

Communism, Credibility, and the Korean War

or
Kommunism, Kredibility, and the Korean War

“If aggression were allowed to succeed in Korea, it would be an open invitation to new acts of aggression elsewhere ... We cannot hope to maintain our own freedom if freedom elsewhere is wiped out”

President Truman, September 1950 Television Address

America opened the 1950s with one of its least renowned military endeavors: The Forgotten War, the Korean War. Unclear in both its genesis and purpose, The Korean war dragged America into a long, gruesome, and largely inconclusive conflict. The American reasons for entering this war were unconventional and not readily apparent. None of the customary reasons for war seemed applicable – in other words, how would the loss of South Korea to North Korea harm America? Was it the loss of a valuable ally in form of the South Koreans? Was it domino theory – that is to say, would a victory let North Korea delude itself into going on some sort of Asian rampage – or some sort of accumulation of North Korean resources? These were hardly the case in 1950. However, many events had happened in 1949 to instill in America a fear of the Soviet Union and the greater worldwide impact of the spread of communism. This fear gave rise to the principal reason for American involvement in the Korean War: America would not idly stand by while the Soviet Union forced the spread of communism around the world – America needed to firmly state that expansion would not be tolerated and beyond that, it would be punished. Some hold that the Korean War was about America asserting itself in an attempt to defend its credibility, but this is certainly less compelling

than the fear of communism gaining the momentum necessary to threaten American interests throughout the free world.

SUMMARY OF THE KOREAN WAR

The American fears and apprehensions surfacing prior to Korean War were not unjustified, given how events unfolded over the course of the war. Consequently, any discussion over the Korean War is done a service and given context by reviewing the war. During World War II, the United States and the Soviet Union jointly forced the Japanese from the Korean peninsula, dividing their sectors at the 38th parallel. However, despite a promise of a fully independent reunified Korea, the temporary boundary solidified into a last division as it did in Germany. Eventually, content with the formation of a South Korean republic complete with an elected leader, America withdrew its occupational forces in 1949. This set the stage for the July 25th, 1950 North Korean invasion of South Korea. America responded to this invasion, landing in South Korea on October 3rd, and promptly routing the North Korean forces. The North Koreans were driven back across the 38th parallel and nearly all the way to their northern neighbor, China. The Chinese took American actions as a threat to their own security, and through errors in diplomacy and communication, the Americans did not perceive this reaction. On November 26th, 1950, the Chinese struck American forces, driving them south of the 38th parallel in a matter of months. This was the worst defeat ever suffered in American military history, and only the first defeat of a long and brutal war. The war lasted until the summer of 1953 and ended in an inconclusive stalemate not far from where it began,

costing the lives of 54,000 American, 16,000 UN, 415,000 South Korean, 516,000 North Korean and 900,000 Chinese soldiers (DoD, cotf.edu).

THE FEAR OF COMMUNISM AND THE KOREAN WAR.

The United States did not enter the Korean War for any of the first-order conventional reasons nations traditionally roused their armies. It was not a personal conflict, as there were no significant American forces at risk; the only American presence was that of a small number of ‘advisors’. There was no particular kinship with the South Korean people – there was no unspoken brotherhood, no official alliance, and no major treaty that tied U.S. interests in with those of South Korea. We had no cultural, political, or historical similarities with the South Koreans; there was no obligation for the Americans to help repel the Northern invaders. America did, however, go to war the same reason that lies behind the first-order motives of nearly any war – the search for personal security in a changing world.

In July of 1947, “The Sources of Soviet Conduct” was published in the quarterly *Foreign Affairs*. Signed simply ‘X’ (and later known as ‘The X Article’), it was penned by senior State Department official George Kennan. In it, Kennan proposed the strategy of containment. In order to justify the necessity of containment, Kennan outlined precisely why communism was such a threat to American interests. As a tool for detailing the communist threat, the entire article is quote worthy, but key excerpts will

suffice:

- “Belief [within the communist ideology] is maintained in the basic badness of capitalism, in the inevitability of its destruction, in the obligation of the proletariat to assist in that destruction”

The capitalist American economic system was seen as directly antithetical to the goals of communism, thus if communism were to spread, it could not do so without spreading anticapitalist sentiment – which could only bode poorly for American interests abroad.

- “[There exists an] innate antagonism between capitalism and socialism ... and from it flow many of the phenomena that we find disturbing in the Kremlin’s conduct of foreign policy: the secretiveness, the lack of frankness, the duplicity, the wary suspiciousness, and the basic unfriendliness of purpose”

The Soviet Union had established itself as a high-irrational actor on the global political scene. This complete lack of any semblance of open communication and frank diplomacy – especially when the threat to American interests was an inextricable part of communism – heightened American tensions. Due to this secrecy, every action that could possibly be perceived as communist aggression or expansion would have to be perceived as such as there would be no official word from the Kremlin that it was not part of Soviet designs. Even if word was issued from Moscow, for the same paranoid reasons it would not be taken at face value.

