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Who Really Started the Korean War?

By Justin Raimondo
April 18, 2017

The sixtieth anniversary of the "end" of the Korean war saw President Obama attempt to rescue that classic example of interventionist failure from history's dustbin. Addressing veterans of that conflict, he declared:

"That war was no tie. Korea was a victory. When 50 million South Koreans live in freedom, a vibrant democracy...a stark contrast to the repression and poverty of the North, that is a victory and that is your legacy."

This is a fairytale: it wasn't a victory, or even a tie: the US public was disenchanted with the war long before the armistice, and Truman was under considerable pressure at home to conclude an increasingly unpopular conflict. As for this guff about "democracy": whatever the US was fighting for, from 1950, when the war broke out, to 1953, when it ground to a halt, democracy hardly described the American cause.

We were fighting on behalf of Syngman Rhee, the US-educated-and-sponsored dictator of South Korea, whose vibrancy was demonstrated by the large-scale slaughter of his leftist political opponents. For 22 years, Rhee's word was law, and many thousands of his political opponents were murdered: tens of thousands were jailed or driven into exile. Whatever measure of liberality has reigned on the Korean peninsula was in spite of Washington's efforts and ongoing military presence. When the country finally rebelled against Rhee, and threw him out in the so-called

April Revolution of 1960, he was ferried to safety in a CIA helicopter as crowds converged on the presidential palace.

The mythology that has coagulated around the Korean war is epitomized by Obama's recent peroration, a compendium of uplifting phrases largely bereft of any real history. When history intrudes, it is seen only in very soft focus. The phrase "Korea reminds us" recurs throughout, like the refrain of a pop song, but nowhere does this anonymous presidential speechwriter remind us of the origins of this war. How did it come about?

The standard neocon-cold war liberal line is that the North Koreans, in league with Moscow and Beijing, launched a war of aggression on June 25, 1950, when North Korean troops poured across the disputed What this truncated history leaves out is that, in doing so, they preempted Rhee's own plans to launch an invasion northward. As historian Mark E. Caprio, professor of history at Rikkyo University in Tokyo, points out:

"On February 8, 1949, the South Korean president met with Ambassador John Muccio and Secretary of the Army Kenneth C. Royall in Seoul. Here the Korean president listed the following as justifications for initiating a war with the North: the South Korean military could easily be increased by 100,000 if it drew from the 150,000 to 200,000 Koreans who had recently fought with the Japanese or the Nationalist Chinese. Moreover, the morale of the South Korean military was greater than that of the North Koreans. If war broke out he expected mass defections from the enemy. Finally, the United Nations' recognition of South Korea legitimized its rule over the entire peninsula (as stipulated in its constitution). Thus, he concluded, there was "nothing [to be] gained by waiting."

The only reason Rhee didn't launch an attack was due to American reluctance to supply him with the arms and aid he would need: war, when it came, would be on America's terms, and our leaders had good reason to think it would come sooner rather than later. Washington's policy was to keep Rhee supplied with just enough arms to control the South. There is also evidence for Congressman Howard Buffett's contention that the secret testimony before Congress of CIA director Admiral Hillenkoeter proved US responsibility for the war.

Buffett, Republican anti-interventionist from Iowa, went to his grave demanding the declassification of that crucial testimony: alas, to no avail. And yet what we do know is this: the US government had ample warnings of the pending North Korean invasion, via intelligence reports sent to top cabinet officials well before the June 25 commencement of large-scale hostilities. Yet Washington took no action, either diplomatic or otherwise, to deter the North Koreans.

On the other side of the equation, the Communist world was divided on the Korea question, with Stalin skeptical of Kim il Sung's assurances that his forces would achieve victory in three days. Russian policy was: military aid, yes – Soviet intervention, no. China's Mao, on the other hand, offered his support – which wasn't actually forthcoming, however, until the US entered the war and advanced into North Korea itself.

Neither Stalin nor President Harry Truman were particularly eager to see the conflict erupt, although both may have considered it inevitable. In which case it was convenient, for propaganda purposes, to be able to portray the enemy as having fired the first shot.

