The Korean War: A Review Essay

The Korean War is most commonly known as “The Forgotten War” largely because it is overshadowed by World War II and the Vietnam War.\(^1\) Numbers of opinions have been offered with regards to how the war began, how the war played out, and the treaty that was reached at the end of the war. Some authors can find some common ground among them when you look at their overall arguments, while others there is no common ground to be found. The Korean was a controversial war when you look at it in the context that it happened. The war officially began in 1950, and during that time the U.S. was in an anti-Communist hysteria. What needs to be addressed is why the United States entered the Korean War looking at the origins, political and military, and a few cultural aspects (these came from the U.S. entering the war) for the U.S. to enter the conflict.

The beginnings of the war are not completely agreed upon by many authors but when reading through their arguments they put the blame on that fact that the Korean partition was imposed from without with little reference to the aspirations of the Korean people.\(^2\) It is also cited in Karunakar Gupta’s article, *How did the Korean War Begin?* That the idea of using the 38\(^{th}\) parallel as a dividing line was ill thought out because it made absolutely no sense. The division of the country caused problems to heighten among the two newly created countries. There was a political divisions between the Left and the Right some influenced by Marxism-Leninism, or Chinese communism, while still others were being influences by Western ideas,

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Confucianism, or a mixture of the two. This emergence of the two different political parties had lasting effects with regards to Korea’s political development leaving a debilitating effect on Korea’s role in the world arena. To complicate things in the Koreas, Soviet involvement in the north lead to the U.S. sending troops over to the south in an attempt to stop Soviet troops from advancing too far south. The Soviet’s interest in Korea stems from the fact that that the two countries touch and Korea’s northern frontier. The Korean peninsula under Soviet influence would be a source of strength to them, under enemy control it would be a source of weakness. The American interest in Korea was not as obvious as the Soviet’s. The U.S. played a role in opening the peninsula to Western powers. For the most part the U.S. up until the end of World War II was indifferent towards Korea. Once the war was over the U.S. policymakers believed that we should play a larger and more active role in international affairs than we had in the past. This belief was not central to the U.S.’s postwar plans. Within Korea the north and south were having political parties jockeying for position to lead the country. In the north the communist movement was notorious for its factional strife. This strife was between the Yenan group, who were returnees from China and North Korean Communists. The Yenan group was an asset to the North Koreans because they had worked closely with Chinese Communists and possessed larger numbers of trained military personnel. The leaders of these two rival groups found that the division between them would be harmful to their overall cause, so they came to an agreement to combine. Kim Il-song, who was one of the returnees from China, was the sole bread winner, becoming the leader of the North Korean people. He used traditional Communist tactics by

4 Koh May 1971
5 Stueck 1995
merging rival groups, using propaganda, and violence according to Chong-Sik Lee. The south
did not have the hardships that the north had and even though they were an authoritarian
government the people in South Korean had much more freedoms politically, economically, and
personally.  

With regards to how the war in Korea actually began depends on which side of the story you are listening. The North Koreans have consistently maintained that the U.S. started the war, but despite considerable attention there has emerged no clear school of interpretation. The UN military Observers’ Report, which came on June 26th one day after the accused attack from the north on the south, said that the South Korean army was organized entirely for defense and that it was taken by surprise. If you take a Western perspective on the conflict, you will hear them accuse the north of invading the south on June 25th. Apparently the Soviet Union knew of North Korea’s intention to invade the south and provided the support needed to carry the attack out. On that same morning the North Koreans accused the south of crossing the border and attacking a town on the northern side. It appeared that both sides had claimed forward action by the south but disagreed on the order of events. The American position, according to President Truman, was the North Koreans attacked the south under Stalin’s order. Robert T. Oliver, who was an adviser to South Korean President Syngman Rhee, said that the U.S. invited a Soviet inspired attack when it publically declared the exclusion of South Korea from America’s defense perimeter in East Asia. We get one perspective from Hong-Kyu Park that the U.S. was disinterested in the south, but the reason for that was because the aid bill for Korea was rejected

