

The Korean War and US Public Opinion: June 1950 to January 1951

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Honors Capstone Project HNRS-490-014H

December 13, 2010

Introduction

...the State Department's PA¹ reported on January 19 [that] "For the America public the issue 'Why Do We Stay in Korea?' has become of primary importance." Since August, for instance, polls had demonstrated a sharp rise from 20 to 49 percent of the population thinking that the war was misguided. "It seems clear," PA concluded, "that the public sees the issue of continued US support to the UN in Korea primarily in terms of military reverses, and it minimizes the moral obligation so generally supported at the outset."²

Only five years after fighting in one of the most devastating wars in world history, the United States (hereafter US) entered in another large scale war in 1950. Considering domestic problems that America had at that time, such as large debts and public discontents over President Truman's appeasement policy towards China, sending combat forces to Korea could have encountered major domestic oppositions of the public. Nevertheless, American people commended President Truman's decisive action; the polling data suggests that about 80 to 90 percent of American public supported the administration's choice to intervene in Korea.³ Then, even more fascinating phenomenon was how swiftly the public changed its stance on this issue. The survey conducted on January 1, about five and half months after the war began, demonstrated that the two third of the American public now wanted their troops be pulled out of the Korean peninsula, and 50 percent of them believed that President Truman made a mistake when he decided to go into Korea.⁴

This sudden change in American public's opinion is something worth analyzing to academics and the officials in government. In a democratic society, public support is vital to the successful conduct of military operations. American history has shown that US military is at risk when such deployment does not receive domestic public support.⁵ In this context, it is necessary

¹ PA refers to Office of Public Affairs within the State Department

² Steven Casey, "Selling the Korean War," *Oxford University Press*: New York (2002), page 206

³ Ibid, page 35-36

⁴ George Gallup, "The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion 1935-1971," page 961

⁵ Here, the author talks about US military deployment in Korea, Vietnam, Haiti, and Iraq

for policymakers acknowledge under what situations the public rallies behind the administration's decision to send troops abroad. Among many historical incidents of US military intervention, the Korean War offers a particularly interesting case because the public attitude changed in such a fast speed, as noted above. Therefore, the paper will attempt to identify rational behind (1) such a high percentage of support in the first week of the Korean War, and (2) sudden drops in the public support for the US military action in Korea in the early 1951. The in-depth analysis suggests that the US public retracted its initial support for the intervention in Korea because the Chinese involvement in the Korean War not only increased both actual and expected casualties of American soldiers, but also lowered US prospects of victory in Korea.

Section 1: Previous research on the US public opinion and the use of military force

The relationship between mass American public opinion and the use of military force has become the focus of many studies and research. They have all come up with different explanations for why the American public is most likely to support or oppose a military operation abroad. First, scholars like Everett Ladd, Andrew Kohut, and Robert Toth, argue that the most common and acceptable justification for the US military deployment is the vital interests of the US are at stake.⁶ Ladd mentions in his study that "[t]hroughout most of the post-World War II period, the American public has approached questions of the use of military force from a single perspective: it is willing to deploy US armed forces to defend national interests, but insistent that those interest be truly vital."⁷ Another mainstream school of thought is that the principal policy objective of a military operation has a strong impact on public opinion. Bruce

⁶ Andrew Kohut and Robert Toth, "Arms and the People," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 73 (November-December 1994): page 47-61 and Louis Klarevas, "The 'Essential Dominos' of military Operations: American Public Opinion and the Use of Force," *International Studies Perspective*, Vol. 3 (2002): page 420.

⁷ Klarevas, page 420.

Russett and Miroslav Nincic, renowned political scientists who are currently teaching at Yale and UC Davis, respectively, discovered that while helping to defend against external aggression was popular, intervention in civil wars was not.⁸ In a similar vein, Bruce Jentleson, Professor at Duke University, argues that the public tends to support the use of force “to coerce...adversary engaged in aggressive actions against the US or its interests,” but it generally shows lower support for the use of force to “influence the domestic political authority structure of another state.”⁹ In addition, some scholars focus on human costs of wars and claim that casualties are the strongest determinant of public opinion. One of the first and the most famous scholarly book on this subject was published by renowned researcher John Mueller. In his book “War, Presidents, and Public Opinion,” he analyzes American fatalities’ data from the Korean War and the Vietnam War and concludes that “every time American casualties increased by a factor of 10, support for the war dropped by about 15 percentage points.”¹⁰ Likewise, Scott Gartner and his colleagues reaches the same conclusion with Mueller by using marginal, instead of aggregate, casualties’ data from the Korean and Vietnam War.¹¹

In fact, some scholars in recent years have concluded that the public stance on the use of military force is not simply determined by a single factor, but by a cost-benefit analysis using multiple variables. In other words, all the determinants described above are being used at once by American people to find out whether they should support the use of force abroad. For example, Mueller observes that “the public undertakes a fairly sensible cost-benefit accounting when evaluating foreign affairs and, not unreasonably, the key to its definition of cost is the high

⁸ Bruce Russett and Miroslav Nincic, “American Public Opinion on the Use of Military Force Abroad,” Political Science Quarterly, Vol 91, no. 3 (Autumn 1976), page 418-420.

⁹ Bruce Jentleson, “The Pretty Prudent Public: Post Vietnam American Opinion on the Use of Military Force,” International Studies Quarterly, Vol. 36, No. 1 (March 1992), page 50, 66-70.

