
Truman and Korea: A Cold War Confrontation

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On June 25th, 1950, seventy-five thousand North Korean troops crossed the 38th parallel into South Korea. Over the course of the next few days, the communist invaders decimated their southern cousins. As they seized the capital city of Seoul and continued the march southward, it became clear that only outside intervention could save South Korea's sovereignty. This salvation would come in the form of the free world's champion, the United States. Under the leadership of seasoned president Harry S. Truman, America had declared in the years following World War II that it would defend and support the "free peoples" of the world from the threat posed by communism.

To Truman, the North Korean invasion was a thinly veiled attempt by his Cold War rival, the Soviet Union, to drag the Americans into a conflict that would distract them from their ultimate goal of strengthening the western world against communism. It was also viewed as a challenge to the policy of containment laid out by the Truman Doctrine of 1947, which had recently failed to prevent Mao Zedong from taking power in China. Truman himself took much of the blame for "losing China," and his reluctance to fully support the Chinese Nationalists in their civil war was a mistake he did not intend to repeat in Korea. His decision to send American troops into the conflict, instead of just the economic support promised by the Truman Doctrine, also set an important precedent for the powers of the presidency during the Cold War and beyond. The Korean War was the first of many proxy conflicts fought between the United States and Soviet Union throughout the second half of the twentieth century in which each superpower sought to expand its own authority and influence at almost any cost.

The roots of the confrontation can be found in the years leading up to World War II. In 1910, Korea fell into Japan's Pacific Empire and was largely repressed and divided for the next thirty-five years.¹ Tens of thousands of Korean citizens were forced into labor across East Asia, especially after Japan went to war with the United States in 1941. As early as 1943 at the Tehran Conference, President Franklin Roosevelt made plans for a Korean "trusteeship" after the war that would fall under the control of the Allies until they felt it was ready for independence.² However, Roosevelt was dead by the Potsdam Conference of 1945, and his successor Truman devised an alternative plan. He worried that the Soviets would press their geographic advantages to seize Korea as soon as they entered the Pacific War, or at least impose a communist regime over the peninsula. His best hope was that American use of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki would persuade the Russians to yield the issue. This was not the case, as the Red Army pushed deeply into the country even after the bombs were dropped. In response, Truman offered to forgo the original

¹ Arnold Offner, *Another Such Victory: President Truman and the Cold War, 1945-1953* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 348.

² *Ibid*, 349-350.

agreement on a general trusteeship of Korea in exchange for a political division of the country at the 38th parallel.³

Soviet Premier Stalin agreed, and Korea became a nation occupied by Russians in the north and Americans in the south. Tensions began to rise almost immediately, both between the opposing powers and within the ranks of the divided Korean people. These divisions were personified in the characters of the split nation's two major leaders. Kim Jong-Il was a native of the northern city of Pyongyang, as well as a staunch communist who had waged a guerilla war against the Japanese in China. He cooperated with the Soviets in the liberation of his country, and subsequently received their support to lead the North Korean Communist Party.⁴ At the other end of the spectrum was Syngman Rhee, an American-educated nationalist and devout anticommunist.⁵ Despite their differences, both men shared a common desire for Korean independence from outside control.

By 1949, both the United States and Russia had largely pulled out of Korea. Truman recognized the southern Republic of Korea on the first day of that year, and within a few months passed the reins of power to Rhee.⁶ The South Korean leader quickly turned his country into a police state, jailing political opponents and violently quelling rebellion. In the spring and summer alone, Rhee's administration claimed to have hunted down and killed 19,000 "guerillas" and jailed 36,000 political prisoners.⁷ The situation in North Korea was similar, but the Americans and Soviets were too preoccupied elsewhere to intervene. China's fall to communism ensured that the United States would continue economic support for Korea, but the Truman administration also wanted to keep its distance from the increasingly volatile Rhee.

