

**The Korean War:
Conflict and Compromise in Stemming the Tide of
Communism**

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Introduction

The Korean War, which lasted from June 25, 1950 to July 27, 1953, was a short-lasting war; however, millions of people both military and civilians died. The involvement of the United States in the Korean War prevented Korea from being fully overtaken by the Soviet Union, who occupied North Korea at the time, and helped slow the spread of communism throughout Asia. This also gave the United States a military foothold in Asia and made it easier to defend Japan, who was an important trading partner with the United States. Japan would have likely been targeted by communists, but for the intervention of the United States. After years of conflict, the United States helped negotiate an armistice through compromise.

Rise of Conflict

Before World War II, Japan occupied Korea throughout the first half of the 1900s.

¹ The Japanese people treated the Koreans harshly and took land from peasants to give to wealthy Japanese people and politicians. Many Koreans protested Japanese rule, but these protestors were often jailed, beaten, or beheaded.² Two Korean nationalists, Syngman Rhee and Kim Il Sung, were important leaders that supported Korean independence.³ Syngman Rhee was put in jail and tortured because of his desire for

¹ “United States Involvement in the Korean War: Causes and Effects.” *Study.com*, 2017, study.com/academy/lesson/the-korean-war-causes-and-effects.html. Accessed 26 Jan. 2018.

² Stein, R. Conrad. *The Korean War “The Forgotten War.”* Springfield, Enslow Publishers, 1994. American War Series., 10.

³ Conrad. *The Korean War “The Forgotten War.”*, 10.

Korean independence from Japan.⁴ He fled Korea and stayed in the United States for 20 years, but eventually came back to South Korea and became president.⁵

Kim Il Sung went to China to fight with Chinese communists to free Korea from Japanese rule.⁶ He later became the leader of North Korea. After Korea was freed from Japanese rule, it needed help forming its own country without Japan. The Soviet Union and the U.S. both wanted influence Korea in their own ways. Because their visions for Korea were so different, they agreed to divide the country by the 38th parallel line. The Soviet Union occupied the northern half of Korea and encouraged communism, while the U.S. occupied the southern half and encouraged a democracy.

Kim Il Sung and Syngman Rhee both separately planned on trying to control all of Korea under their own terms.⁷ It was difficult for Syngman Rhee to start an invasion because the U.S. agreed to only provide South Korea with enough supplies to maintain control of their own half of Korea.⁸ Unlike South Korea, North Korea was supplied extra equipment and vehicles by the Soviet Union, especially by Russia's leader Joseph Stalin.⁹ Kim Il Sung had gone to Russia and China to persuade Mao Zedong, the leader of China, and Joseph Stalin that he could overtake South Korea with the Soviet Union's support.¹⁰ Both agreed, but Joseph Stalin did not want to fight the U.S. head on, so

⁴ Conrad. *The Korean War "The Forgotten War."*, 10.

⁵ Conrad. *The Korean War "The Forgotten War."*, 10.

⁶ Conrad. *The Korean War "The Forgotten War."*, 10.

⁷ Raimondo, Justin. "Who Really Started the Korean War?" *Anti War*, 29 July 2013, original.antiwar.com/justin/2013/07/28/who-really-started-the-korean-war/. Accessed 28 Jan. 2018.

⁸ Raimondo, Justin. "Who Really Started the Korean War?" *Anti War*.

⁹ "Why Did the Korean War Break out in 1950?" *John D Clare*, www.johndclare.net/EC5.htm. Accessed 3 Feb. 2018.

¹⁰ "Why Did the Korean War Break out in 1950?" *John D Clare*.

instead he provided North Korea with supplies for war.¹¹ The Soviet Union wanted communism to grow throughout Asia so they could gain power.¹²

The War Begins

This attack has made it clear, beyond all doubt, that the international Communist movement is willing to use armed invasion to conquer independent nations. An act of aggression such as this creates a very real danger to the security of all free nations.

- Harry Truman¹³

On June 25, 1950, North Korea surprised the world when it crossed the 38th parallel line and invaded South Korea. The Security Council ordered a “police action” to aid South Korea in pushing North Korean forces back.¹⁴ The United Nations (UN) (mainly the U.S.) sent air and sea support to help defend South Korea.¹⁵ The Soviet Union was boycotting the Security Council at the time, so it could not veto the act.¹⁶ When UN forces arrived, they realized they were trapped at the bottom of the Korean peninsula in the city of Pusan.¹⁷

¹¹ “Why Did the Korean War Break out in 1950?” *John D Clare*.

¹² “Why Did the Korean War Break out in 1950?” *John D Clare*.

¹³ Truman, Harry. Speech. 19 July 1950. *The American Presidency Project*, www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=13561. Accessed 4 Feb. 2018.

¹⁴ “The History of the World: North Korea Invades South Korea.” *Oxford University Press*’s, 25 June 2013, blog.oup.com/2013/06/history-world-north-korea-invades-south-1950/. Accessed 25 Jan. 2018.