¹⁰ John Mueller, “War, Presidents, and Public Opinion,” Wiley: New York (1973), page 60

¹¹ Scott Gartner and Gary Segura, “War, Casualties, and Public Opinion,” Journal of Conflict Resolution, Vol 42 (June 1998), page 295

value it places on American lives.”¹² What Mueller essentially argues is that the public is always going to ask this question to itself: will the benefits that accrue from intervention justify the costs incurred? In a similar vein, Eric Larson, researcher at the RAND Corporation, claims that “the historical record suggests that...when important national interests are engaged, important principles are being promoted, and the prospects for success are high, the majority of the American public is likely to accept costs that are commensurably high with the perceived stakes.”¹³ The author agrees with Mueller and Larson that American public engages in a complex cost-benefit calculation when deciding whether to support the foreign military intervention. Therefore, the paper will seek to find out the majority public’s cost-benefit analysis in the period between June 1950 and January 1951 in regarding American intervention to Korea.

Section 2: Decision to intervene in Korea: June 25 to 30, 1950

The outbreak of Korean War and the US decision to send troops: June 25-30, 1950

The North Korean invasion began at 4:00 am on June 25th (3:00 pm on 24th, Washington time). This surprising news of the attack reached Washington about six hours after the first blows had been struck. When being informed about the invasion, officials in Washington devoted all might in finding out what was really happening in the Korean Peninsula. Dean Acheson, the former Secretary of State at the time of the Korean War, recalls that he ordered his subordinates to collect all necessary information regarding the situation in Korea before making any policy decisions.¹⁴ Especially, the Truman administration wondered whether the attack had been done with Soviet direction. If that was the case, the US now might have to face another major world

¹² John Mueller, “Common Sense,” National Interest, Vol. 47(Spring 1997): pages 81-88.

¹³ Eric V. Larson, “Casualties and Consensus: The Historical Role of Casualties in Domestic Support for U.S. Military Operations,” RAND Corporation: Santa Monica (1996), page 13.

¹⁴ Dean Acheson, “The Korean War,” WW Norton & Company Inc, New York: 1971, page 16

war with communists. However, if the conflict came out to be a civil war in nature, the administration was freer in determining how to respond to this incident.

Few hours after the news, The US ambassador to Korea, John Muccio, confirmed the North Korean assault against the South. Ambassador Muccio explained, in his urgent letter to the State Department that the attack appeared to be an all-out offensive against South Korea, but the details of fighting were unclear.¹⁵ Subsequently, he officially notified about the situation to the American community by broadcasting a short speech through radio station. Ambassador announced, “At four o’clock this morning ,[local time], North Korean armed forces bean unprovoked attacks against defense positions of the Republic of Korea at several points along the thirty-eighth parallel...there is no reason for alarm...[T]he Ambassador requests Americans Mission personnel to remain at home or at their posts as the situation dictates.”¹⁶ In his delivery, Ambassador Muccio not only informed the factual situations concerning the North’s invasion to the public, but also asked Americans to be calm and patient until everything became clear. In other words, the speech was clearly intended to prevent any kinds of overreaction to the situation in Korea.

At the same time, American intelligence community was busy finding out the ultimate intentions of the attackers as well as military capabilities of both North and South Korean army. The crucial questions that had to be answered were; was this calculated attack a part of larger plan of the Soviet Union, or maybe the Communist China?; Could South Korea hold the invasion of the North on its own? The initial answer of the Truman administration to the first question was that the North Korean invasion was the Soviet’s “probing” operation to discover a weak point of the US sphere of influence. Washington believed that the Soviet might not be directly

¹⁵ The entire report sent by Ambassador Muccio is available at Department of State, “United States policy in the Korean Crisis,” Far Eastern Series No. 34: Washington Government Printing Office (1950), page 1

¹⁶ The United Press, “US Envoy in Warning To Americans in Korea,” New York Times, June 25, 1950, page 21

involved in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (hereafter DPRK)'s invasion of the South, but certainly had impacts on Kim Il-Sung's decision. Also, the administration assumed that the Soviet might be in search of other attacking places, such as countries in Indochina or Iran, to expand its sphere of influence. In addition, Washington expected that as long as the Soviet did not actively support the invaders, South Korean army could hold the invasion on its own.¹⁷ In fact, later it was known that Washington mistakenly underestimated the power of North Korean Red Army.

Initial American press response was, in fact, apathetic. Since a Northwest Airlines DC-4 plunged into Lake Michigan, the news of Korean War was being treated as the second-place news of the day. Editors decided not to emphasize Korean situations because they did not foresee that the Korean story would demand banner headlines for days to come.¹⁸ At the same time, major newspaper companies would probably not have any accurate and concrete information about Korean situation at that moment.

On Monday June 26th, the President issued his first formal statement on the Korean crisis. Here, he emphasized that the US would follow the decision of the Security Council to provide whatever necessary to ensure the withdrawal of North Korean troops in the South. He also asserted that "[w]illful disregard of the obligation to keep the peace cannot be tolerated by nations that support the United Nations Charter."¹⁹ The announcement did not mention anything like the Soviet Union or the Communist, while highlighting that the US action was in conjunction with the UN policy. Analyzing the speech, Ferdinand Kuhn of the Washington Post interpreted that "...behind these strong words was an evident desire to temporize until the UN had acted, and until President had made up his mind about the enormous issues raised by the

¹⁷ Glenn Paige, "The Korean Decision: June 24-30," The Free Press:New York (1968), page 97

¹⁸ Ibid, page 108

¹⁹ Department of State, "US Policy," page 15

Korean invasion.²⁰ In other words, President Truman refrained from making any provocative statements that might bother leaderships in Moscow and Peking. This could be interpreted as Washington's willful desire not to make the incident as another world war scale conflict in Asia.

