

Introduction

James I. Matray

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[See table of contents](#)

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Introduction

by *James I. Matray*

James I. Matray is a Professor of History at New Mexico State University.

There have been dramatic events in world affairs that have changed the course of international history. The terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 provide only the most recent example. During the twentieth century, the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand on 28 June 1914 at Sarajevo and Japan's attack on the US naval base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii on 7 December 1941, obviously fall into the same category. After more than two decades of reexamination, historians who specialize in Cold War studies now would add the Korean War. Reacting to North Korea's invasion of South Korea after 25 June 1950, the United States not only greatly expanded its commitment to halt further Communist seizures of power elsewhere in East Asia, it also vastly increased defense spending, strengthened the North Atlantic Treaty Organization militarily, and pressed for West German rearmament. It was the Korean War that erroneously persuaded US leaders that only the direct application of military power could contain what they now perceived as a dire Soviet threat menacing the entire world. Shortly after an armistice ended the Korean conflict in July 1953, the United States would begin its intervention in Indochina, leading to a disastrous war in Vietnam.¹

For many years, however, the Korean War attracted little attention from either diplomatic historians or the general public. Clay Blair even titled his detailed account of the Korean conflict, *The Forgotten War*. Other authors have labeled Korea *The War Before Vietnam* and *The Unknown War*.² But since 1981, a swelling stream of books and articles reexamining not only the war itself, but US policy toward Korea before June 1950 has demonstrated the central importance of the conflict in altering the direction of postwar international affairs.³ In June 2000, *The Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations* acknowledged the elevated significance of the Korean War when it sponsored a "Symposium on the Korean War" in conjunction with its annual conference at Ryerson University in Toronto, Canada. This issue of the *Journal of Conflict Studies* presents revised versions of the papers that six scholars presented at that gathering to commemorate the 50 year anniversary of the Korean War.⁴ These articles rely on recent research to advance new interpretations on selected issues related to one of the most important events in modern world history. Although the Vietnam War still occupies a more prominent place in popular memory, the swiftly forgotten "police action" fought in Korea finally has escaped the obscure place that it occupied in Cold War literature for nearly a half century.

This introduction will provide readers with an overview of the Korean War, attempting in the process to expose old myths and replace them with current realities about the conflict. Early accounts of the war almost without exception focused on events beginning with North Korea's invasion of South Korea. This was so because few people doubted that the Soviet Union had ordered the attack as part of its plan for global conquest. President Harry S. Truman provided support for this assumption just two days after the start of

hostilities. On 27 June 1950, he told the American people that North Korea's attack on South Korea showed that world "communism has passed beyond the use of subversion to conquer independent nations and will now use armed invasion and war."⁵ This assessment reflected Truman's firm belief that North Korea was a puppet of the Soviet Union and Kim Il Sung was acting on instructions from Moscow. In his memoirs, Truman equated Soviet Premier Joseph Stalin's actions with Adolf Hitler's in the 1930s, arguing that military intervention to defend the Republic of Korea (ROK) was vital because appeasement had not prevented but ensured the outbreak of World War II.⁶ Senior administration officials, as well as the general public, fully shared these assumptions. This traditional interpretation provided the analytical foundation for early accounts of the war, perpetuating the most important myth of the Korean conflict.⁷

A consensus now prevails that the origins of the Korean War date from at least World War II. Rather than characterizing the conflict as the product of external aggression, scholars acknowledge the centrality of domestic factors. In fact, more than a decade ago, it became fashionable to portray the Korean War as a civil conflict, rejecting not only the assertion that it was an example of Soviet-inspired, external aggression, but denying Moscow's involvement. Bruce Cumings, the leading proponent of this interpretation, insisted in his two volume study titled *The Origins of the Korean War*, that a conventional war would start in Korea in June 1950 because the United States prevented a leftist revolution on the peninsula during 1945 and imposed a reactionary regime in the south during the years immediately following World War II.⁸ Accounts of the war thereafter adopted the Cumings interpretation. Callum MacDonald wrote that the North Korean "attack was the latest act in a civil war which had been taking shape since the liberation of Korea from Japan in 1945." Burton I. Kaufman labeled the conflict "a true civil war." For Peter Lowe, by 1950, the "situation in the Korean peninsula was in essence one of civil war." John Merrill charged that prior accounts of the Korean War ignored the "local setting," insisting that "the war can be usefully interpreted as a case of intervention in the ongoing civil strife in the South."⁹

