

By Paul Dawson

University at Albany student

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Some Depictions of the Korean War in the United States and Korea

The Korean War is often called the Forgotten War. Minimal time is spent on it in high school, and only a few feature films focus on it. Americans may overlook the Korean War because it was bookended by two of the most important wars in modern United States history. It was preceded by World War Two, probably the deadliest conflict ever, and it was followed by the war in Vietnam, a conflict which tore the country apart and whose effects we still feel today. While Korea is often overlooked in America, its effects are felt throughout East Asia. The United States still has troops stationed in South Korea to repel a possible North Korean attack, and the regime in North Korea continues to threaten South Korea as well as Japan.

However, the Korean War was certainly newsworthy at the time when it was being fought. A look at news coverage of the events of the war helps one to perceive the period's *zeitgeist*. To bring contemporaneous New Yorkers' attitudes toward the Korean War into greater relief, this research studied a small sample of relevant 1949 and 1950 issues of the *Poughkeepsie New Yorker* newspaper [archived at the New York State Military Museum].

First it is important to understand the events leading up to the Korean War, as well as an overview of the events that took place during the war. After the Second World War, Korea was divided into two halves, a Soviet-influenced North, and an American influenced South [Leibo, *East and Southeast Asia*, p. 100]. From the surrender of Japan in 1945 onwards, the two superpowers poured millions of dollars into Korea to try to strengthen their respective regime preferences. The United States alone spent one hundred million dollars a year in aid to South Korea.

Tensions continued to mount on the peninsula, until on June 25, 1950, one side attacked the other. Most Americans assume that it was the North that struck first, but it was never clearly established which Korea attacked first [Knightley, *The First Casualty*, p. 365]. Regardless, these initial hostilities were followed by a very successful Northern invasion which quickly overran most of South Korea [Leibo, *East and Southeast Asia*, p. 100]. Soon after the invasion, President Harry Truman of the United States went to the newly formed United Nations to condemn the action of North Korea [Leibo, *East and Southeast Asia*, p. 100]. The United States ended up persuading the United Nation "to begin an official, collective 'police action' in Korea." [Knightley, *The First Casualty*, p. 365]. So began a very bloody struggle, costing the lives of thousands.

Although it was a United Nations effort, the Korean War was fought primarily by the American contingent [Leibo, *East and Southeast Asia*, p. 100]. A hero of the Second World War, General Douglas MacArthur, was designated to command the UN forces. He managed to drive the North Korean forces out of South Korea, thanks to a particularly risky amphibious landing at Inchon and American air power [Leibo, *East and Southeast Asia*, p. 100]. When he reached the 38th parallel, MacArthur kept going and led a drive into North Korea to try to unify the peninsula

[Leibo, *East and Southeast Asia*, p. 100]. Ignoring the warning of the People's Republic of China, MacArthur kept driving his forces closer and closer to the Yalu River, which was the border between China and North Korea. Against the predictions of the Allies, China attacked [Leibo, *East and Southeast Asia*, p. 100].

After the Chinese intervention, General MacArthur attempted to widen the war, proposing the bombing of Chinese bases in Manchuria [Leibo, *East and Southeast Asia*, p. 100]. Less publicly, MacArthur and others in the United Nations command advocated the use of nuclear weapons against "Red China, Eastern Russia, and everything else" [Knightley, *The First Casualty*, p. 382]. Eventually, MacArthur's very public calls for a wider war caused a rift between him and President Truman, culminating in MacArthur's removal from command [Leibo, *East and Southeast Asia*, p. 100].

Even though MacArthur was no longer the commander of the United Nations forces, the war still raged on. The counter-attack from the Chinese pushed the allies out of North Korea, and in May of 1951 the Chinese forces attempted to retake Seoul [Leibo, *East and Southeast Asia*, p. 100]. However, this failed and the war soon entered a stalemate. Peace talks began in 1951, but they were not concluded for over two years [Leibo, *East and Southeast Asia*, p. 100]. All that time the fighting continued, with each side building up their defenses against the other [Leibo, *East and Southeast Asia*, p. 100]. Finally, on July 27, 1953, an armistice was signed between the two opposing sides. In an almost tragic twist of fate, the final border between North and South Korea was almost exactly the same as it was at the beginning of the war [Leibo, *East and Southeast Asia*, p. 100]. So that was what an estimated three hundred thousand allied soldiers, and almost two million civilians died for: no change on the Korean peninsula [Knightley, *The First Casualty*, p. 382].