In fact, the public moods at that time supported a swift and decisive intervention policy rather than a passive wait and see approach. Such atmosphere was perhaps created due to strong criticism toward the administration in regarding the victory of communism in China in 1949. When Mao Zedeng's Communist army finally took over the mainland China on October 1949, the US domestic media and Congress vehemently blamed President Truman for being soft on communism in Asia. They reopened old sores about Hitler's fascism in 1930s and said that American would encounter the emergence of another major threat due to the administration appeasement policy. In this context, the United States wanted to see strong response to communists' attack on free South Korea. For example, Senator Knowland from California once said that "Time is of the essence. We must constantly keep in mind that Holland was overrun by Nazi Germany in five days and Denmark in two...the Congress, the American people, and the free world must be prepared to make a prompt decision."²¹

Reflecting upon such request for prompt action, President Truman announced American air and naval support to South Korea on Tuesday June 27. In the morning of that day, the President summoned 14 congressmen and the State Secretary to discuss the deployment of US troops in Korea. Here, all participants reached consensus on the statement that prompt action is necessary to restore peace in the area. President Truman suggested his idea of sending air and naval supports to the peninsula, and no one challenged his policy choice. As the decision became publically available, opposing Republican as well as media expressed their genuine supports for

²⁰ Washington Post, June 27, 1950, p6

²¹ "Congressional Record," US Government Printing Office, Vol. 96 part 7, June 26 1950, page 9157.

President's decision. Reporters all agreed that Truman made a right choice in sending helps to the US allies. For example, Joseph Harsch of the Christian Science wrote that "I have lived and worked in and out of this city [Washington] for 20 years. Never before in that time have I felt such a sense of relief and unity pass through this city...Mr. Truman obviously did much more than he was expected to do, and almost exactly what most individuals seemed to wish he would do."²² Similarly, New York Times called the President's decision to save the Republic of Korea as "mementoes and courageous act."²³ These bipartisan and unanimous supports from both the Congress and media affected the domestic support of the war, which will be discussed further later.

Nevertheless, only one and a half day after making a decision to send air and naval supports, President Truman was forced to the situation where he had to make another sensitive decision. General Douglas MacArthur, located in Japan, made a personal trip to South Korea to check the status of North and South Korean armies. After one-day trip, he concluded that South Korean armies were in the worst possible situation.²⁴ Therefore, he suggested that only assurance for holding the present line was to send US ground forces to Korea. Then, about 12 hours later, at 3 am on Friday June 30th, General MacArthur sent another message, but this time it was more in an urgent manner, which asked Washington to grant him authority to send from Japan at once a regimental combat team of two divisions as soon as possible. In response, President Truman first gave limited approval to General MacArthur and ordered him to wait for the final decision. The main concern, again, was that the deployment of US ground forces might stimulate the Soviet's counteraction in the peninsula. However, at the time, there was still no evidence that Moscow intended to intervene in Korea. Intelligence teams in the State Department were in

²² Paige, page 194

²³ Arthur Krock, "President Takes Chief Role in Determining US Course," New York Times, June 28 1950 page 1

²⁴ The full text of MacArthur's message is available in Paige, page 237-238

general agreement that the Soviet Union would avoid a head-on military collision with American forces in Korea.²⁵ Even if the Soviet, or China, was thinking about coming down to help DPRK troops, there was no on-going movement of communist forces that indicated the imminent involvement of them. In this context, the President and his advisors concluded that for a certain period of time, they did not have to worry about the possible confrontation with Soviet or Chinese communist troops. Finally, the President gave General MacArthur to power to deploy US ground military forces in Korea. Now, the US became fully committed in Korea.

US public reaction to the intervention in Korea

Then, how did American public react to the government's decision to be engaged in the situation in Korea? By the end of the first week of the Korean War, Gallup reported that up to 81 percent of American public supported Truman's decision to aid South Korea.²⁶ The survey also found that the public typically responded that such decision was the best thing that the President had done in five years.²⁷ In addition, White House also proudly informed reporters that letters to President went running almost ten to one in favor of sending US troops to Korea.²⁸ It is known that in regarding such high percentage of public supports, Clark Clifford, a member of the White House staff, told President Truman that "approval of your action is surprisingly universal."²⁹

The evidence all suggests that US public passionately supported President's decision to send American troops to Korea. In explaining such high approval percentage, the cost-benefit calculation model described in the section 1 of this paper is useful. It appears that the US operation in Korea held clear missions of rescuing South Korea from the communist invasion

²⁵ Paige, page 259

²⁶ George Gallup, "Survey Finds 8 out of 10 Voters Approve US Help to Korea," Washington Post, July 2, 1950, page M1.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Casey 35-36

²⁹ Rosemary Foot, "The Wrong War," Cornell University Press: Ithaca (1985), page 63

and restoring world peace. At the same time, the prospect of winning was high, since the Soviet intervention was unlikely and the power of DPRK army was underestimated. All these factors synthetically influenced the US public decision to endorse the involvement in Korea.

a. Interests at stake/ Policy Objectives

From Americans' perspective, Korean War was understood as the beginning of intensified US-Soviet rivalry. Many urged to the administration that now was the time to "draw the clear line" with respect to Communist aggression.³⁰ Such arguments were mainly created due to the failure of appeasement policy in 1930s. Prior to the World War II, western democracies failed to stop Mussolini in Ethiopia, Hitler in Austria, and the Japanese in Manchuria. In a similar vein, Washington's negligence to let the Communist victory in China raised sincere concern regarding the democracies' future against Communist threat. In this context, President Truman and American public were on the same page in thinking that the US had to show something to Moscow that we, the western democracies, were not as weak as we had been beforehand. Moreover, Americans strongly believed that Korean War was a simply triggering event of a larger plan. Therefore, Washington thought that if the US showed a determinant position against the Soviet's attack, Moscow might abandon its desire to start a devastating war in other parts of the world. For example, President Truman once said, "Korea is the Greece of the Far East. If we are tough enough now, if we stand up to them like we did in Greece three years ago, they won't take any next steps."³¹

In addition, Policymakers decided to deploy troops in Korea, not simply because Korea was strategically important, but Korea's symbolic meaning to other US allies in Asia and Europe.