Release of previously classified Soviet and Chinese documents during the 1990s abruptly ended the emerging consensus that Korea was a classic civil war. In the first essay that follows, William Stueck assesses "Revisionism and the Korean War" in light of this new information. In 1995, publication of his *The Korean War: An International History* reflected the renewed emphasis on international factors in reexaminations of the Korean conflict, contributing to the current description of it as an "international civil war" that only sounds like an oxymoron. Providing a succinct summary of this new consensus, Kathryn Weathersby asserts that the war's origins "lie primarily with the division of Korea in 1945 and the polarization of Korean politics that resulted from ... the policies of the two occupying powers The Soviet Union played a key role in the outbreak of the war, but it was as facilitator, not as originator."¹⁰ Many writers already had arrived at this conclusion before Communist archival materials became available in the course of reexamining US policy toward Korea before June 1950, focusing attention on how Korea came to be divided in 1945. A myth had taken hold in the McCarthy era that just as Communists in the State Department had helped Mao Zedong seize power in China, so too had they conspired to ensure Soviet control in North Korea. Korea's partition at the

38th parallel allegedly was part of the price President Franklin D. Roosevelt paid at Yalta for Soviet entry in the Pacific war. This coexisted with another erroneous belief that the Allies divided Korea at the Potsdam Conference.¹¹

We now know that President Truman proposed partitioning Korea on the eve of Japan's surrender to prevent the Soviets from occupying the entire peninsula. When he became president following Roosevelt's death in April 1945, Soviet expansion into Eastern Europe had begun to alarm US leaders. Almost from the outset, the new president expected Soviet actions in Korea to parallel Stalin's policies in Poland. Within a week after assuming office, Truman began to search for some way to eliminate any opportunity for a repetition of Soviet expansion. The atomic bomb seemed to provide him with an easy answer. Japan's prompt surrender after an atomic attack would preempt Soviet entrance into the Pacific war, thereby permitting the United States to occupy Korea alone and removing any possibility for "sovietization." But Truman's gamble failed. When Moscow declared war on Japan and sent the Red Army into Korea prematurely on 12 August 1945, the United States proposed Korea's division into Soviet and American zones of military occupation at the 38th parallel. Only Stalin's acceptance of this desperate eleventh hour plan saved the peninsula from unification under Communist rule. Accepting Korea's division into suitable spheres of influence, the Soviet leader probably also hoped to trade this concession for an equal voice in occupied Japan.¹²

Korea soon found itself a captive of the Cold War. As Soviet-American relations in Europe deteriorated, neither side was willing to acquiesce to an agreement appreciably strengthening its adversary. After 18 months of failed negotiations, Washington and Moscow moved toward the formation of separate regimes, resulting in creation in August 1948 of the Republic of Korea (ROK) in the south and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) in the north the following September.¹³ After North Korea launched its attack two years later, a myth took hold that the United States abandoned the ROK, thereby encouraging an invasion. Admittedly, the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) had recommended during September 1947 prompt US military withdrawal from Korea, but a major uprising against the government of Syngman Rhee in October 1948 caused the United States to postpone disengagement until 29 June 1949. By then, Truman believed that South Korea could survive and even prosper without protection from US troops despite the existence of a powerful army in North Korea. This was because before US troops left, the administration had assumed a commitment to train, equip, and supply a security force in the south that was capable of preserving internal order and deterring an attack from the north. Also, it had asked Congress to approve a three-year program of technical and economic assistance.¹⁴

To build support for the Korean aid package, Secretary of State Dean G. Acheson delivered a speech before the National Press Club on 12 January 1950, offering an optimistic appraisal of the ROK's future. In the second essay that follows, my "Dean Acheson's Press Club Speech Reexamined" uses Soviet documents to expose as myth the commonly accepted idea that Acheson's exclusion of South Korea from the US "defensive perimeter" gave the Kremlin a "green light" to order an attack. More important was the fact that the speech reflected the correct assumption guiding Truman's

