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## Another war diary entry

*The Korean War: A History, reviewed again and again*

Critical cultural historical perspective is not easy to obtain. Yet its importance as an orientation is immeasurable. One episode in the past American century of war is still virtually unknown and/ or misrepresented, the longest single armed conflict in the history of the North American republic—its campaign against Korea. In terms of active hostilities conducted by military formations, the United States *dba* the United Nations fought in Korea between 1951 and 1953, until a ceasefire and armistice was agreed between the United Nations and the People’s Democratic Republic of Korea. In practice, war by other means has continued with scarcely an abatement to this day.

This persistence of this condition is well understood in Korea, China and Japan, even if the public statements diverge among the governments of these three. In the United States one can say that the vast majority of the population has little or no idea about the campaign beyond the few lines in school history books, occasional sentimental films and the ignorant as well as outright dishonest statements by the U.S. government. Since Barack Obama announced the regime’s “pivot to Asia”, there have been occasional eruptions of sensitivity to events and developments on the Korean peninsula. These remain largely incoherent. As I have argued elsewhere this incoherence and general ignorance can be explained by the fact that although every U.S. school pupil has heard the term “manifest destiny” very few have ever understood it. In contrast, one can hear almost anyone preach with authoritative tones about the *Monroe Doctrine* as if this were an institution of international law and not an arrogant gesture, mainly addressed to the British Empire in the 19th century (when it was barely capable of defending its own merchantmen).

Without a clear understanding of *manifest destiny*: the U.S. absorption of the Philippines and denial of its hard fought independence after Spain had ceded it in the Treaty of Paris (1898), the promotion of Japanese expansion into the Asian mainland including colonization, the transfer of Germany's China assets to Japan after the Great War, and the covert operations against Japan that led to the provoked (and staged) Pearl Harbor "surprise", as well as the "loss of China" in 1949, it is impossible to explain the comprehensiveness of U.S. imperial engagement in Asia and the importance of Korea in this constellation (or Vietnam for that matter). The "pivot" announced under Barack Obama was not a new policy. It was a relabelling of a policy that emerged from manifest destiny long before the U.S. was capable of projecting the naval, military and economic power to actively pursue it.

At the end of the campaign against Japan in 1945, the immediate consequence of Japan's defeat at the hands of the Soviet Union was surrender and withdrawal from its Korean colony. Prosaically, the almost hereditary military governor of the Philippines, Douglas MacArthur (father had been military governor while son had commanded the Philippine armed forces until the Japanese invasion), played a significant role in executing in Korea the same manoeuver perpetrated by Admiral Dewey in Manila Bay. Just as the Spanish had been forced to cede the Philippines to the U.S., the Japanese were to surrender their Korean possession to the United States. However, after waging four years of bloody war again for democracy, the high representatives of the Allies had declared in Cairo that Korean independence was to be restored. Thus, the U.S. designs had to be cloaked in other garb.

This is the most reasonable perspective from which to see the beginnings of the war in Korea as far as the United States is concerned. It is the simplest and most consistent explanation not only for Dean Acheson's action in 1951 but also for the policies pursued today by the permanent state that directs the foreign policy a reigning POTUS is permitted to pronounce.

Of course, there are many complexities involving conflicts among the interested parties which make it impossible to reduce all the events and phenomena of the war to just one cause or effect. Several political conflicts arose among the U.S. Establishment because of the Korean campaign. The impact on occupied Germany and relations with the temporary "ally", the Soviet Union, as well as emerging independent states like India, was substantial. Therefore, to argue for a controlling cultural historical perspective is not to

claim a linear or analogue explanation for everything that happened between 1951 and 1953.

This is the fundamental strength of the numerous books Bruce Cumings has written about the Korean War, including his participation in a highly controversial Thames TV documentary called *Korea: The Unknown War*. The importance of the latter lies in its unparalleled compilation of eyewitness interviews and archival film material about a war that predated “TV war fetishism”. The interpretative work was so controversial in the production that Professor Cumings later wrote a critical analysis and partially distanced himself from the end product. Nonetheless, as “diluted” as some evidence and critique in the film was, two versions had to be distributed. U.S. television broadcasters found the original British documentary too negative for American audiences. In 2010, *The Korean War: A History* was published in the Modern Library, an established series characterized by titles that widely recognized as “classics”. Perhaps that is why David Martin assumed for the purpose of his review that Bruce Cumings’ account and interpretations of this period in U.S. and Korean (as well as Chinese) history are now Establishment or mainstream. He supports this assumption by reminding the reader of Professor Cumings’ pedigree, a distinguished professor emeritus from a top-tier American university and former chair of that institution’s history department. Dr Martin then concludes that *The Korean War*, as narrated by Professor Cumings, is best assigned to that bin of radical Leftist revisionism he imagines—like many conservatives—dominates the apex of U.S. power. Alas Dr Martin is gravely mistaken. Ever since Bruce Cumings published his *Origins of the Korean War*, the Establishment has done its best to ignore, if not discredit, the conclusions he drew—as they were unable to refute the copious historical record with which the book is supported. If appearances in the think tank/ talkshow circuit are any measure of ideological acceptance, Bruce Cumings is probably one of the rarest figures to be found in public debate about Korea or U.S. Asia policy. His standing in the academy entitles him to more respect among colleagues but that hardly constitutes political influence in high places. As far as I know it has not earned him a place in that cesspool of the Anglo-American Establishment, the Council on Foreign Relations—usually the first sign of elevation to the rank of official sage.

