

President Truman's Approach to Korea and Primary Sources

On the evening of June 24, 1950, early on the morning of June 25 in Korea, President Harry Truman picked up the phone at his home in Independence, Missouri where he was vacationing with his family. Secretary of State Dean Acheson was on the line with surprising and very troubling news. North Korean troops were invading South Korea. Standing there in his bathrobe, Truman was stunned. He had recently read a CIA report that described North Korea as "a tightly controlled Soviet satellite." If South Korea came under communist control, the president believed other countries in Asia and around the world would too. If the United States didn't respond aggressively, Truman, Acheson and others feared the entire Asian continent might fall under Soviet control. Truman told Acheson that he thought he should cut short his vacation and fly back to Washington immediately.

He arrived in the capital to a storm of concern among congressional leaders and the media. Major newspapers like the *New York Times* urged the president to act or risk "los[ing] half a world." Republicans already blamed him for China's communist takeover. Now they worried that Truman would be soft on communism in Korea. The president told them that the United States would take a stand. Under a lot of pressure, he declared, "If we let Korea down, the Soviet[s] will keep right on going and swallow up one piece of Asia after another."

Western European governments were also panicking. They watched and waited anxiously to see what the United States would do. European empires that had plundered the world for riches and cheap labor now fretted about their very survival. The French were particularly alarmed. After World War II, they had moved to reestablish their colony in Vietnam, but they were being challenged by Ho Chi Minh's communist-led forces. The British were desperately hanging on to their colony in Malaya. If the United States didn't fight back in Korea many westerners feared that countries in the eastern hemisphere and across the world would fall like dominoes to the communists. This fear became known as the "Domino Theory."

Spinning a globe and pointing to the Middle East, Truman told staffers, "Here is where [the Soviet Union] will start trouble if we aren't careful. . . . 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. But if we just stand by... they'll take over the entire Middle East." So Truman, many Americans and many Europeans viewed Korea as a domino. If it fell, they feared it might produce a chain reaction resulting in a communist takeover of large parts of the world.

John Foster Dulles, consultant to the Secretary of State, pressed Truman to act, "To sit by while Korea is overrun by unprovoked armed attack would start a disastrous chain of events leading most probably to world war." Truman and Acheson agreed. On his way into the White House, the president declared, "By God, I'm going to let them [the communists] have it."

Truman compared the North Korean invasion to the German invasions of neighboring European just over a decade earlier. Then, the failure of Western nations to reign in Hitler had resulted in a stronger Nazi party and world war. Truman was determined not to repeat the same mistake.

Truman's decision to defend South Korea was quite a surprise to many of Paige's friends and family, but then when the United States got into the war, it was only a small minority that really objected, at least at the beginning. Most people accepted Truman's position that it was necessary to defeat the spread of global communism. Most of his peers, teenagers at the time, didn't focus on the global political situation: "We were all just human beings caught up in our personal lives." Then, when they were called up, "[we] did what [we were] ordered to do, [we] all participate[d]. [Video: Glenn Paige – To War or Not to War?]

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE GROUP

THE SITUATION IN KOREA

SUMMARY



Unity and independence are the dominant aspirations of the Korean people, while partition and joint occupation by the US and USSR are the governing factors in the political and economic life of the peninsula. The promises of independence made at Cairo, and confirmed at Yalta, have not been fulfilled. The division of Korea at the 38th parallel has become an almost impenetrable barrier between the US and Soviet Zones. The Moscow Decision, which provides for the unification and eventual independence of Korea, has not been implemented, largely because of disagreement between the US and USSR over the interpretation of the document and the meaning of democracy. All efforts to reconvene the Joint Commission since its adjournment last May have failed.

In the current deadlock, both the US and USSR are attempting to strengthen the political and economic organization of their own zones. The USSR has made more rapid progress toward regimentation in North Korea than the US has made toward democracy in its zone. An interim US policy for South Korea was not implemented until after the adjournment of the Joint Commission disclosed the fundamental disagreement over interpretation of the Moscow Decision. The sovietization of North Korea, on the other hand, began immediately after the occupation, and has proceeded without interruption since then.

Soviet policy in Korea is directed toward the establishment of a friendly state which will never serve as a base of attack upon the USSR. In order to attain this objective at a minimum cost to its own scanty resources in the Far East, the USSR has attempted to make North Korea economically self-sufficient though politically subordinate. Soviets have given their zone a semblance of autonomy by entrusting the administration to a hierarchy of "people's committees" dominated by the Korean Communists. The economy of North Korea has also been reconstructed on the principle of state control. Banking, heavy industry and communications have all been nationalized. The land has been redistributed, and private enterprise survives chiefly in agriculture and handicrafts. Membership is compulsory in a monopolistic system of unions under strict political supervision.

National Security Council Report "The Position of the United States with Respect to Korea" Excerpt → March 16, 1949

D R A F T

~~TOP SECRET~~

REPORT BY THE NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL

on

THE POSITION OF THE UNITED STATES WITH RESPECT TO KOREA

THE PROBLEM

1. To re-assess and re-appraise the position of the U. S. with respect to Korea as defined in NSC 8 of April 2, 1948, in the light of developments since the adoption of that position.