Korea policy that Moscow was reluctant to allow North Korea to practice open aggression. This belief allowed the administration to pursue qualified containment in Korea through economic means and the policy seemed to be experiencing marked success during the weeks after Acheson's address. South Korea had acted vigorously to end spiraling inflation, while elections late in May had given Rhee's critics control of the legislature. Finally, the South Korean army had nearly eliminated guerrilla activities threatening internal order, prompting the United States to approve a second year of economic aid and a large increase in military assistance.¹⁵

While the United States was willing to be patient, awaiting the collapse of what it saw as Moscow's artificial client state in North Korea, South Korea's President Rhee was obsessed with accomplishing early reunification through military means. The Truman administration's fear that Rhee would launch an invasion prompted it to limit South Korea's military capabilities, refusing to provide tanks, heavy artillery, and combat planes.¹⁶ This did not stop the South Koreans from initiating most of the border clashes with North Korean forces at the 38th parallel beginning in summer 1948 and reaching a high level of intensity and violence a year later. Historians now acknowledge that the two Koreas already were waging a civil conflict when North Korea's attack opened the conventional phase of the war.¹⁷ Contradicting traditional assumptions, however, Soviet documents demonstrate that throughout 1949 Stalin consistently refused to approve Kim Il Sung's persistent requests to approve an invasion of South Korea. It was not until April 1950 that Stalin finally relented, after Kim persuaded him that a military victory would be quick and easy. Given the superior economic and military resources of the United States, Kim Il Sung knew that time was running out and manipulated both Stalin and Mao into supporting his desperate bid for reunification before Rhee could beat him to the punch.¹⁸

Few Americans then and thereafter doubted for a moment that on 25 June 1950, North Korea attacked South Korea on Stalin's orders. They also came to believe a myth that Truman acted with swiftness and courage to prevent conquest of the entire peninsula. But in fact, he did not commit US ground troops in Korea for almost a week, referring the matter instead to the United Nations and banking on South Korea's ability to defend itself. This was consistent with Truman's containment policy in Asia, where he hoped to prevent Communist expansion without relying on US military power, thereby avoiding the need to reverse his policy of reducing defense spending. At a press conference on 29 June, he was still optimistic that a total commitment was avoidable, agreeing with a newsman's description of the war as a "police action" rather than coining the phrase himself. But the next morning, General Douglas MacArthur advised that without US combat forces, Communist conquest of South Korea was certain. Even then Truman hesitated. When Secretary of the Army Frank Pace told him that a decision could not wait, the president sent US soldiers to fight in Korea.¹⁹

Truman made much at the time of how the United States intervened in Korea in response to the request for defense of the Republic of Korea from the Security Council of the United Nations. But the myth that the Korean War was an example of collective security lost its credibility long ago, given the reality that the United States acted prior to passage

of UN resolutions. The UN Security Council resolution of 7 July 1950 provided for creation of a United Nations Command (UNC), requiring MacArthur, Truman's choice as the UNC commander, to make periodic reports on developments in the war. The Truman administration had blocked formation of a UN committee that would have had direct access to the UNC, adopting instead a procedure whereby MacArthur received instructions from and reported to the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Since Washington had to approve them, MacArthur's reports in fact were after-action summaries of information that was common knowledge because newspapers already had printed detailed coverage of the same developments. Moreover, the United States and the ROK contributed 90 percent of the manpower. It was not the United Nations, but the United States that provided the weapons, equipment, and logistical support to save South Korea. All this provided clear proof of the nominal role that the United Nations, and collective security, played in the Korean War.²⁰

