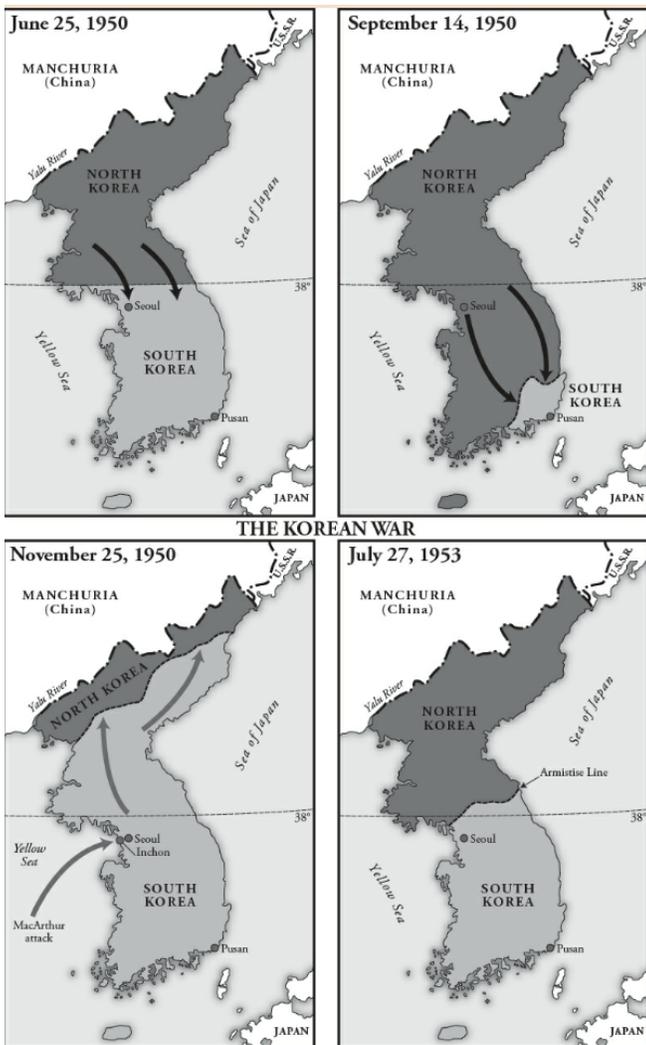


# The Coldest Winter: America and the Korean War

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## Introduction:

On June 25, 1950, nearly seven divisions of elite North Korean troops, many of whom had fought for the Communist side in the Chinese civil war, crossed the border into South Korea, with the intention of conquering the entire South in three weeks...In the early weeks of the invasion, the Communist offensive was a stunning success. Every bit of news from the battlefield was negative. In Washington, President Harry Truman and his top advisers debated the enemy's intentions. Was this, as they greatly feared, an assault ordered up by the Russians? Were the North Koreans nothing but Moscow's pawns? Or was it a feint, the first in a series of what might be provocative Communist moves around the world? They quickly decided to use United States, and in time United Nations, forces to draw a line against Communist aggression in Korea.



The Korean War would last three years, not three weeks, and it would be the most bitter kind of war, in which relatively small American and United Nations forces worked to neutralize the superior numbers of their adversaries by the use of vastly superior hardware and technology. It was a war fought on strikingly harsh terrain and often in ghastly weather, most particularly a numbing winter cold that often seemed to American troops an even greater enemy than the North Koreans or Chinese. "The century's nastiest little war," the military historian S. L. A. Marshall called it. The Americans and their United Nations allies faced terrible, mountainous terrain, which worked against their advantage in hardware, most notably their armored vehicles, and offered caves and other forms of shelter to the enemy. "If the best minds in the world had set out to find us the worst possible location to fight this damnable war politically and militarily, the unanimous choice would have been Korea," Secretary of State Acheson said years after it was over. "A sour war," Acheson's friend Averell Harriman said of it.

To call it an unwanted war on the part of the United States would be a vast understatement. Even the president who had ordered American troops into battle had not deigned to call it a war. From the start, Harry Truman had been careful to downplay the nature of the conflict because he was intent on limiting any sense of growing confrontation with the Soviet Union. One of the ways he tried to do that was by playing with the terminology. In the late afternoon of June 29, four days after the North Koreans had crossed the border, and even as he was sending Americans into battle, Truman met with the White

House press corps. One of the reporters asked if America was actually at war. Truman answered that it was not, even though in fact it was. Then another reporter asked, "Would it be possible to call this a police action under the United Nations?" "Yes," answered Truman. "That is exactly what it amounts to." The implication that U.S. soldiers in Korea were more a police force than an army was a source of considerable bitterness to many of the men who went there. A similar verbal delicacy would be employed four months later by Chinese leader Mao Zedong when he ordered hundreds of thousands of Chinese soldiers into battle, deciding, for reasons somewhat parallel to Truman's, to call them volunteers....

The worst aspect of the Korean War, wrote Lieutenant Colonel George Russell, a battalion commander with the Twenty-third Regiment of the Second Infantry Division, “was Korea itself.” For an army that was so dependent on its industrial production and the resulting military hardware, especially tanks, it was the worst kind of terrain. Countries like Spain and Switzerland had difficult mountain ranges, but these soon opened onto flat areas where industrially powerful nations might send their tanks. To American eyes, however, as Russell put it, in Korea “on the other side of every mountain [was] another mountain.” If there was a color to Korea, Russell claimed, “it came in all shades of brown”—and if there was a campaign ribbon given out for service there, he added, all the GIs who fought there would have bet on the color being brown.

