

President Truman and crossing the 38th parallel in the Korean War

When Truman was committed to a policy of containment, why did the American president resort to rollback by authorising an invasion of North Korea in September 1950?

Extended Essay in History

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Introduction

The Korean war, 1950-1953, was the first military conflict the US actively participated in after the second world war. At the time of the Korean war the cold war was in full motion and the US public was going through the second red scare¹. The mindset on the US side was that quick and decisive action had to be taken to avoid losing the whole of Asia to communism². This domino mentality played a significant part in US policy especially during the early cold war. Currently it hasn't been three decades since the cold war ended and its effects are still clearly visible, for example in world politics - still there remains a divide between the old opponents of the Cold war. Particularly the result of the Korean war is visible from the yet remaining armistice between North Korea and South Korea, now two quite different countries. Also the sides of the Korean war can be seen in North Korea's relationships with countries - almost all of North Korea's international trade is done with China and China consistently provides North Korea with aid and support³.

In June of 1950 North Korea, a dictatorship under control of the USSR appointed Kim Il Sung, crossed the 38th parallel and invaded South Korea, a dictatorship under the US appointed Syngman Rhee. Both countries were to an extent satellites of their respective superpowers, leading to the assumption in Washington that the war was orchestrated by the Soviet Union⁴. North Korean troops pushed South Korean and US troops to a small perimeter around the city of Pusan. A US invasion at Inchon orchestrated by MacArthur, the leader of the UN forces in

¹ Sherry, 170

² Brogan, 605

³ Bajpai

⁴ Vadney, 134

Korea, enabled pushing the North Korean troops back to the 38th parallel. With authorization from Harry Truman, the US president from 1945 to 1953, McArthur proceeded to attempt uniting Korea under Rhee. The invasion of North Korea was prevented by a Chinese counter attack across the river Yalu.⁵

This investigation focuses on President Truman's decision to authorise McArthur's invasion of North Korea in september of 1950, first considering the policy of containment, rollback and why actions taken in Korea would be rollback and not containment. This established the base for the investigation and outlines the extent of break from policy. Next a hypothetical situation where the UN troops stopped at the 38th parallel is assessed. The Chinese played a massive role in the sequence of events, hence warranting a section of their own for the mistake of judgement made by Truman's administration. Then the UN's approach is explored. Finally the perceived opportunity is evaluated - this includes the US perception of the Soviets, Korea and other factors affecting Truman's decision.

1. The policy of containment, rollback and comparison with regard to Korea

Two main lines of policy were used in Korea, containment and rollback. Of these the policy of containment seemed to be the established line of policy during the Truman administration - it is one of the best known lines of policy in history. However in Korea Truman authorised a move to rollback. The question arises whether rollback can be applied under the guise of containment.

⁵ Vadney, 144-148

1.1 The policy of containment

The effective definition of the policy of containment was to prevent the spread of communism via a supply of monetary and military aid to countries at risk of falling under communist influence, accompanied by an increase in US involvement in the internal affairs of said country.

Truman's outlook on the Soviets was first shaped by George Kennan's, the US ambassador to the USSR at the time, "Long Telegram", an extensive telegram Kennan sent to the Secretary of State. The key points from the telegram later seen in US policy making are that firstly there "*can be no peaceful coexistence*"⁶ as in the USSR would never stop fighting. Secondly in the second section of his telegram Kennan states that the Soviet party "*does not represent natural outlook of Russian people*"⁷, implying that the party doesn't represent the will of the people nor the general outlook of them toward foreigners, and that the party is headed by ignorant leaders who sincerely believe in their cause. Thirdly Kennan warns that the USSR is working with communist parties around the world to overthrow capitalist governments. Fourth Kennan describes the Soviet's as "impervious to logic of reason". Finally in his summary Kennan claims that if met with force the Soviets will often retreat. In essence Kennan states that the soviets are an enemy who can't be reasoned with and who won't let up but if met with force and decisiveness can be contained or pushed back. The article was later published in the Foreign Affairs journal and Kennan's perspective remained in the NSC 68 document which outlined

⁶ Kennan

⁷ Kennan

US foreign policy and again confirmed containment as the official line of the US and Truman's administration⁸.