ANALYSIS

2. a. Objectives of U. S. policy in Korea as defined by NSC 8:

(1) The broad objectives of U. S. policy with respect to Korea are:

(a) to establish a united, self-governing, and sovereign Korea as soon as possible, independent of foreign control and eligible for membership in the UN;

(b) to ensure that the government so established shall be fully representative of the freely expressed will of the Korean people;

(c) to assist the Korean people in establishing a sound economy and educational system as essential bases of an independent and democratic state.

"The Truth about Korea" Excerpt (Author Unknown) → 1950

The unprovoked aggression by the Soviet dominated government of North Korea against the Republic of Korea has created widespread interest in recent relations of the United States with Korea. There have been full accounts of U.S.-Korean relations published recently by the Department of State and Congressional committees. In order, however, that the most significant facts may be readily available, they are set out in this pamphlet.

The significance of Korea cannot be measured in terms of its relatively small area and population. In the great world struggle in which the United States and other free nations are resisting the determined efforts of the Soviet imperialism to dominate the world, the success of American efforts to help the people of Korea build a free nation is of immeasurable importance. As President Truman said in proposing the "little ECA" for Korea to the Congress on June 7, 1949:

"Korea has become a testing ground in which the validity and practical value of the ideals and principles of democracy which the Republic is putting into practice are being matched against the practices of communism which have been imposed on the people of North Korea. The survival and progress of the Republic toward a self-supporting, stable economy will have an immense and far-reaching influence on the people of Asia. Moreover, the Korean Republic, by demonstrating the success and tenacity of democracy in resisting communism, will stand as a beacon of the people of northern Asia in resisting the control of communist forces which have overrun them.

"If we are faithful to our ideals and mindful of our interests in establishing peaceful and prosperous conditions in the world, we will not fail to provide the aid which is so essential to Korea at this critical time."

(3) Far from permitting the Soviet Union to take over a part of Korea from which it could have been excluded, the establishment of the 38th parallel line actually held for the free people of Korea the southern half of the country, which otherwise would easily have been overrun by the Red Army.

United States Efforts to Unite Korea

It should, of course, be thoroughly understood that the division of Korea and the movement of United States forces into Korea was never intended to be for a long-term occupation. This was a development which resulted from the persistent refusal of the USSR to agree to the establishment of a united and independent Korea upon terms which would do justice to the aspirations of the Korean people for freedom and national independence.

At the Cairo Conference, in December 1943, the United States, Great Britain and China had declared that, after Japan had been defeated, all Korea would become a single Republic. This was reaffirmed at the Potsdam Conference, in July 1945. The Soviets joined in that pledge. From the first days after the acceptance of Japanese surrender, the United States endeavored to obtain agreement of fulfillment by the USSR of its pledge. The Soviets on their part refused to deal with any non-Communist Korean groups and rejected every reasonable proposal advanced. At the same time, they engaged in an ever-increasing campaign of anti-American propaganda and vilification and commenced to create Communist controlled military forces in North Korea. In view of this stalemate, it was concluded that the justified desire of the Korean people for independence and unity entitled them to have the aid of the world community in getting it. Therefore, the United States took the Korean problem to the United Nations in November of 1947, asking that Korea be established as a unified nation through election of a provisional government which would draw up a constitution. The Korean issue was handled before the General Assembly by Mr. John Foster Dulles, a member of the U. S. Delegation. The proposal was approved by a vote of 43-0, with Russia and her satellites abstaining.

The General Assembly in September 1948 recognized the Republic of Korea as the only democratically established government in Korea. The United States and all the major free nations have recognized the Republic. The United States sponsored the admission of the Republic to the United Nations but Soviet Russia vetoed its entrance. (USSR and Ukrainian delegates cast the only opposing votes.)

Communist Trading Cards → 1951

This set of forty-eight trading cards entitled *Fight the Red Menace: Children's Crusade against Communism* was designed to teach American children about the threatened spread of Communism. They were part of the propaganda initiative to gain the support of Americans for the war by creating fear and demonizing the enemy. Each card features a dramatic, colorful depiction of American military heroes and victories, or Communist villains and their atrocities. The text on the reverse uses strong language to focus on the threat posed by Communism, building on fears of infiltration at home and military attacks from abroad. The cards were officially marketed to children. However, the inclusion of a note encouraging children to tell their parents to read the Department of State Bulletin "if they want to learn more about the brutal conditions of life under communism" is a clear indication the cards were intended for an adult audience as well.



Bowman Gum Company, Fight the Red Menace: The Children's Crusade against Communism trading cards; 1. Reds Invade South Korea, 1951. GLC09627.01



Bowman Gum Company, Fight the Red Menace: The Children's Crusade against Communism trading cards; 2. MacArthur Heads UN Forces, 1951. GLC09627.02



CHILDREN'S CRUSADE AGAINST COMMUNISM

6. Landing at Inchon

We couldn't stand by and let North Korean Reds gobble up South Korea. So we sent troops to help the South Koreans keep their freedom. Our soldiers had a rough time because the enemy had lots more men than we did. We had to retreat down the Korean peninsula. Things looked bad in September 1950. Then we pulled a surprise punch. Our troops stormed ashore at Inchon, 150 miles behind the enemy lines. We recaptured Seoul and kept going. We had freed most of Korea when the Chinese Reds struck us from Manchuria.



FIGHT THE

RED MENACE



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Bowman Gum Company, Fight the Red Menace: The Children's Crusade against Communism trading cards; 6. Landing at Inchon, 1951. GLC09627.06.01

From Gilder Lehrman