Concurrent with the changes being made in Korea was the intensifying political and ideological rift between capitalism and communism in the west. The United States and Soviet Union clashed several times as they quickly shifted from wartime allies to opposing superpowers, as the defeat of Nazism turned the focus of America's attention to the threat posed by communism. Increased fears that communist revolutions would sweep a broken Europe in the years following World War II brought the descent of Churchill's "Iron Curtain." Stalin, angered by the perceived betrayal of his former Big Three allies, began to look to expand his operations in other regions. A confrontation in the Middle East in mid-1946, in which Soviet troops attempted to secure oil concessions from Iran as a price to lift their occupation, was one of the earliest examples of Stalin attempting to expand his influence.⁸

If the Iran incident stoked Truman's fears of Stalin looking to expand his sphere beyond Eastern Europe, then Soviet meddling in Greece and Turkey a year later confirmed it. Greece, a country racked by constant civil war, was seen as a "ripe plum" for the Soviets to pick.⁹ Turkey was a somewhat more stable nation, but its proximity to both the Soviet Union and the Middle East could easily make it the domino that would spread communism across the region. It was these events, coupled with a resurgent fear of communism among the American populace, that pushed President Truman to make his historic address to Congress on March 12th, 1947, declaring that the United States would support any nation fighting against the oppression of communism. He pledged \$400 million in economic and military assistance to help Greece and Turkey defend themselves from communist revolution.¹⁰ Congress largely supported the Truman Doctrine, and its namesake

³ D. Clayton James, *Refighting the Last War: Command and Crisis in Korea, 1950-1954* (New York: The Free Press, 1993), 14.

⁴ Mark Byrnes, *The Truman Years, 1945-1953* (Harlow, England: Pearson, 2000), 85.

⁵ *Ibid*, 84.

⁶ Offner, 355.

⁷ Joyce Kolko and Gabriel Kolko, *The Limits of Power: The World and United States Foreign Policy, 1945-1954* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), 567.

⁸ Byrnes, 17-18.

⁹ Offner, 197.

¹⁰ Kolko and Kolko, 342.

president signed it into law two months later. While the new policy was put in place mainly to secure democracies in Greece and Turkey, it also formed the basis of America's response to the emerging crisis in Korea.

By late 1949, Syngman Rhee was becoming an increasingly more frustrating character for U.S. policymakers. His police force of 35,000 was especially brutal towards potential communists and leftists, and he was frequently chastised by Truman's fourth Secretary of State Dean Acheson for attempting to provoke border conflict.¹¹ Beyond that, he constantly lobbied the United States for a larger and better equipped army with which he could take preemptive action to prevent a North Korean invasion, despite having nearly 150,000 soldiers in early 1950.¹² Truman and Acheson had difficulty finding support for the radical leader in Congress, and their Marshall Plan-style Korean Aid bill was defeated in the House in January 1950. American forces had been largely removed the previous summer, besides a few hundred men who made up the Korean Military Advisory Group (KMAG) that worked to train the South Korean army.¹³

With the exception of KMAG, Truman and the Americans left South Korea relatively undefended to northern aggression. Rhee's volatile nature convinced many, including General Douglas MacArthur, that the Republic of Korea could not be trusted with weapons that would allow them to perpetrate an offensive war. Conversely, the Soviet Union left the North Koreans with a plethora of heavy artillery, tanks, and planes, as well as China returning nearly 12,000 veterans to the country who had been helping to fight the Nationalist forces.¹⁴ To many, including Kim Jong-Il, this suggested that Truman believed South Korea was no longer worth defending. After all, Secretary of State Dean Acheson himself had left it out of his "Pacific defense perimeter" when he spoke before reporters in early 1950. Elsewhere he voiced his own opinion that it was a militarily indefensible nation. But in all reality, the United States left South Korea so lightly defended because its leaders underestimated the threat posed by the North. Syngman Rhee was believed to be the primary aggressor on the peninsula who regularly announced his intent to unite Korea by force. While Kim Jong-Il had made similar threats, he had also urged for a peaceful reunification.¹⁵ This idea may have lulled Truman, Acheson, and MacArthur into a false sense of security that would be shattered on June 25th.

