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CHAPTER

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4 The Second Dyad: The USA in the Korean War

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Abstract

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The two American warning failures in the Korean War are unique cases in our category of events: The first, because the US intelligence community provided no warning at all prior to the North Korean invasion in June 1950, due to the poor quality of its collection capabilities and its distrust of South Korean warnings. The second case is even more unique. Despite China's public warnings, reliable information that massive Chinese forces had crossed the Yalu River, and the actual engagement with these forces, General MacArthur, supported by his intelligence officer General Willoughby, entirely ignored them when ordering his forces to complete the occupation of North Korea. Explaining this odd decision, the chapter pinpoints MacArthur's paranoia and narcissism and Willoughby's tendency toward centralism, mirror-imaging, and need for cognitive closure. These traits allowed the success of the sudden Chinese counteroffensive in late November that caused the US Army one of the worst defeats in its history.

Keywords

Keywords: Korean War, MacArthur, Willoughby, Chinese intervention, narcissism, paranoia, mirror imaging, need for closure, authoritarian personality, Bataan gang

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Content

With the prize within his grasp, holding tight to his conviction that Red China was a paper tiger, MacArthur had simply closed his ears to all counsel save his own.¹

MacArthur did not want the Chinese to enter the war in Korea. Anything MacArthur wanted, Willoughby produced intelligence for.... In this case, Willoughby falsified the intelligence reports.... He should have gone to jail.²

heading **Introduction**

Content

The two American intelligence failures in the Korean War are unique cases in the category of events that make this book. The uniqueness of the first, the failure to warn that North Korea intended to invade South Korea in June 1950, derives from the fact that on the eve of the invasion, American intelligence organizations failed to provide any specific piece of information that could alert their consumers to the looming threat. This kind of a failure—at the level of collection—is rare in the history of surprise attacks. When compared to other cases in this book, it is a far cry from Barbarossa and the Yom Kippur war, when the intelligence organizations collected sufficient information to alert the decision-makers to the threat even if these warnings were ignored. ↴

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The second American failure is even more unique. In June 1950, the attack was against soldiers from the Republic of Korea and not the US Army, and prior to it the Korean Peninsula was ranked very low in the American intelligence order of priorities, as indicated in NSC-68, and this explains much of the outcome. But in late November 1950, the Chinese attacked American soldiers, and unlike in the June 1950 case, in the weeks before the attack a plethora of intelligence information concerning the looming threat had become available to General Douglas MacArthur and his staff. They were nevertheless caught unprepared, and the United States suffered one of the worst defeats in its military history. A number of factors explain this failure, but they mainly result from the lack of a proper learning process after the failure of June 1950.

Headline **Case Study I: Failing to Forecast the War**

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a. The road to war

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When compared with Hitler's decision to launch Barbarossa before ending the war with Britain, Japan's decision to initiate a war against a far stronger American opponent at Pearl Harbor, or Sadat's decision to attack Israel despite the clear military superiority of the Israel Defense Force (IDF), the decision of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea ([DPRK]; North Korea) to attack the Republic of Korea ([ROK]; South Korea) seems rather rational. The decision to attack was Kim Il-Sung's, but it was dependent on the approval of Stalin and Mao Ze Dong.

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Kim's commitment to an "armed unification" of Korea dates back to the early 1940s, when he served as the head of the Korean battalion for the 88th brigade in the Soviet Far East Command.³ Earlier, he was a guerrilla commander in the war against the Japanese occupation in Manchuria and North Korea. He had moved to the USSR in 1939 or 1940, graduated from an officers school, and in 1945 was selected by Beria, with Stalin's approval, to be the leader of the Korean territories that were occupied by the Red Army toward the end of the war. Backed up by Soviet support, Kim took over the country in 1946 and established the Korean People's Army (KPA), which became, within a few years, a significant military force. Committed to the unification of Korea under his leadership, Kim rejected the Soviet-American understanding for a joint trusteeship of Korea reached at the February 1945 Yalta conference. Following the American military withdrawal from South Korea in June 1949, he became convinced that the KPA was capable of defeating the far weaker ROK army, as well as the American dispatch forces.⁴ Kim's optimistic estimations, which were supported by the reports of the Soviet ambassador in Pyongyang, convinced Stalin that the "progressive forces" in South Korea were powerful enough and that it was in a state of "revolutionary readiness."⁵