MacArthur's Inchon landing reversed the course of the Korean War, but, contrary to traditional beliefs, did not create the momentum that resulted in the decision to cross the 38th parallel and continue the offensive to the Yalu. In fact, throughout July, Truman's advisors, certain that a battlefield victory was inevitable, debated whether to pursue forcible reunification once North Korea's army had been thrown out of the south. Initially, Acheson opposed crossing the parallel, stating publicly on 29 June that US military action was "solely for the purpose of restoring [South Korea] to its status prior to the invasion." However, State Department officials worked to change Acheson's mind, arguing persuasively that the United States should destroy the North Korean army and then sponsor free elections for a government to rule all of Korea. US military leaders were reluctant to endorse this drastic change in war aims until, in late July, UN defensive lines finally stabilized. Roughly two weeks later, Truman decided to approve military operations in pursuit of forcible reunification. Truman's plan for conquering North Korea, which he approved on 1 September, included precautions to minimize the chance of Chinese intervention that MacArthur later ignored. But allegations that MacArthur was responsible for the ill-advised advance into North Korea is a myth. Truman made this decision to register a victory in the Cold War.²¹

China's decision to intervene in the Korean War has received a thorough reexamination in recent years as a consequence of access to new documents and personal accounts on the Communist side. Chen Jian has demonstrated that Beijing's "entry into the Korean War was determined by concerns much more complicated than safeguarding the Chinese-Korean border." Mao Zedong sought "to win a glorious victory" that would restore China's world status as the "Central Kingdom." He also wanted to repay a debt to North Korea, which had sent thousands of soldiers to fight in the Chinese Civil War. Furthermore, after the Inchon landing, Stalin had been pressing Beijing to intervene and prevent US conquest of North Korea. Chen insists, however, that because the triumph of Mao's revolutionary nationalist program was so vital to "the new China's . . . domestic and international interests, there was little possibility that China's entrance into the Korean War could have been averted."²² Building on Chen's explanation, Michael M. Sheng's article in this volume elaborates on why Mao dispatched Chinese forces to Korea. He explores the role of ideology and perception, arguing that a Chinese version of

the "domino theory" dictated military intervention to ensure not only the survival of the People's Republic of China, but the Soviet Union as well.

Recent research has contributed to a modest rehabilitation of MacArthur on other issues, most notably the general's persistent efforts to escalate the Korean War. After China's massive military assault in late November 1950, MacArthur submitted a "Plan for Victory" that proposed four specific steps to defeat the Communists. First, the general called for a blockade of China's coast. Second, he wanted authorization to bomb military installations in Manchuria. Third, MacArthur advocated deployment of Chinese Nationalist forces in Korea. Finally, he recommended that Jiang Jieshi launch an attack from Taiwan against the mainland.²³ We now know that the Joint Chiefs of Staff, despite later denials, seriously considered endorsing implementation of these actions prior to receiving favorable reports from the battlefield late in December. By spring 1951, Truman had approved the first two proposals if UN forces faced annihilation or China expanded the war beyond Korea. In fact, the president even was prepared to use atomic weapons, an option that he had under consideration since the early days of the fighting. According to some historians, the United States was closer to using nuclear weapons in Korea under Truman than under his successor Dwight D. Eisenhower.²⁴

A surprising pattern in recent writing on the Korean War has been the indifference to the role of MacArthur. Nevertheless, scholars have clarified events surrounding Truman's decision to recall the general in April 1951. Early in 1951, General Matthew B. Ridgway halted the Chinese Communist advance southward, making it possible for the administration to implement its preference for fighting a limited war in Korea. After Washington turned down successive pleas from MacArthur to expand the war through attacking China, the general grew frustrated with a policy of settling for an armistice near the 38th parallel. In March, his demand for an immediate Communist surrender sabotaged a planned ceasefire initiative. But for various reasons, many of them political, Truman reprimanded, but did not recall the general. By early April, a combination of factors forced the president to act. The JCS worried about a Chinese and Soviet military buildup in East Asia and thought the UN commander should have standing authority to retaliate against any Communist escalation, even recommending deployment of atomic weapons to forward Pacific bases. They mistrusted MacArthur and guessed he might provoke an incident in order to widen the war. While MacArthur's letter to House Republican Minority Leader Joseph W. Martin on 5 April once again criticizing the administration's efforts to limit the war was, as Truman later argued, "rank insubordination" and the "last straw," he already had made his decision for a more compelling reason related to military strategy.²⁵

During the month after MacArthur's recall, UN forces had repulsed two massive Chinese Communist offensives, creating a battlefield stalemate that we now know intensified friction between Moscow and Beijing on how best to prosecute the war in Korea. In the fourth article, Zhang Xiaoming traces how limits that Stalin placed on Soviet air support raised China's suspicions about the reliability of its alliance relationship for Chinese security interests. This discord also had an impact on the armistice negotiations that opened at Kaesong in July, where allegedly Communist intransigence stalled progress.

