

THE TRIUMPH OF THE LIMITERS: KOREA

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You will gather from my remarks the fact that I consider the title given me to be in one sense a misnomer. A group of leaders called the "limiters" did not prevail in 1950 against a group of leaders who demanded general war. Rather a limited war took place in an environment in which nearly every one feared a general war. Later, after Communist China entered the war, the limiters did prevail over the small group of men who wanted to extend the war to the Chinese mainland. What follows will attempt to explain how and why this was the case.

In many respects the Korean War was the most surprising war in history. Both the way it came about and the way in which it was fought surprised people in the West. In the plaintive language of General Omar Bradley, it was the "wrong war, at the wrong time, against the wrong enemy." To see why this was thought to be the case, it is necessary to go back to the period immediately following the end of World War II, a war which left power vacuums in Eastern Europe and the Far East.

Because both World War I and World War II were thought of as "total wars," there was a widely-held belief in the West that the

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next war would be another total war or World War III. Both World Wars had been fought by America as "crusades" against evil regimes, and we thought the next war would be the same kind of war, this time against World Communism. Classified papers such as NSC-30 and NSC-68, the Report of the President's Air Policy Commission in January, 1948, the so-called Finletter report, as well as articles and books in the open literature showed that their authors expected to see general war occur if the peace was broken. The military literature of the period 1945-1950 was almost completely devoid of items predicting the occurrence of limited war. Captain Sir Basil Liddell Hart was one of the few military writers of the period who pointed to the possibility of limited war.<sup>1</sup>

There were a number of reasons why these views were commonly held. The Communist bloc then seemed to be a monolithic one and a limited war between Communist and non-Communist powers was regarded as a low probability event. A war by proxy was completely unforeseen. The success of strategic bombing in crippling German air power and knocking Japan out of the war in 1945 led many people to think that the next war would be characterized by strategic bombing this time with nuclear weapons. It was widely assumed that the Soviet Union, which did not test its first nuclear weapon until September 1949 and which had little or no experience in strategic bombing, would wait until it had acquired something like parity with the United States in air atomic power before undertaking an aggression which would lead

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<sup>1</sup>See his "War, Limited" in Harper's Magazine, Vol. CLXLIII (March 1946), pp. 193-203, and The Revolution in Warfare, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1947.

to World War III, the stakes of which would be the domination of the world. Such a war was expected to see the nuclear bombing of the Soviet and American homelands while the Red Army overran Western Europe. But until the Soviet Union was ready for such a war, it was thought that the Communist bloc would resort to subversion as its main method of extending control over new territory.<sup>1</sup>

Sustained by these and other beliefs such as those which held that it would take the Soviet Union up to twenty-five years to make an atomic bomb, we and the British Government adopted a "no-war-for-ten-years" planning assumption for fiscal purposes and settled back to enjoy what we thought was going to be a well-earned period of peace. The rapid demobilization of British and American armies, navies, and air forces followed. As a result there were available in the United States in June 1950 only one airborne division and part of a Marine division.<sup>2</sup> Fortunately there were four understrength divisions in Japan.

Despite the British withdrawal from Western Europe and despite Roosevelt's promise to Stalin at Yalta that the United States would withdraw all of its troops from Europe within two years from the end of World War II, the Soviet Union did not disarm after 1945. Instead it maintained large conventional forces, kept up an impressive research

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<sup>1</sup>Dean Acheson, "Instant Retaliation: The Debate Continued," in The New York Times Magazine, March 28, 1954, p. 77.

<sup>2</sup>Hearings Before the Committee on Armed Services and the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, 82nd Congress, First Session, to Conduct an Inquiry into the Military Situation in the Far East and the Facts Surrounding the Relief of General of the Army Douglas MacArthur from His Assignment to that Area, Washington, Government Printing Office, 1951, Part I, p. 352. Hereafter cited as The MacArthur Hearings.

and development program for conventional and nuclear weapons, and its leaders acted as if they thought that the ability of a state to intervene militarily in a given area did not depend entirely upon nuclear weapons. Research carried out by some of my RAND colleagues such as Raymond Garthoff, Herbert Dinerstein, and Arnold Kramish, leads to the conclusion that Soviet military doctrine was not altered appreciably by consideration of nuclear weapons until after the Korean war.<sup>1</sup>