Containment became the prevailing policy of the US in the cold war after the Truman Doctrine, a speech held by President Truman to congress where he requested that congress allow the providing of aid to Greece and Turkey, both of whom had requested monetary aid and aid in expertise from the US. Truman continued to address the implications of aiding these nations by confirming that he thinks the US should carry responsibility in establishing a world "*in which we and other nations will be able to work out a way of life free from coercion*"⁹ and describes a domino effect where the fall of Greece leads to the fall of Turkey and perhaps many more countries down the line. Truman continues that this is a serious and lasting line of policy that the US would establish by aiding Greece and Turkey. The Truman doctrine is often considered the start of the cold war, and Greece the first confrontation¹⁰. US intervention in Greece set a standard for what could be expected from the US under the policy Truman had set. In Greece this meant the US not only supplying resources and monetary aid to Greece but also exercising extensive control over how this aid would be used¹¹. Similarly in South Korea President Rhee would be picked by the US to run South Korea as the US saw best¹². The policy of containment was a line of military and monetary aid and expertise, coupled with control, to countries worldwide to prevent the spread of communism.

⁸ Edwards, 64

⁹ Truman

¹⁰ Calbos, 82

¹¹ Calbos, 86

¹² Vadney, 139

1.2 Rollback

In the context of the cold war on the US side rollback meant forcing change in a country's main policies, effectively from communism to capitalism, most often in the form of overthrowing an existing communist regime in a given country and establishing a more or less democratic, Korea for example wasn't very democratic¹³, capitalist state in its place. The term was standardised at the beginning of the cold war and the approach was first applied in Korea by President Truman and the UN.

The US would throughout the cold war continue to apply rollback in a number of nations. For example President Carter applied limited rollback in Afghanistan after Soviet invasion in 1979¹⁴.

1.3 Rollback or containment in Korea

When President Truman authorized the crossing of the 38th parallel, it would at first seem that he made a full switch from the policy of containment to rollback. However, some factors imply otherwise. The invasion, referring to the invasion of North Korea, might have in fact attempted uniting Korea, bringing stability and containing the communist threat outside of Korea, where containment had previously failed by allowing the fall of North Korea to communism. Additionally the North Korean people were seemingly happier with their regime than their southern counterparts: despite the UN sanctioned election in the south, most real power was held by the US appointed dictator who, despite the population's socialist leaning,

¹³ Vadney, 139

¹⁴ Savino, 4

drove capitalist ideas and reversed the activities of local groups for example in cancelling and reversing the redistribution of land¹⁵. The unstable situation increased the risk of the North overtaking the South later on.

On the other hand the North Korean government, which too was established in a deal between the US and the Soviets - they agreed without difficulty to simply split the country in half, a decision confirmed by the UN¹⁶. The Soviets backed the Northern government and the US their own in the south. The system was unstable due to the desire of both Korean regimes to unite Korea under themselves. Rhee, the dictator of the south, had stated that his invasion of the north was only a matter of time. This applied to both sides, but North Korea was the first to get a green light from their respective superpower¹⁷ - and even in a way from the US in the form of leaving South Korea out of the US official defence perimeter in Statesman Dean Acheson's speech¹⁸. The US proposition to interfere in the war passed the UN due to Soviet absence from the meeting. McArthur reclaimed southern Korea swiftly with an amphibious landing at Inchon. In September 1950 President Truman and the UN authorised McArthur to cross of the 38th parallel in order to unite Korea under the southern regime¹⁹.

Despite the arguments for the invasion being for stability and unity, the bottom line is that the UN forces attempted to overthrow or replace an existing regime, one which was arguably more representative of its people than the one it would be replaced with²⁰, hence making it rollback. The deal on the division of Korea was

¹⁵ Vadney, 135

¹⁶ Gaddis, 41

¹⁷ Gaddis, 42

¹⁸ Edwards, 65

¹⁹ Sherry, 180.

²⁰ Vadney, 137-138

made five years ago. The agreement went unchallenged by superpowers before the war, establishing itself as the new status quo in Korea. Where restoring this status quo would've been containment, tilting it in the US's favor was not. In Korea rollback wasn't applied under the guise of containment.

2. Crossing the 38th parallel

There was a single extreme positive in crossing the 38th parallel: the opportunity of uniting Korea. Uniting Korea under a capitalist, pro-US government would be a considerable setback to the Soviets and China.