Truman's initial thought upon hearing of the North Korean invasion was that it was the first step in a Soviet plot to distract America from an attack in Europe or elsewhere.¹⁶ In truth, it was the culmination of months of careful planning by the northern regime to save their weak nation. Stalin, always the first to be blamed by Truman, also had some influence over Kim's decision to cross the 38th parallel. He correctly predicted that his American counterpart might overreact to an attack on South Korea in order to compensate for failure in China. Stalin, in fact, directed Kim to consult Mao for support if he insisted on a military reunification.¹⁷ In a March 1949 meeting, Stalin offered loans to help modernize the North Korean military, as well as Soviet flight instructors to help Kim build up his air force.¹⁸ He would later express his belief that neither the U.S nor Japan were sufficiently recovered from World War II to fight a "big war" in Korea, and a rapid surprise advance would be

¹¹ Dean Acheson, *Present at the Creation: My Years in the State Department* (New York: W.W Norton, 1969), 451.

¹² Kolko and Kolko, 573.

¹³ Offner, 356.

¹⁴ Kolko and Kolko, 573.

¹⁵ Offner, 358.

¹⁶ James, 11.

¹⁷ Offner, 367-370.

¹⁸ "Meeting Between Stalin and Kim Il Sung," 5 March 1949, Wilson Center, Digital Archives, <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/112127>, accessed 23 April 2018.

enough to convince them not to intervene.¹⁹ Mao Zedong had also agreed to support Kim and the North Koreans, both because of their shared struggle in World War II and as vengeance against the United States for continuing to support the Republic of China, the Taiwanese government-in-exile.²⁰

President Truman, upon returning to Washington from a vacation to his home in Independence, Missouri that had been cut short, immediately began to prepare a military response to the North Korean attack. He cited the Truman Doctrine of three years earlier, calling Korea the “Greece of the Far East” and claimed that its fall to communism would lead to the loss of all Asia.²¹ After consultation with his administration officials, he was forced to settle for U.N Security Council measures rather than immediate American intervention that might provoke Chinese or Soviet retaliation.

To Truman, the United States had a moral commitment to defend its allies against communism even if they were strategically unimportant.²² For this reason, he began to prepare an American response to the conflict even if the United Nations was unwilling to act or if the Soviets used their veto to prevent immediate action. The Soviets, however, were not present at the meeting to use their veto as they were boycotting the United Nations in protest of their refusal to accept Mao’s People’s Republic of China.²³ The Security Council unanimously voted to intervene, and United States’ air and sea power began to deflate the North Korean advance. In a statement given two days after the initial invasion, Truman claimed that the forces of communism had “defied the orders of the Security Council of the United Nations issued to preserve international peace and security” and that the United States was performing its “lawful and necessary” duties to the Korean people.²⁴ Truman and MacArthur were initially cautious about putting American troops on the ground due to a lack of congressional approval, but it eventually became clear that the South Korean army alone was not enough to turn back the invasion. The south’s army was, in Truman’s words, “armed to prevent border raids and preserve internal security” and was thus incapable of fighting the superior North Korean forces.²⁵ In the coming months, 65,000 American troops were deployed by the president to defend the Republic of Korea.²⁶

Even with the support of U.S military might, the South Korean forces were pushed almost to the sea. By September, the war in Korea was beginning to look like a lost cause. In a last-ditch effort to force the North Koreans to pull back, General Douglas MacArthur, commander-in-chief of the UN command, mounted an amphibious assault on the coastal city of Inchon.²⁷ The northern army, cut off from supplies and surrounded on all sides, was forced to retreat back above the 38th parallel. Energized by the victory, MacArthur continued the pursuit into North Korean territory with Truman’s support. What had begun as a defensive war to protect American interests had turned into a chance for the United States and its president to score a powerful Cold War victory. Their hopes were dashed, however, when a Chinese force of nearly 250,000 crossed the Yalu River to support the North Koreans. MacArthur wanted to take the war to China and remove Mao from power, but Truman refused to enter into a prolonged conflict. The angered general publicly voiced

¹⁹ “Message from Stalin to Mao Zedong,” 5 October 1950, Wilson Center, Digital Archives, <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/117313>, accessed 23 April 2018.

²⁰ Kolko and Kolko, 350.

²¹ Offner, 371.

²² James, 12-13.

²³ Byrnes, 86.

²⁴ “Statement by President Truman on Korea,” 27 June 1950, Wilson Center Digital Archives, <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/116192>, accessed 23 April 2018.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Kolko and Kolko, 591.