Dr Martin opens his salvo against *The Korean War* by reporting that he was in Korea as an ROTC candidate at about the same time that Bruce Cumings was in Korea serving in the Peace Corps. The invidious distinction between these two assignments is almost amusingly nostalgic, reminiscent of the sneers of newly-minted patriotic butter bars

leaving for Saigon amidst protesting college students. Accusing Professor Cumings of a lack of martial spirit and patriotism may reflect the naive feelings of a fresh officer candidate fifty years ago, it is certainly not a serious way to approach the published research of a senior scholar, regardless of political coloration. However, the publication of this digest of Professor Cumings decades-long research in the Modern Library does at least suggest that the content has been prepared for a mass market, lay audience. In that sense *The Korean War*, while by no means Establishment orthodoxy, has crept a few rungs to be admitted to educated debate beyond the university. That is something Dr Martin should greet. Since before one can adequately argue with an analysis or judgement it is necessary to understand it. That is certainly the aim of the publishers—not to approve the views but to render them susceptible to broader understanding and thus foster intelligent debate about a continuing conflict in U.S. foreign policy.

Yet, David Martin, a retired economist, employed mainly in government service, reviews Bruce Cumings' book as if it were the established, standard history of the war. Of course it never was and still isn't. Dr Martin also disparages I.F. Stone's *Hidden History of the Korean War*, one of the few contemporary critical analyses of the Korean campaign, based entirely on public sources available at the time. All this is based on the conviction that these are Left-wing views of the matter and therefore inherently incorrect.

The review does not confine itself to *ad hominem*. Dr Martin asserts that aside from an anti-American bias, Professor Cumings makes statements that also lead to substantive questions that he does not answer. To the extent this is accurate, it is beside the point. *The Korean War* makes no claims to comprehensiveness. On the contrary it is a compact digest. Professor Cumings explains in the introduction that every effort was made to keep the evidentiary apparatus to a minimum in the interest of broader readership. In the two-volume *Origins of the Korean War* lie the answers to numerous questions Dr Martin sees as unresolved. On the narrative as a whole he is more than candid:

I wish I could write with the serene confidence that other historians do in similarly short books, offering their settled interpretations unencumbered by footnotes and sources. So many things about this war are still so controversial, however, vehemently debated and hotly affirmed or denied (or simply unknown)...

Having read both volumes of the *Origins*, his other books on the subject, viewed *Korea: The Unknown War*, several times as well as corresponding directly with him, I can only attest to the caution with which Professor Cumings drew any conclusions from his research. Rather than trying to prove who may have started the armed hostilities that

became a major military conflict for three years, his work has focussed on the context in which this war began, the various aims, interests and objectives pursued by those persons involved and those of the institutions through which they acted. The limitations on historical documentation are never overlooked. Interpretation is always an act in the present. However it always is an interpretation of what we call the past. Hence new documents may lead to reassessment of previously known documents. *The Korean War* is “a history”—not “the history” as would be implied by a genuinely Establishment narrative.

At one point Dr Martin writes:

To be sure there would have been social unrest such as occurred on Jeju Island and in South Jeolla Province, but it’s hard to see how it could have developed into an all-out war. Backing someone like Kim Ku, who seems to have had wider public support, instead of Syngman Rhee might have been a wiser course for the United States.

Dr Martin is primarily concerned with the U.S. interest in Korea—“a wiser course for the United States” (or for that matter all of Asia-Pacific) and not with what Koreans wanted or may still want.

In fact, the massacre on Jeju island was not “social unrest.” It was the first in the extermination campaigns of the communists (or those opponents the U.S. and Rhee regime declared to be communists) in all of Korea. These actions began with the overt and covert support of the USMGIK which gladly deployed Japanese and Korean collaborators peninsula-wide. Backing Kim Ku might have led to a peaceful Korea, but that is not what the U.S. wanted at all. The U.S. wanted a dictatorship and wanted to turn all of Korea into a war platform against China. It also wanted to Christianize all of Korea.

Unfortunately, even attempts to popularize his Korea research have largely failed, if one considers that U.S. Korean policy and the ignorance of the U.S. population about Korea have scarcely changed since Theodore Roosevelt got his Nobel prize for helping Japan colonize it.

David Martin’s review is also an example of the importance of the overall perspective. The perspective with which one examines the facts is a crucial distinction. Since Martin reads Korean history only as relevant for U.S. history he cannot entertain the idea that Koreans did not want their country divided and occupied. Unlike Germany, Korea was not a party to the war. It was a conquered colony of Japan. Dean Rusk, who claimed to have chosen the 38th parallel as the dividing line, long before he became a cabinet secretary, explained how arbitrary the choice was. In other words, division of the peninsula was

decided based on factors that had little or nothing to do with the interests or needs of Koreans, a people with a settled nationality in the peninsula spanning more than a millennium. That such a decision could be taken by people from a country with barely 150 years of history is insulting on its face. It would have been decent if Martin could have overcome his anti-communism sufficiently to examine the copious evidence Cumings produced to show what the real U.S. role in Korea was and how it has done everything possible to maintain the ROK as a launch pad against China, as it remains today.

In an environment of such enhanced belligerence, guided by military doctrines of perpetual war, an organizer of Veterans for Peace (as stated in Dr Martin's biography) might contribute by dispelling some of the illusions that still nurture *manifest destiny* in the hearts and minds of those who rule the U.S.

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