The negatives of allowing South Korea to fall to communism were also clear to the US. Despite US military leaders pointing out the insignificance of South Korea for military operations in Asia, the belief was that Korea would be the first domino piece in a row that would lose all of Asia to communism if a line wasn't drawn immediately²¹. This domino mentality greatly affected US policy making the whole cold war, but especially prevailed in the case of Korea. Cutting slack in Korea was even compared to Hitler and appeasement²² - catastrophic in consequence. However the focus of this investigation is not on why the US joined the war, but rather why the US decided to continue their advance past the 38th parallel in a clear show of aggression which was in conflict with the policy of containment last established mere months earlier in the NSC-68 report.

²¹ Sherry, 178

²² Sherry, 178

2.1 Why settle on the 38th parallel

The previously established and accepted line along the 38th parallel seems to have carried only positives. The US was satisfied with the arrangement before the war, the peninsula was divided without conflict - neither party was interested in fighting for it. Stalin wasn't yet confident in sustaining a second front apart from Europe²³ and the US, as mentioned, didn't want to risk direct confrontation with the USSR.

Also the south was looking to invade the north but lacked US support for the attempt²⁴. South Korea wouldn't attempt to defy the Soviets and Chinese without US assistance. Hence, were the US to keep withholding their support from South Korea in invading the North, the arrangement would've been even more stable after a peace settlement and a lesson learned from the conflict. A peace settlement would've been dictated by the Americans, considering that the North Korean military was in shreds after MacArthur's landing in Incheon. Most likely the Soviets and Chinese would advocate for North Korea, perhaps preventing any great injustice in a settlement. However Kim Il Sung would've learned the hard way that the south wasn't to be invaded - or rather that the US wasn't to be openly challenged. Additionally Truman's political career took a terrible hit from the extended conflict in Korea - Truman spent his last years in office with very low public support²⁵. Cutting the conflict at a point where the US had demonstrated their military superiority in such a clean fashion would have not only saved Truman from the public backlash, but likely further improved public opinion of his administration.

²³ Gaddis, 42

²⁴ Gaddis, 41

²⁵ Brogan, 608

Nonetheless Truman decided to authorize the crossing of the 38th parallel. This was also approved by the UN, though the operation in Korea was almost purely executed by the US and South Korea²⁶. MacArthur and the situation of South Korea seem to have played a significant role in the decision, alongside the intelligence failure regarding the Soviets and China.

2.2 The UN

The UN was a quintessential part of Truman justifying the action - if the world police agreed it should be justified. The UN started the joint engagement in support of South Korea in two phases, resolutions 82 and 83. On the 25th of June 1950 in Resolution 82 the UN condemned the actions of North Korea, decided that a response from the UN was necessary and called for its members to assist in fulfilling this response, what ever it be²⁷. The UN also called for an immediate cease to hostilities, with little effect²⁸. Two days later Resolution 82 was followed by Resolution 83. This resolution called for the members of the UN to provide South Korea with the support necessary to *“repel the armed attack and to restore peace and security to the area”*²⁹. The wording clearly implies a return to the state proceeding the start of the armed conflict. In Resolution 84 the UN security council confirms that the US will be commanding and leading the operation³⁰. Despite the status quo driven intentions of these resolutions in October just months later the UN went from returning status quo to supporting an armed invasion of North Korea³¹.

²⁶ Edwards, 66

²⁷ UN Security Council, 25 Jun. 1950

²⁸ UN Security Council, 25 Jun. 1950

²⁹ UN Security Council, 27 Jun. 1950

³⁰ UN Security Council, 7 Jul. 1950

³¹ Savino, 11-12

Resolution 376 (V) called for a “unified, independent, and democratic government”³² of Korea and to retain the UN joint forces, mainly manned by the US and led by the US, in Korea until this goal was achieved³³.

The operation fit the guidelines of the UN in the aim to “*maintain international peace and security*”³⁴ and the “*removal of threats to the peace*”³⁵ - the latter would have to be interpreted in a quite decisive manner to justify invading a country, however Korea’s split wasn’t yet perceived as permanent and the question was about guaranteeing an “independent Korea”³⁶ as opposed to simply invading the north. Hence the rest of the security council was willing to accept the resolutions proposed by the US, and the UN officially backed the operation.

The USSR held veto power in the security council and would’ve blocked these resolutions had it been present. However, due to the US’ refusal to recognise the new communist Chinese government as a permanent member of the security council, a spot which the previous Chinese government now held from Taiwan, the USSR was boycotting the UN security council at the time of the resolutions.³⁷

This enabled Truman to gain the legitimacy of the UN for his endeavour in Korea. Now the seemingly more profitable course of invading North Korea had been justified by the UN.