As to who did in reality fire that shot, Bruce Cumings, head of the history department at the University of Chicago, gave us the definitive answer in his two-volume *The Origins of the Korean War*, and *The Korean War: A History*: the Korean war started during the American occupation of the South, and it was Rhee, with help from his American sponsors, who initiated a series of attacks that well preceded the North Korean offensive of 1950. From 1945-1948, American forces aided Rhee in a killing spree that claimed tens of thousands of victims: the counterinsurgency campaign took a high toll in Kwangju, and on the island of Cheju-do – where as many as 60,000 people were murdered by Rhee's US-backed forces.

Rhee's army and national police were drawn from the ranks of those who had collaborated with the Japanese occupation during World War II, and this was the biggest factor that made civil war inevitable. That the US backed these quislings guaranteed widespread support for the Communist forces led by Kim IL Sung, and provoked the rebellion in the South that was the prelude to open North-South hostilities. Rhee, for his part, was eager to draw in the United States, and the North Koreans, for their part, were just as eager to invoke the principle of "proletarian internationalism" to draw in the Chinese and the Russians.

Having backed the Maoists during World War II, in cooperation with the Soviet Union, the US had already "lost" China, and Truman was determined not to "lose" Korea, too. In spite of the fact that he had ample warning of the North Korean offensive, the President used this "surprise attack" to justify sending American troops to Korea to keep Rhee in power, and in doing so neglected to go to Congress for approval – or even give them advance notice.

Republicans were outraged: Sen. Robert A. Taft and others denounced this usurpation of Congress's constitutional duty as a dangerous precedent that would come back to haunt us – as it surely did in Vietnam, and continues to do so to this day. In the months prior to the war, anti-interventionist Republicans in Congress had succeeded in defeating the administration's \$60 million aid package to the Rhee regime (by one vote!), but this was later reversed on account of pressure from the well-funded China Lobby. Now Truman had sent our troops to fight in a foreign war as if he were a Roman emperor ordering his legionnaires into Gaul.

In defense of the administration, the liberals came out in support of the war, with *The Nation* and *The New Republic* leading the charge: the antiwar Republicans were "isolationists" and their alliance with "legalists," sniffed TNR, revealed a natural affinity, while progressives were burdened with no such sentimental attachments to the Constitution. The editor of *The Nation* rebaited Col. Robert McCormick's fiercely conservative *Chicago Tribune* for being on the same side as the American Communist Party. What's interesting is that the CP's former fellow-travelers, such as Henry Wallace, Corliss Lamont, and the principals of the Progressive Party – which had run Wallace for President with fulsome Communist support – rallied behind Truman, reveling in the idea of a UN-sponsored war on behalf of "collective security." Obama, it seems, commands a similar ability to inspire the left to throw its vaunted antiwar credentials overboard.

Sixty years after the non-ending of the Korean war – there is, to this day, no peace treaty – the lesson of that conflict is not, as Obama insisted in his speech, that "the drawdown after the end of World War II left us unprepared," but that involvement in other peoples' civil wars is never to our benefit, or theirs. Sixty years have passed, and US troops are still in South Korea, defending a country well-prepared to take care of itself – sitting ducks if the North Koreans should ever launch an attack. Having stifled every effort at peaceful reunification – including a promising effort during the Bush era – Washington continues to enable the Korean standoff, and in doing so perpetuates the North Korean regime, one of the worst, if not *the* worst, in the world.

North Korea is dangerously unstable, with a significant movement within the military against the rule of Kim Jong-un, the third member of the IL Sungist dynasty to take the reins of power. There have been episodic reports of gun battles between rival military units, and this, combined with North Korea's dire economic straits, has the potential to spark an explosion sooner or later – and inevitably draw in the South. Having isolated the North Koreans, who have in turn isolated themselves, the West has limited its ability to have much of an effect on the ground.

The two Koreas are very different, opposites in many ways, but one thing unites them: an intense nationalism. This same nationalism resents the US presence, whatever the pretext, and will one day find expression in a successful national reunification. Until that day, the unfinished war and its consequences will continue to be a thorn in our side.