Until early 1950, Stalin, who feared a confrontation with the United States in the Far East, avoided giving a green light to Kim's military initiative. Unlike in Europe, where Stalin expanded Communist influence despite the risk of such a confrontation, concern about the American reaction ranked high in his Far Eastern strategy. In the case of Korea, it led him to agree to the division of the peninsula and the evacuation of the

Red Army from the territory it had occupied in August 1945. In the Chinese civil war, it drove him to support the division of China between the nationalist and communist rivals along the Yangtze River instead of pledging full support for Mao. Only the Communist military achievements caused him to alter policy in the spring of 1949. Similarly, despite the optimistic reports he received from North Korea regarding the south's ripeness for unification under a communist rule, he expressed his reservations about it during the talks he held with Mao in Moscow in late 1949, and continued to reject any proposal for a military initiative until early 1950.⁶

Following the communist victory in the Chinese civil war, both Mao and Kim competed to win Soviet support for the unification of their countries: China with Tibet and Formosa and North Korea with the south.⁷ Influenced by Kim's optimistic reports, Stalin's reluctance to support him lessened. Nevertheless, when Stalin did give Kim the green light, in January 1950, he also made it clear that Korea ranked low in his order of priorities and that, therefore, he would not be able to provide "great assistance and support" in case of failure. In addition, Stalin demanded that Kim obtain the blessing of the Chinese.⁸

Apart from his increased optimism regarding a North Korean military initiative, other factors influenced Stalin's change of mind: the Communist victory in the Chinese Civil War, which was regarded as a model for spreading the revolution in Asia; his belief that the United States had deserted Chiang Kai-shek and would act similarly in the case of Korea; the successful Soviet nuclear test in August 1949, which ended the American nuclear monopoly; and the early January 1950 declarations by secretary of state Dean Acheson and President Truman that excluded Korea and Formosa from the American defense perimeter in the east, signaling weakness in the American position in East Asia. According to a more updated analysis, which relies on recently released Soviet and Chinese documents, Stalin was also influenced by his interest in preserving an ice-free port in the Pacific. By this account, unification of the Korean peninsula under communist rule meant that the ports of Pusan and Inchon would become available to the Soviets. And if the North Koreans were defeated, the risk to the People's Republic of China (PRC) would compel Mao to ask the Soviets to maintain their presence in the ports of Lushun and Dalian.⁹

Mao was even more hesitant to approve Kim's proposal than Stalin. Until the spring of 1949, he and his colleagues had had little interest in Korea, and they only learned about Kim's "armed unification" intentions when they met with him in April 1949. During the meeting, they expressed concern that South Korea, under the militant Syngman Rhee, who was also committed to a unified Korea, might attack the north with Japanese backing. Mao promised that were that to happen, he would send some Chinese troops to aid North Korea, and he agreed to return two ethnic Korean divisions that fought under the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to North Korea. At the same time, he warned Kim against launching any military initiative in the south. In April 1950, the last ethnic Korean division that had participated in the Chinese Civil War returned to North Korea. From a Chinese perspective, this was done to increase the North Korean defensive rather than offensive capabilities.¹⁰

In light of Stalin's demand for a Chinese approval of the planned war, Kim visited Beijing in mid-May. At that time, Mao and his colleagues heard for the first time of the change in Stalin's view concerning the war, and they requested that he acknowledge that it was, indeed, the case. Stalin's telegram granting approval arrived on May 14. The Chinese leadership then reluctantly agreed to Kim's initiative, and in a meeting on May 15, Mao promised Kim that if American forces intervened in the war, the PLA would come to the KPA's assistance. Given this lukewarm Chinese support, however, Kim avoided informing the PRC about his intention to launch the war until it started. Although Mao was outraged by this behavior, it did not undermine his intention to assist North Korea militarily.¹¹