As we now know, the Soviet Union after 1945 did not stay home and devote its entire energy toward recuperating from the ordeals it underwent since World War I. Instead it provoked a crisis in Iran in 1946. It put severe pressure on Turkey to revise the Monetreux Convention in its favor. It approved and to a limited extent supported the Communist forces in the Greek Civil War. It provided the behind-the-scenes military support for the Communist takeover of Czechoslovakia in 1948, and it deliberately blockaded Berlin in 1949. While this was going on in Europe, Chinese Communists took over control of the mainland of China. All that was lacking in this program of aggressive acts was a large-scale border crossing in the classical fashion of 1936-1939. That came in Korea on June 25, 1950.

## II

In the light of preparations to avoid a second Pearl Harbor, it is hard to understand how the United States was in fact surprised by

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<sup>1</sup>R. L. Garthoff, Soviet Military Doctrine, Free Press, Glencoe, Illinois, 1953. H. S. Dinerstein, War and the Soviet Union, Praeger, New York, 1959. Arnold Kramish, Atomic Energy in the Soviet Union, Stanford University Press and Oxford University Press, 1959.

the aggression of North Korea in June 1950. On paper the American arrangements for handling strategic warnings and threats of surprise attack looked good in 1950. The National Security Act of 1947 and its amendments in 1949 set up a system headed by the National Security Council (NSC) which was to assist the President in appraising the commitments and risks of the United States. The NSC was to be assisted by a Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) which was to coordinate the intelligence activities of the several government departments and thus avoid the situation which existed in December 1941, when one agency had greater access to military-political intelligence than others. There was, in addition, an Armed Forces Policy Council within the Defense Department whose function it was to advise the Secretary of Defense on matters of broad policy relating to the armed forces. Finally, there was the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) who, as the principal military advisers to the President, the NSC, and the Secretary of Defense, were charged with the preparation of strategic plans and with providing strategic direction for the military forces.

Thus machinery existed for the orderly handling of important military business and for translating military intelligence into appropriate decisions. But, as the case of the Berlin Blockade indicated, when a crisis occurred there was a strong impulse in Washington to "play by ear" and to transact supremely important national business by ad hoc committees.<sup>1</sup> According to Senator Taft,

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<sup>1</sup>The Forrestal Diaries, edited by Walter Millis, New York, 1952, pp. 454-455.

"The [North Korean] attack was as much a surprise to the public as the attack on Pearl Harbor, although apparently, the possibility was foreseen by all our intelligence forces...."<sup>1</sup>

There were in fact abundant indicators of a coming North Korean attack on South Korea in 1950 but they were not recognized as such.<sup>2</sup> Secretary of Defense Louis Johnson testified that in May and early June North Korean forces crossed the border nearly every Sunday and returned to their side explaining their violations as "due to Maneuvers."<sup>3</sup> The Secretary himself toured the military installations in Korea just before the invasion, but saw or heard nothing that warned him of an impending attack. He arrived home just in time to get a good night's sleep before reports came in that the North Koreans had varied their Sunday pattern of border crossings. This time they did not return.

It is noteworthy that in the spirited defense of his Korean command made before the Congressional Committee investigating his relief, General Douglas MacArthur did not complain that the intelligence provided him by Washington about the prospect of a North Korean aggression was inadequate. He could not very well do this because his own headquarters was the principal source of this intelligence. He, therefore, said that intelligence had collected about as many facts about the North Korean mobilization as could be obtained from

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<sup>1</sup>Speech made before the U.S. Senate on June 28, 1950, quoted in MacArthur Hearings, Part V, p. 3210.

<sup>2</sup>See H. A. DeWeerd, "Strategic Surprise in the Korean War," in Orbis, Vol. VI (Fall 1962) pp. 435-453.

<sup>3</sup>MacArthur Hearings, Part V, p. 2584.