...An estimated 33,000 Americans died in it. Another 105,000 were wounded. The South Koreans lost 415,000 killed and had 429,000 wounded. Both the Chinese and North Koreans were exceptionally secretive about their casualties, but American officials put their losses at roughly 1.5 million men killed. The Korean War momentarily turned the Cold War hot, heightening the already considerable (and mounting) tensions between the United States and the Communist world and deepening the chasm between the United States and Communist forces asserting themselves in Asia. Those tensions and divisions between the two sides in the bipolar struggle grew even more serious after American miscalculations brought China into the war. When it was all over and an armed truce ensued, both sides claimed victory, though the final division of the country was no different from the one that had existed when the war began. But the United States was not the same: its strategic vision of Asia had changed, and its domestic political equation had been greatly altered.

### **Bleak Days: The In Min Gun Drives South**

From the time he was first installed in Pyongyang by the Soviets in 1945, Kim Il Sung, the North Korean leader, had been obsessed with the need to attack the South and unite Korea. He was single-minded on the subject, constantly bringing it up with the one man who could give him permission, the Russian dictator Joseph Stalin. He wanted, he told Stalin in a meeting in late 1949, “to touch the South with the point of a bayonet.”

The pressure on Stalin from Kim had increased dramatically as Mao Zedong came closer to unifying all of China under his revolutionary banner. Mao’s successes seemed to heighten Kim’s frustrations. Here was Mao about to become a formidable new player on the world stage, and yet Kim was frozen in place in Pyongyang, unable to send his troops south without Soviet permission. He was the incomplete dictator, the man who ruled only half a country. So he pushed and pushed with Stalin. What he was selling was simple and seemingly easy: a Communist assault against the South and an easy victory. Kim believed that if he struck with a blitzkrieg-like armored assault, the people of the South would rise up to welcome his troops and the war would effectively be over in a few days...

To the Americans and others in the West, this was not a civil war, but a border crossing, a case of one country invading another, and thus a reminder of how the West had failed to halt Hitler’s aggression in the days leading up to World War II. To the Chinese, the Russians, and the North Koreans that was a surprising point of view. They had chosen at that point not to think of the thirty-eighth parallel, selected by the Americans and the Russians back in 1945 as the dividing line between the two Koreas, as a border at all. (That would change a few months later when the American and UN forces crossed the parallel heading north.) What they had done on June 25 was, in their view, just one more act in a long-term struggle on the part of the Korean people, part of an unfinished civil war like the one under way in Indochina and the one just ended in China...

Korea was a small, proud country that had the misfortune to lie in the path of three infinitely larger, stronger, more ambitious powers—China, Japan, and Russia. Each of them wanted to use it either as an offensive base from which to



*Kim Il Sung remained the last great Stalinist in power: rigid, doctrinaire, inflexible, a man who believed all the old truths even as so many of them had turned out to be false. They were not lies, at least not in Korea, because he could, with the hand and the power of the dictator, made them truths.*

assault one of the others or as a defensive shield to negate the possible aggressive designs of the other two. Long before June 1950, Korea's formidable neighbors had all at some moment favored the right to invade Korea in what they thought of as a defensive move—a precautionary step—against one of their rivals. As the unfortunate geography of Poland placed it between Germany and Russia, so Korea's geography was to no small degree its fate. Syngman Rhee, the eventual president of South Korea, liked to cite an old Korean proverb that went: "A shrimp is crushed in the battle of the whales."



*Syngman Rhee, a genuine patriot, [is] a man whose idea of a democratic society was one where he and his closest allies could do what they wanted, and everyone else should be watched.*

... In 1945, Korea was virtually a country without political institutions, and without indigenous leadership. In the North, when the Red Army swept in, institutions were imposed instantly from the top down by the Russians, as was a new leader, Kim Il Sung. In the South, Rhee, who had spent most of his life in exile, would be the American horse, like it or not. He was then seventy years old, intense, egocentric, volatile, fiercely nationalistic, patriotic, virulently anti-Communist, and no less authoritarian; he was very much a democrat, so long as he had complete control of all the country's democratic institutions and no one else was allowed to challenge his will. He was what the Japanese and the Americans had made him: a lifetime of betrayal, prison sentences, political exile, and broken promises had changed and hardened him. He was one example of what his country's harsh modern history had done to an ambitious young political figure, as Kim Il Sung in a very different way was another example of the same tragic result....

[Syngman] Rhee had been a political prisoner as a young man and had barely missed being executed; he would eventually get a Harvard degree, and the Princeton PhD, but his lifetime was filled with hardships and

disappointments that in many ways resembled the hardships and disappointments of his country. His essentially powerless status as an exile paralleled his country's powerless status as an orphaned nation in the eyes of the great powers. After gaining his doctorate, he had returned briefly to Korea, before spending the next thirty-five years in the United States. He became a professional supplicant, not the most healthy of conditions; he had lobbied constantly for a Korea free of colonial bondage with himself at its head. If he was the most passionate kind of nationalist, he was an equally relentless self-promoter: when he finally took power, his success tended to confirm his monomania.... Choosing Rhee, Makins [a senior British diplomat friendly to the United States] believed, reflected the fact that "Americans have always liked the idea of dealing with a foreign leader who can be identified and perceived as 'their man.' They are much less comfortable with movements." Those most comfortable with Rhee did not, however, include the Americans in Korea who actually had to deal with him on a daily basis, many of whom came to loathe him. General John Hodge, the unusually rough and undiplomatic commander of American troops in South Korea, despised Rhee. He considered him, as Clay Blair, the military historian, wrote, "devious, emotionally unstable, brutal, corrupt, and wildly unpredictable."