³⁰ Foot, page 62

³¹ Halstambam page 92-93

When determining whether to send troops or not, policymakers in Washington realized that the option of not doing anything would produce unexpected concerns to other US allies around the world, and therefore, Washington almost had to do something. In other words, unwillingness to intervene in support of a recognized ally in Asia would mean that US determination to resist Soviet communist pressure would be questioned in elsewhere, particularly among governments in Europe and Asia.³² In fact, many US allies felt relieved when they observed Washington actively help Seoul when it was attacked by communist threat. General MacArthur once reported from Tokyo that that Japanese were immensely relieved; they interpreted the situation as the US would vigorously defend them against the Soviet attack.³³ Moreover, Averell Harriman, President Truman's special assistant, reported that prior to the US intervention in Korea, European countries were gravely concerned that the Americans would not meet the challenge, but afterward, they too were greatly relieved.³⁴ The information all suggest that US decision to intervene had more meaning than simply rescuing South Korean people and the operation appeared to have intended impacts on other US allies around the world.

b. Prospect of winning and expected casualties

When the decision to send American soldiers to Korean peninsula was made, people in the United States expected the situation to be an easy victory and only lasting for a short amount of time. Such anticipation was available only because that the administration assured the Soviet and China would not intervene in Korea. In fact, the evidence shows that decision makers in Washington carefully reviewed the possibility of the Soviet and Chinese intervention before they decided to send troops to Korea.

³² Foot 58

³³ Truman papers, President's Secretary Files, August 6-8, quoted in Foot, page 60

³⁴ Ibid.

Although Communist China became the biggest challenge to the US operation in Korea in the late 1950, in June 1950, the US considered China to be the least concerned of the major powers with events in either North or South Korea. Washington viewed the tie between Pyongyang and Peking as “weak and superficial.”³⁵ In fact, this was somewhat true. The opening of the Soviet Archives in the aftermath of the Cold War gave opportunities to scholars to analyze the Sino-North Korea relationship in the time of Korean War, and the evidence proved that the tie between Peking and Pyongyang was relative weak in the outbreak of Korea.³⁶ It was only after the Chinese intervention in Korea that Peking became the closest friend of Pyongyang. Yet, other than a fact of superficial relationship with DPRK, China was already preoccupied with other domestic issues at that time. The Chinese Communist Party (hereafter CCC) gained control of the mainland China in October 1949, less than a year prior to the outbreak of Korean War. This suggested that the government of Communist China had to spend their all possible efforts in building up their domestic structure. Mao also expressed such belief on June 23, two days before the beginning of the Korean War, by saying “it was now time to entire the new era of socialism unhurriedly and with proper arrangements when conditions are ripe and when transition has been fully considered and endorsed by the whole nation.”³⁷ Furthermore, the intelligence, which mainly came from the US embassy in India, suggested that the large amount of People’s Liberation Army (PLA) troops were to be transferred to productive tasks in rural area, and defense spending was to be severely curtailed.³⁸ With this information, the US concluded that direct Chinese intervention was unlikely, which later came out to be totally inaccurate.

³⁵ Foot, page 55

³⁶ For more information on this subject, see Shen Zhihua, “Sino-North Korean Conflict and its Resolution during the Korean War,” *Wilson Center*: Cold War International History Project, Issue: 14/15. Translated by Dong-Gil Kim and Jeffrey Becker, available at <http://www.wilsoncenter.org/news/docs/article1-sz.pdf>.

³⁷ Foot, page 56

³⁸ Foot 56

In terms of the Soviet involvement, the US was much more careful and prudent in figuring out the relationship between the Soviet intention and North Korean attack. When the news of communist invasion of South Korea first reached Washington, the immediate responses of policymakers were that the attack must have been a direct Moscow move, ordered by Stalin and obeyed by his proxies in North Korea.³⁹ At that moment, such conclusion seemed logical because the administration's Soviet experts all considered North Korea as simply a Soviet satellite, totally under Kremlin's control. This meant that if the US troops were sent to the Korean peninsula, the Soviet would also send their soldiers, which then would lead to the direct confrontation of the world's two most powerful powers at that moment. Nevertheless, Washington's analysis showed that the Soviet was not directly involved in Kim's attack. The Soviet reply to the US aide-memoire calling on Moscow to disavow responsibility for the North Korean invasion indicated to Acheson that the Soviet Union was not going to be directly involved in the fighting.⁴⁰ The response also made clear that Kremlin saw the conflict as a civil confrontation. Moreover, Admiral Roscow Hillenkoetter reported to the NSC's consultants, meeting on June 29th that there was little evidence of Soviet support for the North Koreans and little Soviet military activity anywhere in the Far East.⁴¹ And about the same time, the Soviet Union was engaged in encouraging peace moves in Korea, which the hard-liners in US embassy in Russia considered genuine in nature.⁴² All these suggested that the direct confrontation with the Soviet Union was also unlikely when the US troops were deployed to Korea.

America's proposition that both China and the Soviet Union would not participate in fighting in Korea increased its prospect of winning in Korea. Washington mainly underestimated

³⁹ David Halberstam, "The Coldest Winter: America and the Korean War," *Hyperion*: New York (2007), page 92

⁴⁰ Foot, page 61

⁴¹ Ibid

⁴² Ibid

the power of North Korea army and predicted that the War would be lasted probably for a couple of months. Hearing these messages from the leadership, American public was in full confidence that the conflict would be an easy victory in a short period of time. Likewise, they assumed that the costs of war, both in terms of money and human lives, would be minimal.