³² UN Security Council, 7 Oct. 1950

³³ UN Security Council, 7 Oct. 1950

³⁴ “Charter of the United Nations Chapter I: Purposes and Principles”

³⁵ “Charter of the United Nations Chapter I: Purposes and Principles”

³⁶ UN Security Council, 7 Oct. 1950

³⁷ Edwards, 66

2.3 The Chinese

The Chinese intervention was the turning point of the war and seemingly the crucial miscalculation that made rollback so appealing, hence warranting its own section.

The Chinese civil war had been raging on and off since 1927, in 1945 moving to its final stage, the Chinese Communist Revolution. The CCP, the Communist Party of China, led by Mao, beat the ROC, the Kuomintang led government of the Republic of China, which fled to the island of Taiwan³⁸. Mao's communist party acquiring power, to the US public, equated to the "*loss of China*"³⁹. The US public had viewed China as something under US influence despite the US in reality having limited influence in China⁴⁰. It would seem that there was a certain prejudice toward the Chinese in US policymaking in the Korean War. The US simply viewed China as another one of Stalin's puppets⁴¹. The CIA retained that the invasion was purely a Soviet managed affair - even in their weekly report stating that "*The USSR could use these 'Korean' reinforcements*"⁴², counting early reinforcements provided by the Chinese to North Korea as something the Soviets orchestrated. Even in September the CIA retained that the Soviets would call the shots on Chinese intervention⁴³.

MacArthur appears to have carried a certain prejudice toward the Chinese - he found the Chinese "*obedient, dutiful, childlike, and quick to follow resolute leadership*"⁴⁴, in other words unlikely to challenge the US and even if they did

³⁸ Edwards, 62

³⁹ Brogan, 602

⁴⁰ Brogan, 602.

⁴¹ Edwards, 62.

⁴² "Weekly Summary #113"

⁴³ "Intelligence Memorandum 324"

⁴⁴ Halberstam

MacArthur felt the Chinese military was “*Grossly overrated*”⁴⁵ and no challenger to US troops. This, as proven by the sequence of events, was a faulty perception. Nonetheless, MacArthur would assure Truman that the Chinese wouldn’t enter the war⁴⁶.

There is no reason to believe that Truman would have questioned the CIA on a definitive report, especially with General MacArthur reassuring the president that the Chinese wouldn’t intervene.

The assumption of Chinese inactivity proved to be the worst intelligence failure in the war, perhaps apart of not predicting the invasion itself despite evidence⁴⁷, though the evidence was even clearer in the case of China. China had publicly announced that it wouldn’t stand the defeat of North Korea and the CIA had confirmed that the Chinese definitely had the immediate capability to intervene in Korea if they decided to⁴⁸. Nonetheless the Truman Administration and Mac Arthur assumed and made decisions on the basis that the Chinese would be content in watching from the sideline. Had Truman realised that the Chinese would intervene he might have made a different decision entirely.

2.3 The Opportunity

The Truman administration obviously saw an opportunity for uniting Korea under a capitalist regime. However as is apparent from the outcome such an opportunity either wasn’t seized or didn’t exist.

⁴⁵ Halberstam

⁴⁶ Rose

⁴⁷ Rose

⁴⁸ “Intelligence Memorandum 324”

All out global war was out of the question to all parties⁴⁹. Despite the negatives of a capitalist Korea, Stalin was ready to accept it and reportedly commented “*So what. Let it be. Let the Americans be our neighbours*”⁵⁰. The Soviets did provide North Korea with advisors and equipment, even having Soviet planes fly within North Korean airspace⁵¹, and most importantly gave Kim Il Sung a “green light” to invade the south, but retaining that the Soviets wouldn’t help if he lost⁵². Despite US assumptions⁵³, the Soviets did not orchestrate the Korean war and it wasn’t the first step of a communist invasion plan.