Concrete North Korean preparations for war had started under a heavy veil of secrecy. The KPA attack plan was ready on May 29. It aimed at the fast occupation of all of South Korea "in order to prevent the landing of the American imperialists."¹² On June 11, the KPA headquarters distributed a top-secret command for a

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large-scale military exercise in the border area. This was the cover for the military deployment that started on June 12 and took place over the following two weeks. The division commanders received their attack orders on June 18. At the same time, Pyongyang radio announced additional conciliatory moves toward South Korea, including the release of prisoners. The deception also included public calls for a peaceful reunification and false diplomatic initiatives aimed at calming Seoul's apprehensions by demonstrating Pyongyang's goodwill, thus refuting rumors of KPA's preparations for invasion.¹³

Altogether, the process that led to the North Korean invasion did not include any major miscalculations. Armed unification ranked certainly at the top of Kim's order of priorities but was far less important for the USSR and the PRC. Both Stalin and Mao made this clear to Kim, but they seem to have miscalculated the war dynamics that would involve not only strategic considerations but also reputational ones. Here they seem to have made a similar mistake to the one conducted by the American policymakers on the eve of the war.

Headline heading

b. The American surprise

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i. The American intelligence assets

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In the period between the end of WWII and the breakout of the Korean War, the American intelligence system in the Far East was in a decrepit state. This was the outcome of deep cuts in the defense and intelligence budgets, a high level of bureaucratic competition, and a poor level of coordination among the various operating intelligence organs. Monitoring the Korean Peninsula, moreover, ranked low in the intelligence order of priorities. ↴

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Collection in the Far East was mainly made by Sigint and Humint as well as some open-source intelligence (Osint). Although visual aerial reconnaissance, which proved its value during WWII, was used extensively in the Korean War itself,¹⁴ this means of collection, which could have provided good information about the deployment of the KPA forces for war, was not used until June 1950.

Sigint collection was divided between a number of relatively small army, air force, and naval units. Beginning in 1949, their activity was loosely coordinated by the newly established Armed Forces Security Agency (AFSA),¹⁵ whose prime target was the USSR. Until 1948, AFSA had been "astonishingly lucky" in reading Soviet military, police, and industrial traffic. Then, based on information that was passed to the Soviets by an AFSA linguist named William Weisband who had been recruited by the KGB, the Soviet cipher systems stopped working, leaving communication intelligence (Comint), the United States' main source of collection, almost completely in the dark on the road leading to the war.¹⁶

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In addition, Comint collection in the Far East suffered from fundamental difficulties, such as a lack of skilled operators because of a high level of personnel turnover and a relaxed working manner that meant that interception facilities operated only five-and-a-half days a week, eight hours a day.¹⁷ The situation was even worse in the Korean case. Despite their being a source of concern, the US Communications Intelligence Board (USCIB) ranked Japan and Korea (with a lesser focus on Korea), number fifteen on its order of "high importance" priorities. Accordingly, when war broke out, North Korea was covered by two full-time and one part-time cryptanalyst, one linguist, and two analysts.¹⁸ ↴ AFSA, moreover, had no Korean dictionaries or typewriters and no books about the country.¹⁹

Given its type of regime, North Korea constituted a challenging target for Humint. This task had become even more difficult because of the cumbersome organization of the various bodies involved in this mission. Following the withdrawal of US forces in June 1949, American military assistance to the South Korean army was provided by the Korean Military Advisory Group (KMAG), which also passed information from ROK sources to the Pentagon. In addition, the United States maintained three small intelligence missions in Korea: the Korean Liaison Office (KLO), established by MacArthur's G-2, Gen. Charles Willoughby after the

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American forces left South Korea in 1949 and tasked with intelligence collection and analysis;²⁰ the Air Force Office of Special Investigations (AFOSI); and a CIA element that was linked to the local police and intelligence services. Their main sources were the South Korean collection agencies.²¹ Although South Korean officers claim that the intelligence that they collected about the coming attack was valuable,²² there is a consensus that G-2 in Tokyo regarded it as conflicting and useless.²³