Section 3: From the lowest to the highest: July 1 to October 15, 1950

Period of Escalation and Concerns: July 1 to September 15 1950

When MacArthur recommended the commitment of US ground troops to combat North Korean army, he as well as officials in Washington estimated that the task would only require two divisions, plus air and naval forces already involved in the conflict.⁴³ They certainly thought the US involvement would not last more than several months. However, such illusions were all shattered by a series of news reporting American defeats on the frontline. Since US troops made first contact with North Korean army on July 5th, they had to be constantly pushed southward. The main reason for early defeats was that Washington underestimated the power of DPRK's Red Army. American combatants were small in number, inadequately trained, and insufficiently supplied. In contrast, North Korean troops, which had presumably prepared the war for 5 years, could easily overwhelmed American forces. Noticing the seriousness in the frontline, General MacArthur, on July 9th, asked for eight more divisions to fight the war.⁴⁴

At this point, it is interesting to see how the administration and the public responded differently to the situation. President Truman, who feared of the enlargement the Korean conflict to another world war, was very careful in dealing with General MacArthur's request of more troops in Korea. He agreed with MacArthur that more American soldiers should be sent to

⁴³ William Stueck, "Rethinking the Korean War: A new diplomatic and Strategic History," Princeton University Press: Princeton (2002), page 87.

⁴⁴ Acheson, page 36

control the situation, but his concern was that such deployment would create unnecessary wartime mood within the United States. Because of the same reasoning, the President already labeled the operation in Korea as the police action, instead of war. However, if the US decided to bring eight more divisions to the peninsula, there appeared to be no way to counterargue the claim that US was fully committed to the Korean War.

His apprehension was well depicted in his July 19th speech in front of congressmen and the general public. Before a vast audience estimated around 130 million, the President clearly pointed out that North Korean assault was 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.”⁴⁵ Placing North Korean attack in its global perspective, President insisted America be on its guard against communist forces.⁴⁶ As part of handling the situation, he asked to raise taxes to pay for the \$10 billion increase in defense spending as well as abolish a \$13.5 billion ceiling placed on that year’s defense budget. Nevertheless, President remained to speak in a slow and measured manner and refrained from using terms such as ‘war’ and ‘all-out mobilization.’

The public’s response to the speech suggested that Americans were unsatisfied with President’s softness in dealing with communist North Korea. After watching President’s speech on television, focus groups assembled in New York City concluded that “the President was not in advance of the national mood...If anything, the public would evidently have gone along with somewhat stronger language regarding communism.”⁴⁷ In addition, a report published by Office of Public Affairs in the State Department stated that “the main criticism of the administration’s

⁴⁵ Harry, S Truman, “President Truman on the Situation in Korea: Radio and Television Address,” July 19, 1950, retrieved December 2, 2010, available at http://www.authentichistory.com/1946-1960/2-korea/1-timeline/19500719_President_Truman_on_The_Situation_in_Korea.html

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Schwerin Research Corporation, “Public Reaction to President Truman’s Korea Speech, July 19, 1950,” quoted in Casey, page 75.

actions since June 25 is that the actions are inadequate and that mobilization should be faster and greater in magnitude.”⁴⁸ The public’s desire for more vigorous action in Korea became even clearer in Gallup’s poll conducted in early August. They found that 70 percent of Americans would be willing to endorse higher taxes to fund a larger military to resolve the situation in Korea.⁴⁹ Perhaps, the US public reacted in such a belligerent way, because they firmly believed that the war with the Soviet was an irresistible fate of the United States. At that time, people in the US thought that the confrontation with the Soviet communist would happen in a very near future. If having a war was apparent, they would rather have it earlier than later. That was why Americans were so willing to even sacrifice themselves to support more aggressive activities in Korea.

North Korean troops, far from being intimidated by the appearance of American combatants, had continued to push southward. By early August, with the aid of covert operations by guerrillas who had survived prewar ROK suppression campaigns, they had driven all the way to the Naktong River, often little more than thirty miles from Pusan.

⁴⁸ US Congress, Senate, “Hearings before Committee on Banking and Currency: Defense Production Act,” 1950-1951, quoted in Casey, page 75

⁴⁹ George Gallup, “Strong Controls, Higher Taxes Favored by Public in Survey,” Washington Post, August 6 1950.

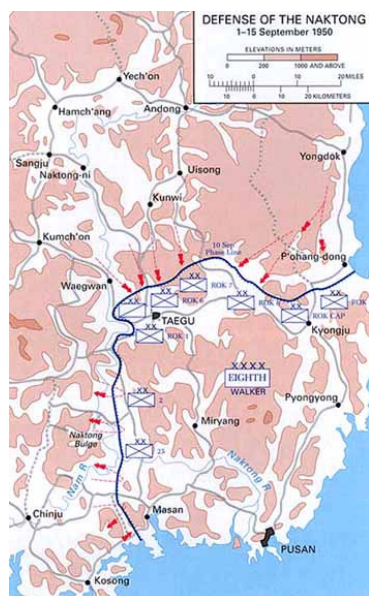


Figure 1. Defense of the Naktong in the late August⁵⁰

Although United States and ROK soldiers now outnumbered the enemy and American planes dominated the air, but for the moment North Korean troops possessed better equipment and more aggressive spirit. Air-power was a limited advantage in the overcast skies of Korea's rainy season in July and August. At month's end DPRK forces launched an offensive across the front that, in the two weeks that followed, inflicted more casualties on US troops than during any other comparable period in the war.⁵¹