"behind the iron curtain." He asserted that no man or group of men could **predict** such an attack as took place at Pearl Harbor." Then, with **splendid** candor, he remarked that even if he had been supplied with an authentic copy of the North Korean attack order 72 hours in advance, it would not have made much difference. It took three weeks to get a sizeable body of troops to Korea from Japan anyway.<sup>1</sup>

For a short time after the aggression, it was commonly believed that the North Korean attack was a diversion intended to draw off American forces from the defense of Western Europe. So strong was this belief that when the United States 7th Fleet was sent from the Philippines toward the war zone, General MacArthur diverted it from Japan to Okinawa in order to be farther away from Russian and Chinese bases.<sup>2</sup> Concern with European security was thus coupled with the fear that World War III might be at hand. Western Europe could at that time place no effective barrier against an advance of the Red Army to the English Channel. "All the Red Army would need," said one observer, "was shoes."

### III

Before it committed ground forces to assist in the defense of South Korea, the United States Government tried to ascertain through diplomatic and intelligence channels what the intentions of the Soviet Union were. When we became convinced that they were not participating **directly in the** North Korean attack and did not seem prepared to launch

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., Part I, pp. 239-240.

<sup>2</sup>David Rees, Korea: The Limited War, New York, St. Martin's Press, 1964, p. 23.

World War III, and as the situation in South Korea deteriorated, the United States began a piecemeal commitment of forces from Japan to Korea under United Nations auspices.

It may surprise some of you to learn that at the outset the Korean war was limited on our side by a shortage of troops and lack of available air power. We were barely able to scrape together the forces which, with a little United Nations help, were able to hold the Pusan bridgehead in the summer of 1950 and prepare for the landing at Inchon and the counter-offensive which drove the invaders out of South Korea.

The North Koreans also had to limit their war because of lack of forces. They had just enough troops, tanks, and planes to conquer South Korea quickly if no outside power came to its assistance. They were lulled into believing that the United States would not intervene by its obvious lack of preparation to do so and a number of statements of American leaders putting South Korea outside the American defense perimeter in the Far East.

Thus the initial limitations on the war were not imposed by a group of men called the "limiters" who set bounds on the limits of the war, but by a prosaic shortage of men, weapons, and equipment, and by a lingering uncertainty about what the real intentions of the enemy were.

Some of the initial limitations on military action stemmed from a decision not to extend the war to the Chinese mainland. Thus, although the U.S. 7th Fleet was ordered to defend Formosa, it was also ordered to prevent a Nationalist Chinese invasion of Communist China. Chiang Kai-shek's offer of nationalist troops to fight in Korea was also declined.

The United States machinery for conducting war functioned quite well **after** the initial surprises of the Korean War had passed. General MacArthur and his staff estimated with remarkable accuracy what would be required to defend the Pusan bridgehead and prepare for a landing of the X Corps at Inchon to be followed by an offensive from the Pusan bridgehead. These operations were carried out with brilliant success in September 1950 in a campaign which drove the invader out of South Korea and led to the extension of the war into North Korea.

As my RAND colleague Alexander L. George has written:

General MacArthur's brilliant victory over the North Korean army at Inchon led the Truman Administration to adopt a new, quite ambitious objective. With the tacit approval of the United Nations, the decision was made at that time to occupy North Korea and unify all Korea. This new objective entailed no vital U.S. interests; it was casually accepted and adopted without serious opposition as a result of the momentum of events.<sup>1</sup>

On October 8, 1950, President Truman gave new instructions to General MacArthur which authorized him, in the event of the employment of major Chinese Communist units anywhere in Korea, to continue action as long as there was a "reasonable chance of success."<sup>2</sup>

At this stage of the war the Truman Administration was allowing General MacArthur great freedom of action with respect to strategy in spite of some opposition from the British. This sanctioned General MacArthur to carry out an advance to the Yalu in October-November 1950. An ill-advised separation of the X Corps from the bulk of the Eighth

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<sup>1</sup>Alexander L. George, Presidential Control of Force: The Korean War and the Cuban Missile Crisis, The RAND Corporation P-3627, p. 4.

<sup>2</sup>Harry S. Truman, The Memoirs of Harry S. Truman, Vol. II, Years of Trial and Hope, Garden City, Doubleday, 1956, p. 362.

Army invited the military disaster which the Chinese Peoples Liberation Army inflicted on the United Nations Command in late November and December 1950. The longest retreat in American military history followed.

It was after this when the U.N. Command faced the disheartening prospect of fighting an indecisive war against Chinese Communist troops in Korea, that political-military disagreements between Truman and MacArthur, and between the U.S. and its allies became acute. These controversies were over objectives, over the way in which the war should be waged, over the levels of violence which should be employed, and over the physical boundaries of the conflict.