Now that the historical events of Korea are laid out, we can consider the matter of the press. The Korean War took place during a time of heightened paranoia about Communism. This can be seen in the coverage of President Truman's inaugural address. While this didn't take place during the actual war, it does set the scene for things to come. The *Poughkeepsie New Yorker's* January 29, 1949 issue ran a prominent headline that read, "President Denounces Red Peril to World Peace." The paper went on to quote the Chief Executive: "President Truman today pledged a global crusade for 'peace, plenty, and freedom.'" The operative word to note in that statement is "crusade." Communism was atheistic in nature, so the religious values of the West were clashing with the Godless communists. The newspaper further quoted the President as "...denouncing the 'fake philosophy' of Communism and war." This is more than just saying that Communism is wrong, it is decrying it as fake. "Fake" implies misleading, a lie, something insincere. Also, Truman here seems to link Communism to war, as if Communism is an inherently violent philosophy. All of this played into the sense of paranoia and fear that permeated the Red Scare era, culminating in the proceedings of Senator Joseph McCarthy. Did this fear perhaps manifest itself in the coverage of the Korean War?

The answer is yes, and no. The term "Red" is almost exclusively used to describe the North Koreans (and later the Chinese). A headline dating from June 28, 1950 in the *Poughkeepsie New Yorker* reads, "Reds Take Seoul, 1st American Foot Soldiers in action." Another headline from the same date reads "U.S Planes Bag Red Tanks." Every war has its

slandorous terms for the enemy. In World War I, the Germans were known as the Huns; in World War II, the Japanese were the Japs. It is not unusual for this to carry over into newspapers as well. Many headlines after the attack on Pearl Harbor read “Japs Bomb Pearl Harbor”; what is interesting about this, though, is that the epitaph being used isn’t a racial slur against the particular country the United States was fighting at the time, it was used against an ideology. Further research might explore whether this was driven by the Red Scare (which inspired such colloquialisms as “Better dead than Red”).

The imagery used in the reporting should also be considered. The *Poughkeepsie New Yorker* reported on July 25, 1950 that “Red Hordes Overrun YongDong...” The newspaper also printed that “Waves of fanatical North Korean troops drove elements of the U.S First Cavalry division out of Yongdong yesterday, narrowing the American defense perimeter on Southeast Korea.” The imagery is rather thickly laid over in these stories. The use of the words “Hordes” and “waves” conjures up a sea of humanity throwing itself on the American defenses with no thoughts for its own safety or survival. Such expressions are possibly also used to dehumanize the North Koreans (akin to the use of the word “Red”). The same day, the paper reported, “The rampaging Communists sheared off all the western and southeastern side of the peninsula.” The word “rampaging” suggests an image of barbarians. It implies looting and pillaging and murder.

An interesting aspect of the coverage was the consistent disavowal of the first -person plural voice to describe the United Nations forces. The *Poughkeepsie New Yorker* reported on July 25, 1950 that “...Allied carrier planes blasted targets where Red troops swept virtually unopposed to the coast.” If this were the Second World War, the U.S. forces would have been referred to as “our forces,” but this doesn’t seem to be the case in Korea. Perhaps this was because the United States was part of a United Nations force. That is not to say that there was a completely dispassionate tone when referring to Allied forces. For example, on July 6, 1950, a headline in the Poughkeepsie daily paper reported that “Cut-Off Yanks Back With Small Losses.” The word “Yanks” has been used to describe the American from the American Revolution, and while it has taken on a patriotic connotation it is not the same as using the first-person plural voice. Using the first-person plural voice makes it us-versus-them, instead of U.S. forces-versus-North Korean forces. The first-person plural is used when the writer wants the public to feel involved and invested in the war. Perhaps it is because of an undefined purpose in Korea that the first-person plural is not used. Perhaps it is because it was felt that the war was neither large enough nor important enough to warrant the American public being as involved as it was in the Second World War. It is impossible to know for sure based on this preliminary research.

By September of 1950, the Americans and the United Nation forces had assumed that they had won. This can be seen in the September 29, 1950 edition of the *Poughkeepsie New Yorker*, where it was reported that “South Korean forces chased broken-down Communist invader units to the Parallel 38 border of Red North Korea tonight...” The paper quoted an army official who said, “As far as we are concerned, the war is over. The enemy’s army has disintegrated into ineffective pockets which have no real offensive power.” The tide of the North Korean advance had been turned, and they were pushed out of South Korea. It was assumed that there would be little further resistance. This assumption proved wrong when the Chinese entered the war.