The situation in South Korea likely motivated the invasion. Syngman Rhee was primarily a US appointed dictator, and despite the UN sanctioned elections in South Korea the people had little choice over the policies implemented. It seems that the US even rigged the elections⁵⁴. After the election Rhee, with US support, violently suppressed revolts from the people, who were unhappy with most apparently fixed the result. Around 1947 a guerilla war broke out, supported by North Korea but mainly operated within the south by southerners. In total around 100 000 people were killed after the second world war in South Korea to retain Rhee’s dictatorship, which even alienated some right wingers. Though actual resistance was practically suppressed by 1950, the danger of North Korean supported attempts on Rhee’s power remained. As the elections of May 1950, where Rhee’s party got a minority vote despite attempts at fixing the election, showed the public wasn’t supportive of his regime.⁵⁵

⁴⁹ Rose

⁵⁰ Gaddis, 45

⁵¹ Rose

⁵² Edwards, 66

⁵³ Sherry, 178

⁵⁴ Vadney, 139-140

⁵⁵ Vadney, 137-139

The yet unstable situation in South Korea was likely another motivator to invade the north. If the north was let be, Korea might end up under communist control due to Rhee's unpopularity. This fit particularly well into MacArthur's world view, supporting his existing opinion of invading the north. MacArthur liked Rhee despite Rhee's poor popularity due to their shared anti-communism and common goal in increasing US funding in Asia⁵⁶. The South Korean situation gave the US reason to invade North Korea in order to guarantee stability and a capitalist foothold in Korea.

MacArthur was quite the character. A war hero from Japan, credited with "*superior intelligence, rare commanding ability and zealous dedication to duty, honor and country*"⁵⁷. He was also referred to as overconfident or egotistical⁵⁸. This counts toward explaining his prejudice toward the Chinese. He was a firm believer in absolute victory⁵⁹. To him leaving the north uninvaded wouldn't count as a proper victory. MacArthur's greatest achievement was the success against the Japanese, and this was an absolute victory without a doubt. The opponent had surrendered unconditionally and was occupied by the invading force⁶⁰. Victory at its fullest - unlike retaking half of a country. MacArthur was one to strongly and decisively argue for what he perceived as the best course of action in a given situation⁶¹. Hence he would strongly advocate for rollback in Korea.

In the US the second Red Scare was in full motion. The population was terrified of communism and certain groups and individuals - McCarthy for example -

⁵⁶ Vadney, 142

⁵⁷ James

⁵⁸ James

⁵⁹ Rose

⁶⁰ James

⁶¹ Halberstam

were looking to take advantage. People were judged in front of the HUAC(House Un-American Activities Committee) often only on accusations or suspicions without much content to them.⁶²

A large factor in the US population's sentiment regarding the Korean war was frustration that no total victory, similarly to the second world war, had been achieved yet. The Cold War had been dubbed a war and now that actual combat was in progress nothing seemed to be getting done. Truman's approval even from democrats would suffer tremendously after the extension of the war, though.⁶³

Overall the opportunity seemed apparent. Truman and MacArthur were, falsely but understandably, convinced that the Chinese wouldn't interfere with the operation. The attack was perceived as a direct Soviet grab for world domination by the US and hence warranted instant action - if the Soviets learned a lesson now, they might not try anything for awhile. Also parallels to appeasement and Hitler were drawn. Finally the public in the US was all for a concrete victory over the Soviets. Especially since the action gained legitimacy from the UN, it seemed like a great opportunity.

⁶² Sherry, 170

⁶³ Brogan, 607-608

Conclusion

This investigation has aimed to answer the question “*When Truman was committed to a policy of containment (rather than aggression), why did the American president authorise an invasion of North Korea in September 1950?*” Reaching a decisive answer to the question is challenging, since a window to Truman’s mind isn’t available. The answer to the question could be different depending on the definition of containment the investigator relies on, though classifying rollback as containment isn’t plausible it could be brought to question whether toppling a five year old regime was truly rollback. Due to these uncertainties an opportunity for further investigation remains.

Based on the evidence and analysis the investigation has concluded that aggression was seemingly beneficial in Korea. The Soviet Union had taken a passive stance in terms of Korea and MacArthur and Truman were convinced that the Chinese wouldn’t take action - Chinese intervention proved to be the deciding factor for the entire war. Also the US public wanted to see a victory as opposed to a deflection. Due to the Soviet absence in the UN Truman could gain the legitimacy of the UN for his operation in Korea, which of course made the course of action politically safer. Because the opportunity seemed so obvious and the UN provided legitimacy to rollback the safer course of action of returning the border to the 38th parallel was seen as the less beneficial course of action. Hence it seems Truman acted on a perceived opportunity.

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