

Korea: The Right War? At What Price?

The Vietnam war was not the first war in Southeast Asia in which the United States lost over 50,000 men. Earlier, America fought a bitter war in Korea—a struggle that most Americans know mainly from the television show *MASH*. There was nothing funny, however, about the real Korean War.

At 6 a.m., June 25, 1950, the army of Communist North Korea invaded non-communist South Korea, allegedly repelling an invasion from the South. President Harry S. Truman was at dinner at his home in Independence, Missouri, when Secretary of State Dean Acheson called from Washington and told him, "Mr. President, I have very serious news." Within a week, American air, sea, and ground forces had been committed. Over the next three years, in a conflict that would soon engage us with China, almost six million Americans served and 54,000 died.

Ironically, just months before, the National Security Council, with Truman as chair, endorsed a recommendation of the Joint Chiefs of Staff that Korea was "of little strategic value to the United States and that commitment to United States use of military forces in Korea would be ill-advised."

Why had the war begun? Who was responsible? President Truman took the position that the North Koreans invaded the South on direct orders from Joseph Stalin. In fact, Stalin apparently reluctantly consented to the North Korean plan for a campaign that would conquer the South before the Americans could react. Truman declared, "The attack upon Korea makes it plain beyond all doubt that communism has passed beyond the use of subversion to conquer independent nations and will now use armed invasion and war." Robert T. Oliver, an American advisor to South Korea's President, Syngman Rhee, claimed, in contrast, that the United States itself had unwittingly provoked the attack, by declaring that South Korea lay outside our defense perimeter.

It must be noted, however, that armed struggle between North and South Korea had been going on since 1945, part of a Korean civil war, in which both the North and South were trying to unify the nation on their own terms.

Why did the United States become involved in the war? Domestic politics doubtless contributed to Truman's decision to intervene in Korea. His popularity had fallen sharply in the polls, and Republicans accused him of losing China to the communists.

Above all, Truman and other policy makers were motivated by what they took to be the lessons of the 1930s: that the failure to take a firm stand against totalitarian aggression early on had simply invited a larger war to occur later. Convinced that the communist invasion of Korea was merely the first step in a broad plan of global domination, Truman began a massive program of military rearmament for the U.S. and its North Atlantic Treaty allies. The president tripled the U.S. defense budget, dispatched four divisions to Europe, and authorized the rearming of Germany.

Initially, America's objective in the war was to restore South Korea's border at the 38th parallel. But after a series of military victories over the North Koreans, an overconfident Truman launched a drive forward to liberate North Korea. Suddenly, a defensive war was transformed into an offensive war. The decision to carry the war into the North had momentous consequences. As Americans

approached the Yalu River, Chinese intervened to prevent a perceived threat to Chinese security and proceeded to push Americans back to the 38th parallel.

The Korean war dragged on until 1953. The number of Americans killed in Korea—54,246—was nearly the same as in Vietnam, 56,146. But the total casualties were actually higher in Korea. A million soldiers and two to three million civilians killed, compared to about one million in Vietnam.

What was the war's legacy? Truman's critics charge that one consequence of the war was to provide an important precedent for the abuse of the President's war making powers by committing American troops to what he termed a police action in defense of common security without formal Congressional approval. Critics also contend that the Korean war committed the United States to the military containment of communism not just in Europe but throughout the world.

The war carried a number of other important lessons for the future—lessons largely ignored at the time. The Korean war revealed the difficulty of defeating determined adversaries, even with the staunch support of our allies and a virtual monopoly of sophisticated weaponry. Korea also revealed the difficulty of fighting a limited war, in which our objectives are unclear and there is a threat of intervention by other major powers. And finally, Korea revealed how difficult it is for the United States to extricate from a war. Today, over four decades after the war began, American troops and material remain in Korea, and the Korean peninsula remains the most heavily armed area in the world.