The Korean War contributed to the proliferation of American global strategic alliances and security treaties, such as SEATO and ANZUS. The war hardened American attitudes toward “Red China” and domestic leftism. It was one of the contributing causes of McCarthyism. Additionally, the U.S. began to aid the French in their war in Indochina.

Militarily, the Korean War had two distinct phases—maneuver and stalemate. The limited nature of the war placed restrictions on its conduct by political leaders on both sides too. History would repeat itself in Vietnam. Even Japan’s emergence as an economic power has its origins in the Korean War. Technically the Korean War continues because only an armistice agreement halted fighting. The Korean peninsula remains divided and one of the world’s most dangerous flash points.
ORIGINS

- Second World War and developing Cold War combined to produce the division of Korea.
- Soviets liberated Korea north of the 38th parallel from Japanese control, while the U.S. took over the territory to the south.
- Because of the rising Cold War hostility dividing the Grand Alliance, by 1945 relations between Korea’s two occupation forces were already antagonistic. Unification by peaceful means was quite unlikely.

Kim Il Sung
DIVISION

• Neither occupying power was willing to accept a settlement that denied their side predominance in a united Korea.

• In the North, the Soviets backed Kim Il Sung, a young Communist guerrilla fighter. Meanwhile, Americans supported Syngman Rhee, an elderly, obstinate, authoritarian, and anti-communist leader.

• Although Truman “did not care for [Rhee’s] methods,” the U.S. supported his government because it anti-communist.
CONTAINMENT

• Test of American honor and credibility and commitment to “containing” Communism

• Learn lessons of the 1930s; “appeasement” of dictators simply encouraged them to escalate their demands, whereas firm, vigilant resistance to aggression would cause them to yield and withdraw

• American leaders viewed Stalin as a second Hitler and Kim merely as his puppet; contain Moscow-directed global expansion of Communism

• Truman considered Korea to be the “Greece of the Far East.”
Eager to reunite Koreans under its rule, the People’s Republic of Korea (PRK) invaded South Korea on June 25, 1950.

President Harry S Truman ordered American forces under General Douglas MacArthur to repel the invasion.

Beginning in the 1980s, revisionist historians blamed America and South Korea for provoking hostilities, argued that the conflict was basically a civil war, and charged that ethnocentrism and economic imperialism influenced American policymakers.
Truman considered the North Korean invasion a Soviet-directed act of aggression rather than an internal matter.

Thanks to a Soviet boycott of the UN Security Council at that time, the UN, at the instigation of the United States, condemned the invasion and voted to assume responsibility for the defense of South Korea, inviting members to furnish military forces for that purpose to be placed at the disposal of United States commander, General Douglas MacArthur.”
IMPERIAL PRESIDENCY

• For three years (1950-1953) America fought the first limited war in its history.
• Truman committed American troops to battle in a UN “police action” without congressional approval. Actions such as these would later lead to charges that an “imperial presidency” had developed.
• Some have charged Truman with going to war to prove to Republicans that Democrats were not “soft on communism.”
• Eventually nearly 1.8 million Americans would serve in Korea, of whom 54,200 were killed, 103,300 wounded, and 8,200 missing in action.
• Besides the preponderant American and South Korean forces, military units from 15 other members of the UN fought in the conflict.
• The aim of the American sponsored UN resolution was to create a “unified, independent and democratic Korea.”
NORTH KOREAN OFFENSIVE

• The initial offensive (June-Sept. 1950) drove defenders from the 38th parallel to the Naktong River.
• MacArthur’s forces managed to hold the southeast center of the Korean peninsula.

Checking for mines
INCHON AND “LIBERATION”

- MacArthur launched a brilliant counteroffensive (Sept. – Nov. 1950) with an amphibious assault at Inchon.
- MacArthur’s forces pushed the North Koreans back to the 38th parallel, but Truman and MacArthur decided to conquer North Korea and place it under the control of the South Korean government.
- When MacArthur’s armies neared the Yalu River (boundary between PRK and PRC), Mao Zedong warned that China would not “stand idly by.”
CHINESE INTERVENTION

- After MacArthur ignored Mao’s threat, 33 divisions of Chinese troops pushed MacArthur’s forces deep into South Korea (Nov. 1950- Jan. 1951), thwarting attempts to “liberate” North Korea.
- Following months of bloody fighting, the U.S. Eighth Army of Gen. Matthew Ridgway drove the Chinese (Jan. – April 1951) back across the 38th parallel.

