

## The Korean War

The Korean conflict, which began in June 1950, pitted the hapless army of the Republic of Korea supported by a UN force, made up mainly of American military personnel, against a battle-hardened North Korean army that had all but conquered the South by the time the U.S. intervened. Then, starting in late October of 1950, when, after a spectacular counteroffensive, the UN forces seemed poised to occupy all of North Korea, the Chinese Red Army streamed across the Yalu River and crashed down on the unprepared American forces, driving them back down the peninsula in a bloody retreat. On the domestic front, President Truman found himself quickly at odds with American (and UN) commander, Gen. Douglas MacArthur, whose rash advance toward the Yalu precipitated the Chinese intervention and threatened to turn a “limited war” into World War III.

Truman and his military advisers had made the decision in September 1950 to proceed north of the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel dividing North and South Korea, and – miscalculating Chinese intentions – were intent on reunifying the country under a non-communist government. They based this decision in part on MacArthur’s assurances that the Chinese would not dare to join the fight. When the Chinese did, in fact, invade, MacArthur called for air strikes north of the Yalu, in China itself, to stem the tide, and became panic-stricken by the sudden change in his military situation. After much hesitation, Truman relieved MacArthur of command in April 1951 and replaced him with Gen. Matthew Ridgeway, who proceeded to stop the retreat and to launch a counter-offensive which eventually returned the situation to approximately where it had been at the outset of the war, with the Americans facing-off against Chinese and some North Korean forces along the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel. The fighting continued off and on for almost another two years, with heavy losses on both sides. The military stalemate caused Truman’s approval ratings to plummet and contributed to Dwight Eisenhower’s decisive victory in the 1952 presidential election against the Democratic candidate Adlai Stevenson.

Truman and his principle civilian and military advisors had seriously misread the situation in the Far East in the years immediately following World War II. Their focus had been squarely on Europe and the Soviet threat, and even the successful Chinese communist offensive against Chiang Kai Shek’s Nationalists was explained largely as a result of Soviet assistance to Mao’s armies. In October 1949, six months after the signing of the North Atlantic Treaty creating the NATO military alliance, Chinese communist forces pushed the Nationalists out of mainland China and on to the island of Formosa (Taiwan). Truman, Defense Secretary George Marshall and Secretary of State Dean Acheson attributed the Nationalist’s defeat to the corruption and ineptitude of Chiang and his generals. The Republicans, on the other hand, quickly seized on the “loss of China” as a major gain for their party in their domestic battle with the Democrats and Truman personally.

Thus, when Truman received the phone call from Acheson on Sunday morning, June 25, 1950, with the news that the North Korean army, led by some two hundred Russian T-38 tanks, was streaming across the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel and threatening to overthrow the government of President Syngman Rhee, he had to react both to the threat of communist expansion in Asia and the fear of Republican attacks in Washington. Even before phoning Truman with news of the attack,

Acheson had called UN Secretary General Trygve Lee to request an emergency meeting of the Security Council to condemn the North Korean aggression and rally support for a UN force to confront the communist advance down the Korean peninsula.

Eventually, 21 countries besides the United States will join the UN coalition, with General MacArthur as their overall commander. Luckily for the U.S., the Russians were boycotting the Security Council at the time of the North's attack (to protest the exclusion of the Chinese communists as the representative of the Chinese in place of Chiang's Nationalists, who continued to occupy the "China" seat at the UN for another twenty years). This allowed the passage of resolutions condemning North Korea and calling for "all measures" to assist the South without the fear of a Soviet veto. (The absence of the Soviet delegate continued for several more days after the fighting began, making it likely that Stalin had been unaware that his fellow dictator, Kim Il Sung, planned to unleash the attack, and therefore had not prepared to provide diplomatic cover for his aggression)

In the U.S., the Truman Administration had similarly dropped the ball on the diplomatic and strategic-thinking front. In a gathering at the National Press Club in early 1950, for instance, Acheson had laid out for the reporters a graphic presentation of the U.S. policy in the Far East following the October 1949 victory of Mao's communist regime. Using a large map on an easel, Acheson traced the U.S. "defense perimeter" in the western Pacific, including Japan, the Philippines and Formosa, but excluding the Korean peninsula. In fact, the U.S. and the Soviets had withdrawn all their forces from the peninsula by 1949. The American military strength in Korea amounted to about 250 men engaged in providing training to the ROK (Republic of Korea) army and were totally unprepared to engage in combat. U.S. forces in Japan were little better equipped to counter Kim's aggression. Five years of serving as an occupation force in Japan, where the population had proved to be as docile as it had been ruthless a mere few years before, left the occupying force less than "battle ready.". MacArthur himself rivaled the Emperor in the people's affection. As a result, the five American army divisions as well as naval and air force units were "flabby" – i.e., unprepared for combat.