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7 Koh May 1971  
11 Park 1983
by Congress, Korea had actually been written off the U.S.’s defense policy since the end of the 1940s. However, Secretary of State Dean G. Acheson attempted to drum up support for aid to South Korea saying it was vital for the south’s survival. The idea of containing Soviet expansion was an attractive policy to American leaders. They hoped that by giving aid they could avoid giving military support, which was the idea until the North attacked the South. We again see the difference in opinion about who attacked who first. Matray gives the information that the north attacked the south, but we have seen from other sources that the initial spark to start the war is unknown. David Rees also gives the impression, in his book *Korea: The Limited War*, that the north attacked the south and the attack was a complete surprise to the U.S. government. The south probably could have gained from war with the north because of dwindling support for President Rhee, but he needed to enter a war he knew he could win and this depended on U.S. willingness to give support. Matray is cited in Park’s article as saying that the U.S. involvement in Korea was done with great reluctance from Truman. That was until General MacArthur reported to Truman that the territory lost to the North Koreans could be regained but only through the use of U.S. ground troops. Truman’s administration was convinced that the north’s attack was a Soviet attempt at global domination, and because of the South’s inability to defend itself the U.S. decided upon military intervention. The initial goal of the U.S. was to restore the South Korean border to the 38th parallel. When MacArthur stopped the North Korean’s military advance, this changed the administration’s attitude toward not crossing the 38th parallel. The choice to cross the parallel drew the Chinese into the conflict. The Chinese felt that the

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14 Warner January 1980
15 Park 1983
American invasion was a “barbarous act that threatened the security of China.” The decision by Truman to pursue the complete destruction of North Korea was dangerous, both politically and militarily. Militarily because when the administration went back to its policy of restoring the status quo ante bellum in Korea, MacArthur felt that it put restrictions on his command. He was later relieved of his duties by President Truman. Republicans began to denounce Truman for taking part in appeasement. Politically, Truman was damned if he did and damned if he didn’t. Matray says that public criticism probably would have been more severe had Truman not crossed the parallel. The prolonged fighting was widely unpopular in the United States and generated discontent with the Truman administration. Eisenhower’s party made this a central theme of their campaign in 1952. Truman was eager to end the unpopular war because of the election year but in his eagerness he contradicted the UN stand that no power should use the truce to make itself stronger. The decision to cross the parallel was the culmination of the U.S.’s efforts to resolve the Korean predicament. Had the American forces stopped at the 38th parallel it would have been a major victory that would have secured the interests of the U.S. The problem was that the American leaders viewed the Korean conflict in the larger context of American-Soviet competition thinking they could gain an easy victory. By crossing the 38th the U.S. drew China into the conflict and China’s involvement happened only when China felt her territory being threatened and when it was clear Russia would not send troops to protect China from American invasion.

When looking at how the war ended and the negotiations that took place, the notion that the communists first proposed to end the fighting by negotiations actually came from the United

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Park February 1983
Matray September 1979
Warner January 1980
By this time Eisenhower had come into office. It has been argued that during the final stages of the armistice negotiations that were threats of nuclear war thrown around against the People’s Republic of China if there was continued failure to agree to terms. The Chinese were well aware of the American potential to use its atomic arsenal in the Korean conflict. At this point the Chinese were actually considering getting some of their own nuclear weapons. It wasn’t until the Eisenhower administration that the Chinese began to worry about the U.S. escalating the war to a nuclear one. The armistice had five items that were being negotiated. Items 2-4 were ones that caused strife between both sides, item 2 was a proposal to create a demilitarized zone, which faced opposition initially, but was ultimately agreed to. Items 3 and 4 were different, and Americans lacked faith in future Communist intentions. Item 3 had to deal with the relationship between neutral observers and a military armistice commission, and the extent of inspection. Item 4 dealt with the POWs from both sides and an “all-for-all” exchange that U.S. policymakers found unfair. They later realized that their stubbornness was not allowing talks to move forward and conceded the issue. It was clear that both sides wanted to end the fighting. Because of animosity and suspicion between the two sides this kept the prospects for an early accommodation in doubt.

The least discussed side of the war is the social and economic impact on the United States. Both the Korean and Vietnam wars were supported to the same degree and by the same segments of society with support never rising above fifty percent.

The armistice that was signed at Panmunjom on July 27, 1953 is still in effect today. Truman made the United States a policeman of communism by committing our military to Korea

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21 Park February 1983
23 Stueck 1995
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to aid the south. The Korean War was one that was a sticky situation for the United States to become involved in and it is obvious that no clear reasons have been uncovered. Much like the Vietnam War, the U.S. should probably have just stayed home. The origins of the war differ depending on the side you talk to and why each side became involved militarily and politically are different according to the perspective being studied. It is obvious that the Soviets saw strategic advantage to the Korean peninsula and the U.S. was attempting to halt any communist expansion. In their attempt to stop communist expansion the U.S. caused China to feel threatened and in effect drew that country into the conflict. Culturally the Korean conflict was viewed in an unfavorable light, ranking among the Vietnam War in unpopularity. The final agreement between all the countries involved was not a quick resolution, but both sides realized that the war needed to end and came to compromises on issues of disagreement to aid in ending the conflict. The fact that even with extensive work done on this war there are still possibilities for study regarding this war. Most conclusions will be tentative as long as the Americans, Soviets, and Chinese keep remaining evidence hidden.\textsuperscript{25}

\textsuperscript{25} Park February 1983
Bibliography