Nevertheless, over the past two months, the United States had build up supplies and personnel in Korea and Japan, and North Korean army had suffered over fifty thousand casualties. Not all of the lost manpower could be quickly replaced, and neither could the captured and destroyed arms and expended ammunition. North Korea's lengthy supply lines produced increasing problems under clearing weather conditions in which the enemy had total

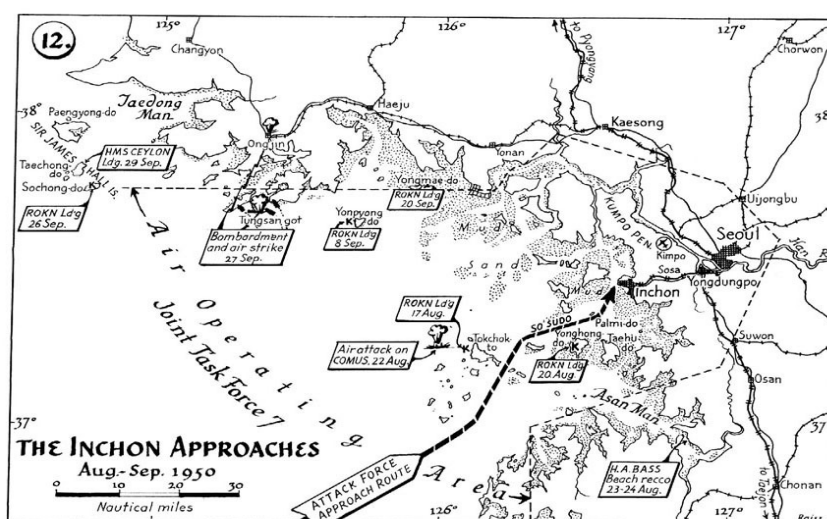
⁵⁰ Picture taken from "A CMH Army Korean War Version: The Outbreak," July 23, 2007, available at <http://www.kmike.com/CMH%20MilitaryHistory/Outbreak.htm>

⁵¹ For more detailed analysis of fighting in this period, see clay Blair, "Forgotten War: America in Korea 1950-1953," Naval Institute Press, New York (2003), page 119-325 and Halberstam, page 251-290

control of the air and sea. Slowly the war appeared to be coming back to the side of the United States and its allies.

Period of Victory and light at the end of tunnel: September 15 to October 20

The Inchon landing operation, which began on September 15 and ended on 17, was truly a turning point in the Korean War. This amphibious invasion was actually prepared by General MacArthur at the beginning of the Korean War. After detouring Korean military sites and personnel on June 29, he concluded that demoralized and under-equipped South Korean armies would be unable to hold off the advancement of Soviet-supported Red Army. MacArthur anticipated that DPRK would easily press the US-Korea soldiers southward and decided to ‘turn the tide’ by making decisive troop movement behind the enemy lines. Inchon was selected as his first choice. The operation in Inchon represented a great gamble; the enemy would have to be completely asleep for it to work, because the entrance to the port was so narrow.⁵² Yet, General MacArthur was willing to take such gambles, and he succeeded greatly.



⁵² Halberstam, page 303

Figure 2. Inchon landing operation⁵³

Fortunately, the plan proceeded as it was planned, and the initial resistance was comparatively light.⁵⁴ US-led UN forces quickly recaptured Inchon and moved towards South Korean capital, Seoul. As marching more inwards, the North Korean resistance stiffened, but while the Americans had little superiority in numbers, their advantage was in hardware and firepower.⁵⁵ American troops' usage of heavy weaponry turned the way to enter Seoul as to sea of fire, but they finally reached Seoul on September 28. This stunning military success changed the entire atmosphere of the War. North Korea lost its supply lines to support its troops in the southern side of the peninsula, and therefore was essentially divided into two.

At the same time, Washington was not unprepared for this victory in Inchon and Seoul. On September 11, four days prior to the event in Inchon, President Truman approved a major planning paper in Korea, NSC-81. In this policy statement, changed the US objective in Korea from 'restoration' to 'reunification of Korea'.⁵⁶ The paper anticipated that granting MacArthur authority to move UN troops north of the 38th parallel would make neither Soviet nor Chinese communist troops intervene in the fighting as long as the UN clearly demonstrates that it has no intention to move beyond the peninsula.⁵⁷ In this new policy objective in mind, the United States proposed a new resolution to the UN. On October 7, the General Assembly passed the resolution, which authorized "all necessary steps to be taken to ensure conditions of stability throughout Korea."⁵⁸ With the approval from the UN, US-led troops began to cross the half line and

⁵³ James A. Field, "History of US Naval Operations: Korea," Department of Navy: Naval Historical Center, chapter 7, available at <http://www.history.navy.mil/books/field/ch7b.htm>

⁵⁴ Halberstam, page 306

⁵⁵ Ibid, 308

⁵⁶ Steven William Nerheim, "NSC-81/1 and the Evolution of US War Aims in Korea: June-October 1950," United States Navy, 2000: page 7

⁵⁷ NSC 81/1 available at <http://www.wilsoncenter.org/coldwarfiles/files/Documents/Truman-library.NSC.81-1.pdf>

⁵⁸ "Resolution on the Problem of the Independence of Korea, Adopted by the General Assembly October 7, 1950," International Organization, Vol 5:1 (February 1951): page 231-233

marched northward in a rapid speed. DPRK army already lost its aggressive spirit and had no choice but to accept the gap in both power and number. By October 20, the UN forces captured Pyoungyang, North Korean capital. General MacArthur, being heady with victory, had told the President that probably by Christmas, US troops could begin withdrawal from Korea.⁵⁹