By late July 1950, a U.S. force of over 300,000 men had been ferried to the Korean peninsula, first to counter the North Korean siege of the Pusan perimeter on the country's southeast corner, and then as part of a pincers movement after the Inchon landing of September 15. MacArthur, like his putative superiors in Washington, had discounted the possibility of North Korean aggression (even though constant fighting on a low-level had been going on for some time) and was taken aback by the news that on October 19, hundreds of thousands of soldiers of the "People's Volunteer Army"( aka Chinese communist army) were crossing the Yalu River and melting into the mountainous terrain of northern North Korea. Similarly, as the Chinese presence grew, he will totally misread Chinese intentions, despite their repeated warnings of intervention if UN forces advanced north toward the Yalu. His one great feat was the daring Inchon landing of September 1950 in which a U.S. Marine/ROK force landed at this port on the peninsula's west coast about twenty miles from Seoul and quickly cut off the 200,000 North Korean troops to the south. This spectacular and risky move had totally reversed the course of the war just a few months after it started and would have stood as a signal victory for MacArthur

and the U.S. had not his ill-advised advance north toward Pyongyang and the Yalu precipitated the Chinese onslaught toward the end of 1950.

In early October 1950, when MacArthur's credibility was at its height, Truman had sought a meeting with the General to discuss the situation, MacArthur demurred, saying he could not absent himself from his duties in the Far East (he rarely set foot in Korea, spending most of his time in Tokyo). They finally agreed to meet at Wake Island in early October, a 24 hour trip for Truman as opposed to five hours for MacArthur. The meeting was an exercise in futility, it turned out, and was followed a few days later by the Chinese invasion of the north, a thing, as noted, MacArthur had told Truman, was unlikely to happen.

MacArthur's assurances to the Joint Chiefs and Truman that the Chinese would not join the fight in a big way contributed to the decision in September to press on to overthrow the communist regime in the North. The UN itself authorized this momentous decision. For MacArthur, the matter was clear cut: "There is no substitute for victory," he would later intone in his speech to Congress following his ouster as commander by Truman. In this context, this meant subduing the North Korean army and obtaining an unconditional surrender from Kim Il Sung. But the Administration had "sold" the war to the American people as a limited "police action." It then contradicted itself by authorizing an advance north of the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel and preparation for a regime change in the nascent People's Democratic Republic of Korea. Instead of "containing" communism, as in Europe, it sought to "roll back" the Red Menace in a place where it hardly mattered to American security. The argument was made (and it would underpin future American defense strategy) that communism was a "monolith" directed from the Kremlin and that if the U.S. allowed a communist victory (or even the continued existence of a communist state) in Korea, it would fatally weaken our defenses worldwide, and particularly in Europe, where the face-off with the Soviets was most intense.

The Truman Administration also had to consider the domestic political prize a total victory over communism in Korea would be, given the (unfair) attacks on Truman and the Democrats generally over their "loss of China." But it was not to be. Mao and the Red Chinese could no more allow a "roll back" of communism at their doorstep than the U.S. could accept the swallowing of the Republic of Korea by its communist kinsmen to the North. So, starting in early 1951, the two sides would continue to exchange gunfire, shoot down each other's planes, and generally engage in a "limited war" while seeking some way to arrange a cease fire and an armistice, if not an actual peace agreement. The grueling process sapped the vitality of the last two years of Truman's Administration and opened the Democrats to endless attacks from people like Senators Joseph McCarthy and the redoubtable Robert Taft.

Secretary of State Dean Acheson served as the Republicans main punching bag. His haughty demeanor, expensive English tailor-made suits and shoes, for instance, and his moustache, made him a target of right-wing anti-elitist attacks. Acheson totally lacked the "common touch" and was suspected of harboring left-wing views, especially when he defended his friend Alger Hiss from attacks by Joseph McCarthy and other right-wing Republicans. Foreign Service officers John Stewart Service and John Carter Vincent, among others, were forced to resign after McCarthy launched his attack on the State Department as infested with communist sympathizers.

Service and Vincent had represented the U.S. in the camp of Mao during World War II when the communists were aiding in the fight against the Japanese. Their reports to Washington were eventually leaked and then characterized as sympathetic to the communist cause. This miasma of paranoia overhung the last two years of the Korean conflict.

After his “relief” on April 11, 1951, MacArthur returned to the U.S. for the first time in fourteen years. Truman knew he would face an outraged public for his ouster of the wildly popular general, but he and Acheson, as well as his top military advisors, believed he had done the right thing by asserting his authority as commander in chief when MacArthur flagrantly ignored orders to stop making public statements on political questions. The General acted like he was a power unto himself, proclaiming his desire to drop atom bombs on the Chinese, or supporting the entrance of Chiang Kai Shek’s forces into the conflict.

Following the 1946 congressional elections, when they had a majority in both houses of Congress, the Republicans had sponsored the 20<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the Constitution limiting the president to two terms, but its enactment in 1949 did not apply to Truman. Even so, he had more or less decided to retire to Independence at the end of his term in January 1953. The political price would be paid by the Democrats in November 1952, when Eisenhower won out over Adlai Stevenson, and the Republicans took control both Houses of Congress. Eisenhower had promised to “go to Korea” if elected and bring about an armistice. In December, after the election, he made a two-week trip to Korea (stopping in Hawaii on the way back to play golf). Although the fighting had died down, the U.S. and the Chinese fought at the negotiating table at Panmunjom, largely over exchange of prisoners of war. The armistice was finally signed in July 1953, six months after Eisenhower came to office.

Thus ended Truman’s presidency on a sour note, but the “Truman Doctrine” lived on and would form the basis for America’s most dramatic failure to stem communist advances, in Vietnam. Interestingly, Cuba came under communist control at the end of Eisenhower’s second administration, but no one ever said Ike “lost Cuba.” Only Democratic presidents seemed susceptible to “losing” countries.