While North Korea and China did create an acrimonious atmosphere at the start with efforts to score propaganda points, the United States raised the first major roadblock when it proposed a demilitarized zone deep in North Korea.²⁶ More important, the delegates made rapid progress after the talks moved to Panmunjom during October. Agreeing that the demilitarized zone would follow the line of battle, they promptly adopted inspection procedures to enforce the armistice. After approval of a postwar political conference to discuss withdrawal of foreign troops and reunification, a tradeoff settled disputes on airfield rehabilitation and membership on a neutral supervisory commission. Just 10 months after the talks began, negotiators would have signed an agreement had they not deadlocked over disposition of prisoners of war. Progress had occurred because both sides proposed and accepted compromises each thought would contribute to their preserving security interests defined in terms of military power and political influence.²⁷

Popular memory still finds humanitarian motivation behind the inflexible refusal of the United States to return Communist prisoners of war (POWs) to China and North Korea against their will, coinciding with Truman's portrayal of his decision at the time. But a different reality has emerged regarding the issue that prevented peace in Korea for over a year. Truman's main goal was to win a propaganda victory in the Cold War, even though this necessitated a misrepresentation of the facts. For example, the US stand on the principle of non-forcible repatriation may have seemed moral, but it contradicted the Geneva Convention, which required, as the Communist side demanded, the return of all POWs. Far worse was the Truman administration's purposeful decision to allow the perception that those POWs refusing repatriation were Communists defecting to the "Free World." A vast majority of North Korean POWs were actually South Koreans who either had joined voluntarily or were impressed into the Communist army. And thousands of Chinese POWs were Nationalist soldiers trapped in China at the end of the civil war who now had the chance to escape to Taiwan. Moreover, Chinese Nationalist guards at UN POW camps had used terrorist "reeducation" tactics to compel prisoners to refuse repatriation. Those who resisted risked beatings or death. Truman's stand on voluntary repatriation had little to do with moral considerations.²⁸

John Jenks' article explains how American journalists covering the truce talks were flexible enough to rely on Communist sources for information, but nevertheless embraced the same Cold War assumptions that allowed Truman to exploit the POW issue. Their reports probably contributed to mistaken beliefs about how Eisenhower achieved an armistice ending the Korean War. Historians acknowledge that Eisenhower entered office thinking about using expanded conventional bombing and the threat of nuclear attack to force concessions from the Communist side. The armistice agreement came on 27 July, after an accelerated bombing campaign in North Korea and bellicose rhetoric about expanding the war. Most scholars, however, reject as myth Eisenhower's claim that Beijing was responding to his threat of an expanded war using atomic weapons because no documentary evidence has surfaced to support his assertion.²⁹ They argue that the Chinese, facing major internal economic problems and wanting peaceful coexistence with the West, already had decided to make peace once Truman left office. Stalin's death in March only added to China's sense of political vulnerability, causing the Communist

delegation to break the logjam at Panmunjom later that month before Secretary of State John Foster Dulles conveyed his atomic threat to India's prime minister for delivery to Beijing. Furthermore, the nuclear threats of May 1953 were not clearly or forcefully delivered and were not substantively different from those implied threats that the Truman administration made in the fall of 1951, when B-29 bombers carried out atomic bombing test runs over North Korea with large conventional bombs.³⁰