¹⁵ United States, Congress, House. *Statement by the President, Truman on Korea*. Government Printing Office, 1950. *Wilson Center*, digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/116192. Accessed 3 Feb. 2018.

¹⁶ “Why Did the Korean War Break out in 1950?” *John D Clare*.

¹⁷ “The Korean War (1950-1953).” *Sparknotes*, www.sparknotes.com/history/american/koreanwar/summary.html. Accessed 28 Jan. 2018.

Out of desperation, General Douglas MacArthur led his troops in a dangerous, amphibious assault on a western port in South Korea called Inchon.¹⁸ On September 15, 1950, the Battle of Inchon or Operation Chromite took place.¹⁹ MacArthur had planned to flank the North Korean People's Army at Inchon because it was so heavily guarded that they would not expect an attack.²⁰ During the attack, MacArthur and his men swiftly defeated the North Koreans and gained a foothold in Inchon.²¹ The UN's forces had about 570 casualties and about 2,700 were wounded, but the North Korean People's Army had about 35,000 men who were either killed or captured.²² The UN also lost two cruisers, three destroyers, and one armed sampan while the North Korean People's Army lost one aircraft and a patrol boat.²³

After the swift victory in Inchon, the UN forces started their slow and treacherous advance to the capital city of Seoul. The North Korean People's Army knew the UN was heading for Seoul, so they did their best to stall the incoming troops by sending T-34 tank attacks and Yakovlev Yak-28 bomber planes to bomb the Inchon shore. The next day, ships containing the U.S. Army's 7th Infantry Division arrived at the Inchon shore. These troops were going to cut off retreating North Korea troops from the south. On September 18, the 2nd Battalion of the 32nd Infantry Regiment arrived at Inchon to take over the U.S. Marine's position on the right flank south of Seoul. Also, the 7th Division's

¹⁸ "The Korean War (1950-1953)." *Sparknotes*.

¹⁹ Loudermilk, Ben. "Battle of Incheon - Korea War." *World Atlas*, www.worldatlas.com/articles/battle-of-incheon-korean-war.html. Accessed 29 Jan. 2018.

²⁰ "Battle of Inchon." *New World Encyclopedia*, 17 May 2016, www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Battle_of_Inchon. Accessed 29 Jan. 2018.

²¹ "The Korean War (1950-1953)." *Sparknotes*.

²² Loudermilk, Ben. "Battle of Incheon - Korea War." *World Atlas*.

²³ Loudermilk, Ben. "Battle of Incheon - Korea War." *World Atlas*.

31st Regiment arrived, and on September 19th, the 7th Infantry Division engaged in heavy fighting to take Seoul back from the North Korean People's Army. MacArthur and the 1st Marine Regiment attacked North Korean positions on a road to Seoul. Also, instead of putting MacArthur in charge of taking Seoul back, Major General Edward Almond, who was the X Corps commander, was ordered to capture Seoul on September 25. Seoul was heavily fortified by the North Korean People's Army when the Marines started their invasion on September 22. The Marines had to engage in house-to-house fighting while Almond announced the liberation of Seoul on September 25, although there was still active fighting. Then, MacArthur and the rest of the U.S. and UN forces pushed the North Korean People's Army back all the way to the Yalu River, which formed a border between North Korea and China.²⁴

Turning the Tides of the War

China entering the war was an extreme surprise to the UN. About 300,000 Chinese soldiers crossed the Yalu River and counterattacked the UN.²⁵ It is thought that China could have entered the war for four reasons. The first reason was that Stalin convinced China to provide troops for the war. Stalin provided equipment and air support but didn't want to fight America directly. The second reason was likely due to security concerns, because the U.S. was heading towards their border in the northeast, which contained much of China's resources and industry. The next reason was to

²⁴ "Battle of Inchon." *New World Encyclopedia*, 17 May 2016.

²⁵ "This Week in History: China Enters the Korean War." *Deseret News U.S. & World*, www.deseretnews.com/article/865616489/This-week-in-history-China-enters-the-Korean-War.html. Accessed 30 Jan. 2018.

defend communism itself, because China and the rest of the Soviet Union wanted to continue spreading communism throughout Asia. The last reason would simply be for moral support for a fellow communist country. Mao Zedong who ruled China at the time said, "Once another nation is in a crisis, we'd feel bad if we stood idly by."²⁶

Before China attacked, Truman had ordered MacArthur to stay away from the Yalu River because of the concerns that China would enter the war.²⁷ Truman was trying to avoid the possibility of WWII.²⁸ Ignoring Truman's orders, MacArthur pushed onward deeper into North Korea, not believing Mao Zedong was so reckless that he would go to war with the world's strongest superpower.²⁹ Unfortunately, this was not the case. China entered the war very suddenly with many soldiers, so they were able to push U.S. forces back to about the 38th parallel. For the next two years, neither side gave in and there was still fighting occurring.³⁰ During those two years, Truman fired MacArthur, Dwight Eisenhower became president of the U.S., and Joseph Stalin had died.³¹

²⁶ "Explaining China's Intervention in the Korean War in 1950." *Journal Quest*, Student Pulse, www.inquiriesjournal.com/articles/1069/explaining-chinas-intervention-in-the-korean-war-in-1950. Accessed 25 Jan. 2018.