General MacArthur's views were that Formosa should be "deneutralized," that the coast of Communist China should be blockaded, that the bridges over the Yalu and Communist bases in Manchuria should be bombed, and that if necessary to gain a victory, industrial complexes and communication centers on the mainland of China should be attacked.

President Truman and most of our allies did not accept these views. The limitations they wanted to see imposed on the Korean War stemmed from a desire: (1) not to cause a spreading of the war to other areas, particularly to Western Europe, (2) not to trigger off World War III, and (3) not to endanger the collective security system by imposing intolerable strains on it.

These were also important military reasons for not taking on additional military tasks. We did not have the necessary conventional military resources. The testimony of General Hoyt Vandenberg, given in the last days of the MacArthur hearings, shows that the Air Force

Chief of Staff did not think we had the planes and men to carry out MacArthur's program and at the same time deter the Soviet Union from invading Western Europe.<sup>1</sup>

In an effort to make America's objectives in the Korean War clear to MacArthur, the President sent him a long message on January 13, 1951. He said that the United States and her allies were fighting to:

1. Demonstrate that aggression will not be accepted by the U.S. or the U.N.
2. To deflate the dangerously exaggerated political and military prestige of Communist China.
3. To provide time for and direct assistance to the organization of resistance to communist aggression in Asia.
4. To make a satisfactory peace settlement with Japan possible.
5. To bring the U.N. through its first great effort for collective security.
6. To lend point and urgency to the rapid build up of the defenses of Western Europe.

"The American course," wrote the President, "should be such as to consolidate the majority of the United Nations...whom we need to count on as allies in the event the Soviet Union moves against us." A course of action which might be of some local assistance in Korea, he suggested, would **not be** in the overall interest of the U.S. if it involved Japan or **Western Europe** in large-scale hostilities.

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<sup>1</sup>MacArthur Hearings, Part III, pp. 744, 887, 943, 1378, 1385, 1393, 1398, 1399, 1402.

The main limitations on military action in the Korean war are well **known** and only need to be enumerated here. They included sanctuary **status** for the territory north of the Yalu, temporary exemptions for certain targets in North Korea such as hydroelectric plants, the city of Rashin, and for a time an indictment against bombing the bridges over the Yalu river. The coast of China was not blockaded and its military bases were immune from attack. Chiang Kai-shek's forces were tethered to the island of Formosa; atomic bombs were not used, and the number of divisions in the Eighth Army was not increased. In return the enemy air forces did not attack American ground forces or bases in South Korea or ships of the 7th Fleet.

Maintaining these limitations, President Truman was motivated by one over-riding desire. That was to prevent the Korean War from escalating into a third world war. In later years he wrote: "Every decision I made in connection with the Korean conflict had this one aim in mind; to prevent a third world war and the terrible destruction it would bring to the civilized world." General MacArthur did not think his proposed actions would trigger off a world war and his many supporters in the military establishment resented the restrictions imposed by these limitations on the freedom of action of the theater commander.

On December 30, 1951, General MacArthur advocated the bombing and blockade of Red China as well as the employment of Nationalist Chinese troops **in the war**. These proposals were turned down by the President as **we have shown** in a letter on January 13, 1951, which stressed the **negative attitude** of our United Nations allies and the need to preserve the collective security system.

This reply disappointed General MacArthur who later likened the system of political control over the military to the commissar system in the Red Army. He said: "A theater commander, in any campaign, is not merely limited to the handling of his troops; he commands that whole area politically, economically, and militarily. You have got to trust at that stage when politics fails, and the military takes over, you must trust the military, or otherwise you will have the system that the Soviets once employed of the political commissar, who would run the military as well as the politics of the country."<sup>1</sup> To his mind there was no substitute for victory and no half way war. You either had all-out war or peace. There was no middle ground. He carried his disagreement with the civilian branch of the Government to the point of declaring on July 25, 1951, "...I find in existence a new and hithertofore unknown and dangerous concept, that members of our armed forces owe primary allegiance and loyalty to those who temporarily exercise the authority of the executive branch of the government, rather than to the country and its Constitution, which they are sworn to defend."<sup>2</sup>

Though they did not support him in his extreme statements, many American senior officers favored the MacArthur position in the quarrel with Truman. In their testimony before the Jenner sub-committee in 1954-1955 Generals Mark Clark, James van Fleet, George Stratemeyer, Edward Almond, and Admiral Turner Joy, all proclaimed their belief that politicians should not meddle with the conduct of war once it was

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<sup>1</sup> MacArthur Hearings, Par I, p. 45.