By January 1953, both sides in fact wanted an armistice. Washington and Beijing had grown tired of the war's economic burdens, military losses, and political and military constraints, worrying about an expanded war, and the pressure from allies and the world community to end the stalemated war. Food shortages in North Korea coupled with an understanding that forcible reunification was no longer possible, caused Pyongyang to favor an armistice even earlier. Moscow's new leaders had been concerned even before Stalin died about economic problems in Eastern Europe. A more conciliatory approach in world affairs, they believed, not only would reduce the risk of war, but also might create tensions in the Western alliance if the United States acted provocatively in Korea. Several weeks before Eisenhower's threats of an expanded war using nuclear weapons and the bombing of North Korea's dams and irrigation system in May, Chinese negotiators signaled a change in policy when they accepted the UNC's proposal for an exchange of sick and wounded POWs and then recommended turning non-repatriates over to a neutral state. Also, in late May and early June 1953, Chinese forces launched powerful attacks against positions that South Korean units were defending along the front line. Far from being intimidated, Beijing thus showed its continuing resolve, relying on military means to persuade the United States to compromise on the final terms of the armistice. In the end, both sides conceded points on the POW repatriation issue.³¹

Scholars undoubtedly will continue to debate how the Korean War ended, but few writers now disagree that the conflict was the key turning point in postwar international history. It militarized the Cold War and projected the Soviet-American confrontation not only into Asia, but the rest of the Third World. In her article in this volume, Catherine Forslund uses cartoons of the era to demonstrate the powerful impact that Korea had on popular attitudes toward the Cold War in the United States. Unfortunately, the same myths that would dominate American thinking after June 1950 seemed to dictate the initial foreign policy of President George W. Bush after he assumed office in January 2001. At a 7 March press conference with visiting South Korean President Kim Dae-jung, he said that there were no plans at that time to resume talks with Pyongyang to end its ballistic missile program and missile exports because of questions about its trustworthiness and verifiability of existing agreements. His approach placed at risk the significant progress that President Kim has made over the prior three years toward reducing tensions on the Korean peninsula through opening an isolated regime to contacts with the outside world. This "Sunshine Policy" of engagement and cooperation with North Korea, for which Kim won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2000, received strong support from the Clinton administration because it was able to act not on the old myths about Korea, but its new realities.

Exposing the myths surrounding the Korean War is important not just to serve the interests of historical accuracy. The realities of that conflict are instructive because they teach lessons about the impact of US participation in world affairs during and after World War II. Connections between Korea and Vietnam are obvious, although historians have not sufficiently probed the links between these two Asian wars. But another lesson of the Korean War that will have continuing significance is how Americans relate to people of other nationalities and cultures. Recent US expressions of regret for the No Gun Ri incident, in which US soldiers killed innocent South Korean civilians during the first month of fighting in Korea, provides an excellent example illustrating this point. Maintaining the myth that US intervention in the Korean War was an act of idealism and altruism reinforces the wrong lessons about the conflict's meaning, serving to fuel the anti-Americanism in South Korea that has been a destructive force in US-Korean relations for at least the past four decades. The articles in this volume are representative of the recent research and writing about the Korean War presenting a more accurate account of the conflict that has made an important contribution to strengthening relations between South Korea and the United States. While the resolution of some issues awaits the release of more archival material, historians have exposed enough myths about Korea that no longer does it warrant description as the forgotten war.

Endnotes

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2. Clair Blair, *The Forgotten War: America in Korea, 1950-1953* (New York: Times Books, 1985); Callum McDonald, *Korea: The War Before Vietnam* (New York: Free Press, 1986); Jon Halliday and Bruce Cumings, *Korea: The Unknown War* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1989).
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4. I am grateful to David Charters for the opportunity to serve as guest editor for this issue of the *Journal of Conflict Studies*. I thank him for his guidance, as well as assistance from him and his staff. Also, I extend special thanks to Robert Beisner, Chen Jian, Frank Costigliola, Melvyn Leffler, and James Giglio for reading the articles printed here and offering constructive criticism.

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8. Bruce Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War*, 2 vols. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981, 1990).

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10. Kathryn Weathersby, "The Soviet Role in the Early Phase of the Korean War," *The Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 2, no. 4 (Winter 1993), p. 432. See also Sergei N. Goncharov, John W. Lewis, and Xue Litai, *Uncertain Partners: Stalin, Mao, and the Korean War* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993).

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14. James I. Matray, "Korea: Test Case of Containment in Asia," in *Child of Conflict*, pp. 169-94.

15. Matray, *The Reluctant Crusade*, pp. 200-36.

16. Stueck, *The Korean War*, pp. 29-30.

17. Merrill, *Korea*, pp. 130-31.

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