The Associated Press reported on November 29, 1950 that “Chinese Reds swung 13 miles in behind American position in Northwest Korea today through the crushed east flank of the 75-mile United Nation Front...The critical situation posed by 200,000 Chinese Reds and 70,000 North Koreans, amounted to ‘an entirely new war,’ General MacArthur said in a special communiqué” [Copeland, David A. *Greenwood Library of American War Reporting Volume 6*, p. 352]. The panic can almost be heard in the statement. In the span of exactly two months after the Poughkeepsie paper declared, “As far as we are concerned, the war is over,” an entirely new war had started. The Associated Press went on to report that “From Red-captured Tokchon, at the end of the front, the onrushing Communists rolled 23 miles southeast to the town of Samso...At Samso, the Reds are less than five miles from a railroad leading up from the big U.N supply base at Sunchon, 11 miles to the South.” [Copeland, *Greenwood Library of American War Reporting Volume 6*, p. 353] Clearly the situation was dire for the United Nations.

Now that some aspects of the American press’s coverage of the Korean War have been examined, it may be instructive to consider how North Korean sources framed the conflict. While contemporaneous North Korean press accounts of the war are difficult to come by, one can at least consider how historians there have viewed the conflict. While this is not the same as scrutinizing contemporaneous press coverage, it does suggest how North Korean culture today might be viewing the events of the past, and thus offer some ideas to spark subsequent research.

The American press painted the Korean War as an act of aggression by the North; however, the North Koreans explain it differently. According to a major North Korean history textbook, *History of the Revolution of our Great Leader Kim Il-Sung: High School*:

“Upset by the fast and astonishing growth of the power of the Republic, the American invaders hastened the preparation of an aggressive war in order to destroy it in its infancy...The American invaders who had been preparing the war for a long time, alongside their puppets, finally initiated the war on June 25th of the 39th year of the Juche calendar. That dawn, the enemies unexpectedly attacked the North half of the Republic, and the war clouds hung over the once peaceful country, accompanied by the echoing roar of cannons.” [Lindaman, *History Lessons*, p. 265-266]

The North Koreans here paint themselves as the victims of an imperialist plot by the United States against them. While this account is false, it is worth remembering that as this is a textbook for a school; therefore, this version of events is most likely the only version that the North Koreans will see. Bearing this in mind, it is useful for the government to blame the United States to have a convenient boogiemán for the population to fear. The textbook goes on to explain that “Having passed the 38th parallel, the enemies crawled deeper and deeper into the North half of the Republic. A grave menace drew near our country and our people. His Excellency, the great leader of the Republic, had a crucial decision to make-the invading forces of the enemies had to be eliminated and the threatened fate of our country and our people had to be saved” [Lindaman, *History Lessons*, p. 266]. Notice the use of the first-person plural in the passage. As opposed to American accounts which used less personal terms, the North Koreans here are dramatizing the situation so that it almost reads like a novel.

The North Koreans also have a different version of how the fighting of the war progressed. The *History of the Revolution of our Great Leader Kim Il-Sung: High School* relates

that “The ravages of war had been going on for a year already. Meanwhile, after a year of bitter crushing defeats, the American invaders could not but stay at the 38th parallel—the line at which, the year before, they set fire to the war. Nevertheless, the bastards would not give up their evil intention” [Lindaman, p. 272]. It would appear as though the North Koreans are rewriting history by completely omitting the invasion of South Korea. The North Korean government seems to take a page directly out of *1984*. They are deliberately changing history to fit with a political goal.

While the Korean War is not given much attention in the United States, it is important in the context of the Cold War. In the small sample studied here, it can be seen that the American press, while not free from bias, contained less than this researcher initially expected. While much of the coverage contained exaggeration and perhaps even a touch of paranoia, it was still solid reporting. On the other hand, the North Koreans, at least in this limited sample of content, have attempted to present the Korean War in a completely different light—according to the official government position in North Korea. Ultimately, the coverage of every war is determined by experiences in the war that came before. The military learns new ways of dealing with the press based on the experience of previous wars. In the case of Korea, World War II’s influence could be felt in the often derogatory use of terms to address the U.S. enemy. However, World War II’s use of the first-person plural voice did not seem to enter into Korea.

Overall, this very preliminary study sheds some light on the nature of bias in a small sample of contemporaneous Cold War-era press accounts of the Korean War and later historians’ interpretations of it in the form of a school textbook. Although much more research is needed to support any conclusive judgment, this study suggests that during war, and even long afterwards, each side crafted public communication that justifies its actions and values. The implications for citizens in a democracy such as the United States, where full civic participation is built on a base of complete and unbiased information, are profound.

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