Section 4: Chinese intervention in Korean War: An entirely different war

China in the Korean peninsula: October 20, 1950 to January 4, 1951

People's Republic of China (hereafter PRC), which shares a borderline with North Korea, had been monitoring the situation in the peninsula very closely from the beginning of the Korean War. In many weeks before Inchon, the Chinese government was concerned of a massive American military buildup in Japan.⁶⁰ Since Mao spent much of his lifetime fighting adversaries with guerilla tactics, he was good at collecting necessary military intelligence. He ordered his advisors to analyze situation in the Korean peninsula, and conclude in as early as mid-August that if the US continued to send more troops in Korea, the DPRK would not be able to hold and would need direct assistance from China.⁶¹ The story unfolded as China predicted, and now North Korean army was retreating toward the borderline. As DPRK forces collapsed, Kim Il-Sung began to increase the pressure on Stalin to save his people and country. Stalin, in response, said that the best hope was to convince the Chinese to convince. Then, on October 1, Kim spoke to the Chinese ambassador and asked for Chinese troops. As mentioned, Peking anticipated the North Korean defeat long before and had already started to deploy its army around the border area. Mao then decided to initiate his operations in the Korean peninsula.

⁵⁹ Acheson, page 62

⁶⁰ Halberstam, page 304

⁶¹ Ibid, page 305

On October 3, the State Department received a message from the Indian embassy that PRC conveyed a warning that it would enter the war if US troops crossed the 38th parallel. Fatefully, Washington chose to ignore this message, because it perceived the message as little more than a diplomatic gambit that aimed to drive a wedge in the Western bloc.⁶² Therefore, the US troops began to march into the northern half of the peninsula on October 7th, and Chinese also prepared to come down to the frontline. Even until this moment, the Truman administration did not expect China to be a major threat. Washington analyzed that China, due to its domestic economic reconstruction as well as political consolidation in the aftermath of a grueling civil war, would refrain from being involved in the war as much as possible.⁶³

Perceiving no intention to stop the advancement from the US, China finally began to move onto the peninsula on 19th of October. These Chinese volunteers, as they were described in Peking, made subsequent contacts with South Korean as well as UN forces. The initial response of the Truman administration regarding the Chinese intervention was inattentive. It considered Peking such deployment as activities designed to save face after the exclusive threat made through the Indian embassy. Washington believed that they would soon go back to their country once the fighting became intensified. However, the reality was different. The increasing number of PRC's soldiers came down to support DPRK Red Army, and US-led UN forces began to be overwhelmed by Chinese volunteers. The first alarm about extensive Chinese involvement in Korea sounded on November 6. General MacArthur wired back Washington that "men and material in large force are pouring across all bridges over the Yalu from Manchuria. This

⁶² Casey, page 100

⁶³ Foot, page 86-87 and Casey, page 100

movement not only jeopardizes but threatens the ultimate destruction of the forces under my command.”⁶⁴

Realizing that time was running out for Washington’s favorable conditions, General MacArthur planned what was called the ‘end-the-war offensive.’ MacArthur’s intension was to impose a substantive strike on Chinese troops to discourage their further southward movement. Similar to the surprising landing operation at Inchon, this end-the-war offensive was Washington’s another gamble, because this operation could possibly be seen as preemptive strike on China. In fact, Washington observed that PRC troops began to withdraw starting from November 7th. Some Correspondents interpreted this behavior as Peking’s signal to illustrate its willingness to carry out the peace negotiation.⁶⁵ Actually, both Representatives of the US and PRC to the United Nations were scheduled to attend the UN meeting regarding on Farmosa (current day Taiwan) on November 24. During this facial contact, they could have surely talked about the Korean War. Nevertheless, the offensive, which was also schedule on 24th, would certainly eliminate Washington’s chance to peacefully evacuate from the peninsula. Despite these reasons, the administration granted General MacArthur an authority to carry out the attack on November 24. At first, UN troops appeared to encounter no major opposing forces. Yet, on November 27, MacArthur’s Tokyo Headquarters sent the message saying that “strong enemy counterattacks had stalled the offensive.”⁶⁶ Subsequently, on the next day, General MacArthur sent a personal telegram to Washington reporting that approximately two hundred thousand Chinese troops had struck UN forces in Korea. He further explained that “The Chinese military

⁶⁴ The Department of State, “Foreign Relations of the United States: 1950,” quoted in Stueck page 92

⁶⁵ I.F. Stone, “The Hidden History of the Korean War,” Monthly Review Press: New York (1952), page 189-190

⁶⁶ Ibid, page 210.

forces are committed in North Korea in great and ever increasing strength...We face an entirely new war.”⁶⁷

After receiving an expected, gloomy message from General MacArthur, President Truman convened the National Security Council meeting. Since the situation in Korea was so fluid that the President and his advisors could not create any new policy options. However, they all agreed that the US should not further provoke Moscow and Peking.⁶⁸ However, the President himself further confused the situation on November 30 during the Press Conference. In front of two hundred reporters, the President read a pre-written statement regarding the Korean War. After reading such a calm, but authoritative statement,⁶⁹ he opened up the floor for the question-and-answer session. Here, he could not control his temper and stated the US government was under consideration of using A-bomb with UN authorization.⁷⁰ He even made a point that the military commander in the field would have charge of the use of weapons, including the A-bomb.”⁷¹ This surprising announcement made headlines in every major newspaper in the United States. Now, the public was concerned over the possible war with the Soviet Union and China. Also, Washington was unsure of how Peking and Moscow would react to such a provocative statement. The White House press office issued a clarification, saying that “only the President can authorize the use of the bomb and no such authorization has been given to the field officer.”⁷² However, as CBS radio broadcasters pointed out, “the explanations [could] never catch up with the original indiscretion.”⁷³

⁶⁷ Acheson, page 73

⁶⁸ Ibid, page 73-74

⁶⁹ Harry Truman, “The President’s News Conference,” Harry S. Truman Library and Museum, available at <http://trumanlibrary.org/publicpapers/viewpapers.php?pid=985>.