²⁷ "This Week in History: China Enters the Korean War." *Deseret News U.S. & World*.

²⁸ Truman, Harry. Speech. 13 Apr. 1951. *Teaching American History*, teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/speech-explaining-the-firing-of-macarthur/. Accessed 4 Feb. 2018.

²⁹ "This Week in History: China Enters the Korean War." *Deseret News U.S. & World*.

³⁰ History.com Staff. "Korean War." *History*, 2009, www.history.com/topics/korean-war. Accessed 26 Jan. 2018.

³¹ "This Week in History: China Enters the Korean War." *Deseret News U.S. & World*.

A Compromise for Peace

The U.S., China, South Korea, and North Korea all wanted the war to end. They had been working on the armistice for two years and seventeen days and had 158 meetings, making it the longest negotiated armistice in history.³² Before the official armistice, both sides agreed on a prisoner exchange called Operation Little Switch. In April of 1953, the UN gradually released 6,670 communist prisoners in exchange for 684 UN prisoners, 149 of whom were Americans.³³ This event led up to the actual signing of the armistice on July 27, 1953, which officially created a truce for the Korean War. Eisenhower took action to end the Korean War, by mentioning using nuclear weapons to end the stalemate and pressuring South Korea to lessen their demands for the armistice.³⁴

The participating countries eventually came to an agreement, with all countries finally agreeing on the terms. The first term was that there would be a truce, and have no more fighting. Next, there would be a demilitarized zone (DMZ) created to separate North Korea from South Korea. The third part is that neither side can enter any air, sea, or ground areas that the other side controls. The armistice also arranged the release of

³² “Armistice Agreement for the Restoration of the South Korean State (1953).” *Ourdocuments.gov*, www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=false&doc=85. Accessed 3 Feb. 2018.

³³ Conrad. *The Korean War “The Forgotten War.”*, 104.

³⁴ “Korean War.” *History*, www.history.com/this-day-in-history/armistice-ends-the-korean-war. Accessed 2 Feb. 2018.

the rest of the prisoners of war. Finally, the Military Armistice Commission was created, which enforces the terms of the armistice and supervises the demilitarized zone.³⁵

Conclusion

U.S. involvement in the Korean War was controversial, as some Americans felt that the U.S. should not risk American lives for a war not directly involving the U.S.³⁶ However, it was crucial for the U.S. to support South Korea. There are three reasons the U.S. entered the Korean War. The first reason being the Domino Theory. This means that once one country became communist, more will follow like dominoes. Truman was concerned that if Korea became fully communist, the next target for communism would be Japan. The U.S. was very worried about this because of the fact that the U.S. and Japan were very strong trading partners. The second major reason for U.S. involvement, was trying to contain communism itself. Communism was seen as evil and Truman believed the the American way of life would be in danger. The last reason is that the U.S. did not want Communists to gain more land and power from other countries. That is because there was still tension between the U.S. and the Soviet Union from the Cold War.³⁷

In conclusion, if the U.S. did not aid South Korea, North Korea would most likely have completely taken over all of Korea. If they had achieved that, then communism

³⁵ “Armistice Agreement for the Restoration of the South Korean State (1953).” *Ourdocuments.gov*.

³⁶ Elkin, Kristina, et al. “American Public Opinion towards the War.” *Hidden Perspective on the Korea War*, www.ht-la.org/htla/projects/oralhistory/perspectiveonkorea/public-opinion.html. Accessed 4 Feb. 2018.

³⁷ “Why Did the Korean War Break out in 1950?” *John D Clare*.

probably would have spread to more countries making it more influential and powerful. It is clear that the U.S. helped address the ongoing conflict through its leadership, military support, and efforts to negotiate an armistice through compromise. Another important result from the Korean War was that it was the first time the UN worked together and proved their ability to keep the peace and influence the world. This likely made countries think twice before causing conflict with countries that were part of the UN. Also, since the U.S. was not prepared when North Korea attacked, the U.S. now keeps troops placed all over the world in case we needed to react quickly. Lastly, the war was influential because it was the first time U.S. troops were desegregated which had a positive impact on our country.

In summary, while the war may have been lethal and costly at the time, its effect can be seen in South Korea and North Korea today. South Korea has flourished into a thriving country, while North Korea's people continue to suffer under communist rule. Because the U.S. and UN forces slowed the spread of communism, other countries most likely were spared from communist rule, and the U.S. was able to maintain its way of life.

By their actions in Korea, Communist leaders have demonstrated their contempt for the basic moral principles on which the United Nations is founded. This is a direct challenge to the efforts of the free nations to build the kind of world in which men can live in freedom and peace.

- Harry Truman³⁸

³⁸ Truman, Harry. Speech. 19 July 1950. *The American Presidency Project*, www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=13561. Accessed 4 Feb. 2018.

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