<sup>2</sup> An address before the Massachusetts' Legislature, July 25, 1951, quoted in Major General Courtney Whitney, MacArthur, His Rendezvous with History, New York, Knopf, 1956, p. 501.

underway. Aside from Omar Bradley and George C. Marshall, the only important officers who supported the Truman position were Matthew Ridgway and Maxwell Taylor.

When denied the opportunity to attack Red China directly, General MacArthur countered with a proposal in February 1951 for what he called "vast amphibious landings on both coasts of North Korea after cutting the enemy's supply lines with radioactive waste."<sup>1</sup> This was not more acceptable to the Truman administration than MacArthur's earlier proposals. The use of any kind of nuclear munition was opposed by our U.N. Allies. The mere hint, in a Truman press conference, that the United States might consider the use of atomic weapons under some circumstances in Korea brought Prime Minister Attlee on a hasty flight of protest to Washington.

MacArthur's recall was implicit in the situation in the spring of 1951 and in his decision to allow his views to be exploited politically by House Minority Leader, Joseph Martin. MacArthur was relieved not so much for violating directives on military matters or for disagreeing with Truman's conduct of the war, but for repeatedly taking his disagreements to the public.<sup>2</sup>

The military situation in Korea in 1951 was described as unpromising by MacArthur's successor, General Matthew Ridgway in the following words:

**A drive to the line of the Yalu and the Tumen would have cleared Korea of the Chinese enemy. But he would still be facing us**

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid.

<sup>2</sup> Richard L. Neustadt, Presidential Power, New York, John Wiley, 1960, p. 20.



in great strength beyond those rivers. The seizure of the land between the truce line and the Yalu would have merely meant the seizure of more real estate. It would have merely shortened the enemy's supply lines...It would have greatly lengthened our own supply routes, and widened our battlefront from 110 miles to 420. Would the American people have been willing to support the great army that would have been required to hold that line?"<sup>1</sup>

President-elect Eisenhower apparently believed in 1952 that the American people would not support such an army. He thereupon put into operation a series of steps which led to the long and frustrating negotiations at Panmunjom.

Looking back on the situation which existed after the Chinese intervention in Korea, David Rees said that "the Truman Administration decided that the price of a united Korea would be, if not a general war, at least a wrong war with the wrong enemy...It was, therefore, decided to limit the American commitment to the defense of South Korea in an action which would give the North Atlantic powers time to build up what Secretary Acheson called 'situations of strength.'"<sup>2</sup> This was the key motivation behind the limitations placed on military action in Korea.

Though the limiters triumphed in Korea in 1953, there is some evidence that it was the threat of nuclear attack on the Chinese mainland which ultimately brought the protracted and humiliating negotiations at Panmunjom to an end. Sherman Adams reports that in talking to Eisenhower one day about the events which led up to the truce in Korea, he asked him what had brought the Communists into line. Without hesitation

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<sup>1</sup> General Matthew Ridgway, Soldier, The Memoirs of Matthew B. Ridgway, New York, Harper, 1956, p. 219-220.

<sup>2</sup> Rees, op. cit., pp. xii-xiii.

Eisenhower replied: "Danger of atomic war...We told them we could not hold it to a limited war any longer if the Communists welched on a treaty of truce. They didn't want a full-scale war or an atomic attack. That kept them under some control."<sup>1</sup>

Though the frustrations of limited war in Korea led to the Dulles Massive Retaliation doctrine, it did not, as we found out in Vietnam, enable the United States to avoid other limited wars. Whether we liked it or not the nuclear stalemate, arising out of the era of nuclear plenty, made limited war the most likely form of international conflict.

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<sup>1</sup> Sherman Adams, Firsthand Report, New York, Harper, 1961, pp. 48-49, 102. For a less dramatic account see Dwight D. Eisenhower, Mandate For Change, 1953-1956, New York, Signet Books, 1965, pp. 229, 543.