- “We are going to continue for a long time to find the Russians difficult to deal with”
- “It is clear that the United States cannot expect in the foreseeable future to enjoy political intimacy with the Soviet regime. It must continue to regard the Soviet Union as a rival, not a partner, in the political arena.

Moscow, and communism, was going to continue to be a threat to American interests and security, worldwide, for quite some time. This realization set up the framework for a healthy American paranoia of the spread of communism.

It is important to bear in mind the context Kennan provided while considering the events of 1949. To say 1949 was a rough year for America is putting it mildly. America had to come to terms with facing the burgeoning power and scope of the Soviet threat, which was no longer limited to only Western Europe. John Lewis Gaddis phrased the ‘shocks of 1949’ as such:

“The loss of China, [the development and successful testing of] the Soviet atomic bomb, persistent interservice debates over strategy, and the dilemma of how to meet expanding responsibilities with what appeared to be limited resources.”

Following the Second World War, global politics had quickly and clearly settled into bipolarity. Inherent in a bipolar world is a certain degree of paranoia and instability – each pole knows the other is the sole threat to itself, and itself the sole threat to the other. It was readily apparent that for some time, global politics would be dominated by the

characters and actions of the two poles – the United States and the Soviet Union. The countries of NATO feared falling to communism, and the Warsaw pact countries feared the fall of communism to its capitalist antagonist. After the events of 1949, it was clear that things were going well for the one force in the world that could threaten American security, and America was having issues dealing with this. The Soviet threat was growing, and with it American apprehension. The inability for policymakers to distill a succinct strategy and policy statement – principally, which version of containment to adopt – only compounded this anxiety.

America was politically and ideologically primed to react aggressively to any perceived expansion of communism, anywhere in the world. Communism had the power of inevitability on its side – the slow, inexorable spread of communism around the world would degrade and disrupt America security, and consequently must be contested. Thinking along these lines, America would see the actions of the communist North Korean army as a potential watershed event, triggering a cascade of Asian countries to fall to communism. Given this outlook, the recent fall of China, and the upward swing of Soviet relative power, the American fear of communism drove it to war in Korea.

AMERICAN CREDIBILITY

One important Korean War era American document was NSC-68. Sixty-six single spaced pages of typed text, it was a declaration of the American policy of containment, and would outline American Cold War behavior for decades. It lacked, however, the moderating voice of George Keenan (who was against formulating a written policy, feeling the happenstance of dealing with communism were too subtle to be captured on

paper) as he had left office shortly before the document was drawn up (Gaddis). The document was very militaristic, stating America would resist aggression wherever it occurred. This statement is used as an argument for America entering the war to defend its credibility – but NSC-68 was not public knowledge at the time, and could not be held accountable for public actions.

The possibility for going to Korea in defense of American credibility is seriously weakened by the fact our credibility was simply not at stake. During a press conference in January of 1950 Secretary of State Dean Acheson outlined a ‘defense perimeter’ beyond which America would not tolerate the spread of communism. This explicit border for containment delineated where America would pick its fights – Western Europe, Japan, the Middle East – most notably, not Korea. Most importantly, the Joint Chiefs of Staff made the defensive perimeter their official policy (Chace –from web). America had explicitly stated what areas were of strategic interest – what was worth American blood to defend – and South Korea had been left out. When the situation in Korea came to blows, America had no vested interest in the outcome as far as its public commitments dictated; hence credibility was not an issue.

Abstractly, Credibility is also an unconvincing reason to go to war; to tell families their children must go and die in a strange land because the nation’s ‘world image’ is at stake is unconvincing at best. War is an enormous endeavor, too costly in terms of human life to enter lightly – for reasons like defending a nation’s credibility. No rational nation, no leader hoping to be reelected would take their country to war for such reasons. There must be other reasons for going to war, simple credibility isn’t compelling enough.

America had not *publicly* stated that defending Korea was of tactical or strategic significance – it had actually publicly *excluded* Korea from an explicit list of countries it would defend. Thus, credibility had no justifiable reason for driving America into the Korean War.

CONCLUSION

The Korean War was indeed a brutal war – it cost hundreds of thousands of lives on both sides and resulted in a stalemate mere dozens of miles from where it began, all while ravaging nearly the length of the peninsula four times. However, the war was not fought simply in defense of the South Korean people, it was fought out of the American fear of communism; it was an attempt to stem the flow of an ideology that was perceived as a dagger aimed at the heart of the American way. American feared communism to a fault – simply examine the establishment of numerous highly secretive – and highly regrettable terrorist cells - in the name of anticommunist action. America went as far to sacrifice its own credibility and engage in military action not delineated by its defined defensive perimeter. All told, the American fear of communism, more than an attempt to defend American credibility, was the most compelling reason for war.

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