²⁷ Ibid, 595.

his disagreement to Congressional leaders and the media, forcing Truman to remove him for “rank insubordination.”²⁸

As with most Cold War conflicts abroad, Korea became vastly unpopular among the American people. The removal of General MacArthur, coupled with the massive Chinese intervention and continued loss of American lives, forced Truman to begin searching for peace. He would never find it, and it was not until July 1953 that his successor Dwight Eisenhower was able to negotiate the armistice that still survives today.

The war was a blemish on the record of an otherwise largely successful president. Truman’s legacy is dogged by questions of what went wrong in Korea while ignoring the positive outcomes of the war. Without a doubt, a unified communist Korean peninsula would have been a threat to the reconstruction of Japan. Had the United States refused the call to defend its ally, it would have sent a strong message both to Stalin and America’s NATO partners that Americans were unwilling or unable to uphold their commitment to fight the global spread of communism. While President Truman unquestionably made several poor strategic decisions in the Korean conflict, the Cold War may have played out much differently had he made no decision at all.

While it is hard to argue that intervention in Korea was anything but necessary, it is also difficult to defend Truman’s decision to send American soldiers into a war unsanctioned by Congress. Today, the power of the president to send troops into battle is commonly accepted and has been seen in notable conflicts such as Vietnam and Iraq. However, Truman was the first to set this precedent. Up until this point, confrontation on the scale of Korea had required a congressional declaration of war, which might have been difficult to obtain considering South Korea’s strategic unimportance and radical leader. When asked by President Truman about the legality of sending troops without declaring war, Senator Thomas Connally (D-TX) replied, “If a burglar breaks into your house, you can shoot at him without going down to the police station to ask for permission.”²⁹ While the conflict was supported by a vast majority of Congress, enough prominent Republicans opposed it that it appeared to some in the public that Truman had bypassed the legislative branch.

Like most Cold War conflicts, the Korean War was centered around a selfish desire for power and influence.³⁰ While some parties in both the north and south had a real nationalistic urge to reunite the peninsula, it seems that Syngman Rhee and Kim Jong-Il sought more to increase their own personal power. Despite this, they were in all reality pawns of the United States and Soviet Union. The Korean peninsula in 1950, while holding some strategic and economic importance, was much more significant for Truman and Stalin as a proving ground for their opposing ideologies. Truman’s and MacArthur’s plan to conquer North Korea, when they barely had a hold on South Korea even before the war, shows that their true intentions were to score a political victory that would send a message to the Soviets. Stalin was just as guilty, having secretly implored the Chinese to intervene in hopes that it would spark a greater conflict with the United States. All in all, Korea was less of a civil war and more of a pursuit of power between the world’s two great competing hegemonies.

Despite being commonly dubbed “the forgotten war,” the implications of Korea reverberated throughout the Cold War era. It marked a shifting focus from the abstract political battleground of Europe to actual proxy military confrontation between the U.S and U.S.S.R around the globe. Anybody who challenged the commitment of the United States and President Harry

²⁸ John Spanier, *The Truman-MacArthur Controversy and the Korean War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1959), 205-207.

²⁹ Robert Turner, “Truman, Korea, and the Constitution: Debunking the ‘Imperial President’ Myth,” *Harvard Journal of Law and Public Policy* 19, no. 2 (Winter 1996).

³⁰ Melvyn Leffler, “National Security, Core Values, and Power,” in *Major Problems in American Foreign Relations*, 4th ed., vol. 2, eds. Thomas G. Paterson and Dennis Merrill (Lexington, MA: DC Heath and Co., 1995), 14-15.

Truman to uphold their promise to protect the free world from the vices of communism was silenced in 1950. If the world had any doubts about the potential of the Cold War to heat up into a global conflict, they were shattered by the violence and bloodshed of Korea.³¹

³¹ In terms of historiography, like many aspects of Truman's legacy, his handling of the Korean War has generally received mixed assessment from historians. Some of the earliest scholars, Spanier being one of the few cited in this paper, ascribed to the view that Korea was a necessary war fought to defend democracy from the vices of communism. The later post-revisionist view, best characterized in the cited works by Byrnes and Offner, puts the blame for the conflict on the shoulders of Truman and Stalin, who both had personal and varied reasons for wanting to draw the other into a Korean conflict.