⁷⁰ Casey, page 132

⁷¹ Truman, “The President’s News Conference,”

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Casey, page 133

The situation became worse and worse as days went by. On December 3, General MacArthur sent another telegram saying he needed more troops in order to effectively resist PRC volunteers. Stressing that his command was extremely small in number, he concluded that “unless some positive and immediate action is taken, hope for success cannot be justified and steady attrition leading to final destruction can reasonably be contemplated.”⁷⁴ In order to overturn such depressing atmosphere in the frontline, President Truman decided to declare national emergency on December 16. In his proclamation speech, the President asserted that America was now in great danger created by the Soviet Communists. In order to effectively meet the heightened threat, the President requested massive increases in the armed services and defense budgets.⁷⁵ The initiative might have created a possibility of winning the war for one or two days or so. Nevertheless, the situation in the peninsula did not help Washington’s effort at all. On January 1, PRC soldiers began to march down to the 38th parallel. Early on the morning of January 4, Seoul was abandoned. MacArthur’s forces also pulled out of the victorious place of Inchon. Americans had to start their new year with the story of unpleasing defeat in the Korean peninsula.

US public reaction to the Chinese intervention

The news of Chinese intervention and subsequent defeats of American forces certainly discouraged the US public from supporting the Korean War. The Gallup Poll conducted in the late December and the early January of 1951 clearly reflected this change in public’s stance. The survey, conducted in the period between January 1 and 5, found that 66 percent of Americans believed that American troops should be pulled out of Korea as soon as possible, while only 25

⁷⁴ Ibid, page 134

⁷⁵ Harry Truman, “Proclaiming the Existence of a National Emergency,” Harry S. Truman Library and Museum, available at <http://trumanlibrary.org/publicpapers/viewpapers.php?pid=994>

percent of them thought that the forces needed to stay and continue to fight for the South.⁷⁶ Also, 49 percent of the population now believed it was a mistake for the Truman administration to decide to intervene in Korea.⁷⁷ Recognizing that only 20 percent of Americans had identified the involvement as a mistake in August, the public surely changed its stance very swiftly.

In analyzing what led to such abrupt swift in public opinion, one can find that both US interests at stake and operation objectives had stayed identical in the period between June and December. Still, the war was perceived as a smaller version of US-Soviet rivalry. In fact, President Truman's national emergency speech actually made it clear to the public that America was fighting with the Soviet communists. Similarly, there had been no change in American objective of rescuing South Korea.

Yet, what had been changed dramatically were expected costs of the War and the prospects of victory. With the Chinese intervention, people's anticipation that the conflict would only last for a couple of months simply disappeared. Furthermore, with the President's provocative statement regarding A-bomb and national emergency situation, Americans began to think about another world war scale conflict in Asia. Considering both monetary and human costs that they had to pay, that situation was certainly unfavorable to American public. In addition, media which had not been able to bring any live news from the peninsula directly in the early days of the war, now became available to send war correspondents to the peninsula to bring more accurate pictures of the conflict. This development in the field made Americans become informed of more candid and explicit situation in the peninsula during the time of US defeat. For example, On December 2, New York Herald Tribune summarized that "masses of Chinese are still pouring southward down the center of the Korean peninsula and already are closer to Seoul

⁷⁶ George Gallup, "Public Favors Withdrawing From Korea by nearly 3 to 1," Washington Post, January 21, 1951, page M1.

⁷⁷ George Gallup, "The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion 1935-1971," page 961

than are most of the UN forces. It would take a major miracle now to effect a union of the 8th Army force with the US X Corps, which has been fighting an independent war in Northeast Korea...It appeared that the supreme crisis was near.”⁷⁸ These kinds of news directly report from the ground influenced the public to have negative views about the country’s future in the peninsula.

Conclusion and Implications

The paper has investigated under what conditions American people changed their opinions on the issue of US military deployment in the Korean peninsula. The careful and detailed examinations of incidents in the period of June and December of 1950 have indicated that such decline in the public support occurred due to the change in expected costs and length of the war, as well as the prospects of victory. In the beginning, the US public predicted that the fighting would last only for a short amount of time and the costs would be minimal. Nevertheless, as PRC entered into the conflict in the mid-October, the prospects of winning went down dramatically. News of American defeats on November 7th and 28th also made the public become concerned over increasing human as well as monetary costs of the War. Likewise, President Truman’s announcement of possible use of A-bomb and national emergency in December created atmosphere among American people that the war could last more than years as it became enlarged into the conflict with Chinese, and possibly Soviet, communists. All these changes affected the public’s cost-benefit analysis, and they reached the conclusion that American would be better off staying out of the Korean situation.

In fact, the author is fully aware that such conclusion is drawn from specific case of the Korean War, and therefore it cannot be considered as a single theory in the relationship between

⁷⁸ New York Tribune Wire, “Many Chinese Closer to Seoul than Yanks,” Washington Post, December 2, 1950, p 1

the public opinion and the use of military force. However, it may be applicable in other conflicts as well. For example, the public attitude toward the US military intervention in Vietnam during the 1970s has a similar pattern; the support was initially high, but it also experienced the sudden drop. Similarly, Americans rallied behind the President's Bush's decision to go into Iraq, but they turned their backs soon after. Scholars and policymakers may use the conclusion of this paper and try to see if the same patterns are occurring in the Vietnam and Iraq.

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