Mao Zedong
LIMITED WAR

• Truman ordered MacArthur to hold his position while the U.S. sought to negotiate a settlement.
• The notion of a “limited war” complemented the “containment” theory of anti-communism, in which the goal was to halt the spread of Communism by all means short of general war.
• MacArthur protested forcefully, swearing he could achieve total victory if only Truman would allow him to atomic-bomb and blockade China. MacArthur also proposed “unleasing Chiang Kai-shek” and his Taiwan troops on North Korea and China.
INSUBORDINATION

• Truman and the JCS were determined to avoid direct conflict with China and the Soviet Union because he feared it would lead to a third world war. Truman maintained, “We are trying to prevent a world war—not start one.”

• MacArthur resisted any limits on his military discretion and wanted to attack China. He openly criticized the president and refused to desist: “There is no substitute for victory.”

• Truman removed MacArthur from command to uphold the principle of civilian control over the military.

• Truman designated Gen. Ridgway to succeed MacArthur.

• Chairman of the JCS Gen. Omar Bradley warned against global war, saying that MacArthur’s strategy would “involve us in the wrong war, at the wrong place, at the wrong time, and with the wrong enemy.”
TRUMAN’S OTHER BATTLE

• A storm of public outrage followed the removal of MacArthur.
• As the war developed into a bloody stalemate, Truman faced a frustrated American public. People criticized his handling of the economy and homefront. Some even accused him of socialism and outright despotism.
• The war destroyed Truman’s plans for large-scale domestic reform and led to periods of economic turmoil.
BLOODY STALEMATE

• Hard fighting occurred in the Iron Triangle and Punch Bowl regions just north of the 38th parallel.

• Two savage battles led to Communist defeats at Heartbreak Ridge (Sept. – Oct. 1951) and Pork Chop Hill (April 1953).

• UN forces maintained control over the seas and skies.

• An armistice signed on July 27, 1953 resulted in a cessation of hostilities and a prisoner exchange, but it left the peninsula divided close to the 38th parallel and actually satisfied none of the belligerents.
A RETURN TO NORMALCY

• Historian Paul Pierpaoli writes, “When the Korean conflict ended in an armistice in July 1953, most Americans wanted nothing more than a return to normalcy. They wanted to like Ike and focus on the American Dream. So they bought television sets, went to college in record numbers, ogled Detroit’s big-finned behemoths, moved en masse to suburbia, and gyrated themselves into the era of rock and roll. But they also forgot the sacrifice and slaughter that had taken place on the Korean Peninsula, and quickly pushed aside the scourge of McCarthyism, which the war had unleashed.”
CONSEQUENCES

• 3,000,000 Koreans dead, wounded, or missing; destroyed and divided peninsula
• U.S. expended 54,000 lives and $54 billion.
• Defense spending skyrocketed from one-third to two-thirds of the entire federal budget.
• Desegregation of the Eighth Army during Korean operations was a milestone for blacks.
• McCarthyism fed on public discontent with the conduct of the war.
• Frustration with the “limited war” and stalemate led to widespread dissent and the presidential triumph of Republican Dwight D. Eisenhower.
• The U.S. strengthened its military commitment to NATO.
LEGACIES

• “Pactomania”—the war hastened the signing of the Japanese peace treaty and the formation of SEATO and ANZUS.
• Truman administration escalated military assistance to the French in their war in Indochina and then sent “advisers” to South Vietnam.
• The later American involvement in Vietnam, as in Korea, the U.S. government was never able to delineate clearly the currents of nationalism, Communism, and imperialism that seemed to flow into one another.
• The Korean War provided the foundation for the entire Cold War military and defense efforts and prepared the country for the seemingly indefinite struggle against Communism where ever it might emerge.
• The conflict made permanent large defense budgets and granted the federal government greater control over the nation’s resources.
• Bureaucracies grew larger than ever.
• The idea of carrying an increasing national debt became the norm.
• As a result of government-sponsored economic activity, the industrial base became skewed as defense industries emerged in the South and West. Meanwhile, older industrial areas of the Northeast and Midwest stagnated. As economic power began to shift, so did political power.
• The war dislodged the Democrats’ hold on federal power that stretched back over two decades.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


