

Chapter 2

War in Korea

Angry as Knowland and others were with Secretary of State Dean Acheson, there soon would be more provocation. During the summer of 1949, when America's policy of supporting Chiang Kai-shek was rapidly unraveling, a new China policy was being developed by the Truman administration. Acheson and his colleagues in the State Department assumed that a border dispute and other geopolitical tensions would quickly unglue the often-tenuous alliance between communist China and the Soviet Union. Aware of tensions between the Soviet Union and China stemming back to the 1920's, State Department experts were relatively sure that the United States could be in a position to play the two communist countries off against each other. For this strategy to work, however, the U.S. would first have to sever its ties with Chiang Kai-shek. The State Department was thus prepared to allow Mao to finish the Chinese civil war by crossing over to Formosa and defeating what remained of the Nationalist army. Thereafter, the U.S. was willing to extend diplomatic relations to communist China and allow its government to take Nationalist China's seat in the UN Security Council.

Two Koreas

In the wake of Chiang's downfall, the US Government assessed its commitments to other regions of Asia, particularly its support for South Korea. Korea, like Germany had been temporally divided between the victorious powers at post-war conferences with the Soviet Union. In this case, the Soviets were given temporary control over the land north of the 38th parallel, and the United States was given similar powers over the area South of the 38th parallel. In its region, the US attempted to establish a democratic government. Unfortunately, Syngman Rhee, the elected President, acted more like a dictator than a democrat. In an attempt to suppress all left-leaning opponents to his regime, he imprisoned more Koreans than Japan had in the last years of its occupation. North of the 38 parallel, Kim IL Sung, the pro-Soviet strongman, used communist ideology to justify a cruel tyranny. He claimed to be supporting land reform, income redistribution, and other "progressive" policies, similar to Soviet 'reforms' in Eastern Europe. In 1947, North Korea resisted calls from the United Nations to participate with the South in holding free elections to re-unify Korea as had been promised at a meeting in Moscow in December, 1945. In the meantime, the Soviet Union supported President Kim's goal of building a 135,000-man army in the North, and supplied it with 150 tanks, heavy artillery, and a credible air force. The Soviet Union withdrew its troops from North Korea in 1948. Meanwhile, the Republican dominated Congress failed to provide the Truman administration with the funds it needed to station a strong contingent of US troops in South Korea. The U.S. assigned a total of 500 military advisors to the Army of the Republic of [South] Korea (ROK) and helped it build its troop strength to 100,000 men. But, fearing that Syngman Rhee would make good on his threats to invade North Korea, the US failed to provide the ROK with tanks, heavy artillery, and airplanes.

Three Speeches

Reflecting the weakened strategic position the US faced in South Korea, Secretary of State Dean Acheson gave a speech on January 12, 1950. In it he defined America's commitment to defending the countries of Asia. The line passed through the Aleutian chain of islands off Alaska, through Japan and the Philippines, but did not include South Korea, Formosa, or Indochina.* The Joint Chiefs of Staff, future

president Dwight Eisenhower, and US commander in Japan, Douglas MacArthur, supported this assessment of the US capacity to effectively deploy its limited forces in light of Soviet superiority in Europe. This lack of commitment to defending South Korea and Taiwan, however, was severely criticized in a speech by Republican Congressman Walter Judd who predicted it would encourage a communist attack in these areas.

While Judd's speech is not well known today, one given by the junior Senator from Wisconsin on February 9, 1950 is still regarded as a watershed in American history. The speech put the place where it was given, Wheeling, West Virginia, on the map and blazed the name of the speaker, Joe McCarthy, across national headlines. McCarthy captured and articulated a feeling that the loss of Eastern Europe, the China disaster, Russia detonating an atomic bomb (in 1949), and several spy cases, were signs that America was losing the Cold War. McCarthy offered his countrymen a convenient and not implausible scapegoat, Communists in the Government:

The reasons why we find ourselves in a position of impotency [in international affairs] is not because our only powerful potential enemy has sent men to invade our shores, but rather because of the traitorous action of those who have been treated so well by this Nation. The bright young men who are born with silver spoons in their mouths are the ones who have been worst. In my opinion the State Department, which is one of the most important government departments, is thoroughly infested with Communists. ²³

South Korea Attacked

As fate had it, Walter Judd's prediction came true at 4 a.m. on June 25, 1950 Korean time. Following a two-hour artillery barrage, North Korean troops led by 100 Soviet tanks, crossed the 38th parallel at three different points. The next day, the United Nations Commission at the border confirmed the facts of the attack. North Korean forces which had been seen massing at the border prior to the attack were drove the South Korean Army helter-skelter down the Korean peninsular.

News of the war reached President Truman at home in Independence, Missouri. He returned to Washington the next day, and closeted himself with Secretary of State Dean Acheson and other presidential advisors. Their immediate problem: to decide what response the U.S. should make to this unprovoked attack on a country the United States was not pledged to defend.

Defend South Korea?

Whatever decision America made would undoubtedly affect its future relationship with Chiang Kai-shek. Surely the U.S. would not be fighting Communism in Korea while allowing other Communists to defeat a dedicated anti-communist whom the US had supported for 12 years. But the most important considerations were whether fighting a war in Korea was worth the potential loss in men and money; whether the US, having lost China, a country of 450 million people, should fight to save South Korea, a country of fewer than 20 million which the it was not committed to defend. Furthermore, President Truman and his advisors had to decide whether scarce US resources should be used to defend an Asian country with little strategic value, when Western Europe was still vulnerable to Soviet attack.

There were powerful arguments for not allowing the North Koreans, with the support of Soviet weapons and Soviet-trained troops, to take the South. Wasn't the lesson of Munich that aggression must

23 Quoted in Richard Caridi, op. cit., p. 12.

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be opposed before the aggressor gets too powerful to stop? Many of Truman's advisors feared that America's failure to come to South Korea's aid would be interpreted as a sign of weakness and an invitation to Moscow to attack other US interests, such as West Berlin. Containment had worked in western Europe as well as in Greece and Turkey. Was it now time to apply George Kennan's doctrine to Asia as well?

Suggested Student Exercises:

1. Identify or define and briefly describe the relation to the chapter of:

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| a. Kim IL Song | d. policy to divide communist powers | g. attack on S. Korea |
| b. 38th parallel | e. defense perimeter speech | h argument to defend S. Korea |
| c. Syngman Rhee | f. McCarthy's charges | i. argument not to defend |

2. As your teacher directs, make a case to defend or not to defend South Korea. Your argument should include:

- South Korea's importance or lack thereof to the US
- potential effect on strategy of splitting communist powers
- previous successes or failures of containment
- potential cost (in money and lives) to the United States