The KLO and CIA collection abilities in North Korea are a matter of controversy. According to Willoughby, in 1949, he had sixteen agents in North Korea. However, KLO officers had reservations about “their competence, motivation, and loyalty.”²⁴ Similarly, according to John Singlaub, he and his colleagues recruited dozens of Koreans in Manchuria between 1946 and 1948, trained them as agents, and sent them across the Yalu River into North Korea. The agents provided valuable information to the CIA station in Seoul,

p. 130 and on the eve of the war reported on specific North Korean preparations for invasion. Based on these reports, the CIA distributed a document assessing “that a North Korean invasion was pending” on June 19.²⁵ Other intelligence histories of the war tend to ignore the CIA’s Humint contribution. Thus, a semi-official report of American Humint in the war maintains that when it started “Korea was an intelligence vacuum.”²⁶ Academic accounts and the CIA documents themselves refute the claim that the agency forecast a North Korean invasion as an immediate threat a week before the war (see below).

Lastly, the Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS), which was established in 1941 and transferred to the CIA in 1947, provided some information as well. However, its focus was less on North Korea per se, and more on Soviet media coverage of the two Koreas and Soviet–North Korean relations. Consequently, Osint missed some hints in the North Korean media (primarily deceptive messages) that could have indicated a certain change in the situation prior to the invasion.²⁷

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ii. The information and its estimate

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Given the low ranking of North Korea in the US intelligence requirements order of priorities, the Comint contribution to an early warning was minimal. Post factum, it provided two hints of the coming invasion: an increase in Soviet targeting of South Korean communications between April 21 and May 15; and, from February 1950 onward, indications of large Soviet shipments of bandages and medicines to North Korea and Manchuria.²⁸ FBIS monitoring of Soviet references to North Korea and North Korean broadcasts revealed no significant indications for a drastic change in the public attitude of both states on the issue of “armed unification.”

Humint provided a somewhat better picture. On January 13, 1950, a CIA document reported further expansion of the KPA forces, including tank units and heavy artillery, in the border zone with South Korea. In addition, the report notified an influx of PLA forces in Manchuria.²⁹ A G-2 report that was distributed six days before the invasion included significant war indicators: “an imminent enemy offensive—extensive troop movements along the 38th parallel; evacuation of all civilians north of the parallel for two kilometers; suspension of civilian freight service from Wonsan to Ch’orwon and the transportation of military supplies only; concentration of armored units in the border area; and the arrival of large shipments of weapons and ammunition.”³⁰ On the same day, a CIA report included no specific warning indicators. It did notice, however, that the KPA continued to deploy forces near the border, that the deployment included tanks and heavy artillery that had moved there “in recent months,” and that, in general, the North Korean military forces in the border area “equal or surpass the strength of southern Korean army units similarly deployed.”³¹

Some Humint sources also referred to specific dates of the coming offensive. On December 30, 1949, Willoughby sent Washington reports from field agents that warned of a North Korean invasion in March or April of 1950. A month-and-a-half later, he delivered two additional warnings about an attack in March or June. KLO officers reported on March 10 that the invasion had been rescheduled from March or April to June

1950.³² However, since most of the warnings came from South Korean field sources, rather than American sources, they were dismissed by American intelligence officers.

The CIA was right in assessing that the withdrawal of the American army from Korea would lead to a communist “armed unification,” but it erred in estimating the circumstances under which the invasion would take place. It also was wrong in evaluating the balance of forces between North Korea and the ROK. In early January 1947, the CIA’s predecessor, the Central Intelligence Group, had assessed that the USSR’s long-term goal was to take over the whole of the Korean Peninsula, and that since the US military presence was the main obstacle to employing this scheme, “Soviet propaganda and Communist agitation have consistently sought to drive the US out of Korea.”³³ Toward the end of 1947, a CIA assessment warned that “U.S. withdrawal would have the effect of leaving South Korea incapable of offering any serious resistance to eventual domination by the ↴ North.”³⁴ A March 1948 document estimated that the right-wing South Korean regime under Syngman Rhee “would be incapable of withstanding ideological and military pressures from North Korea.”³⁵ Following the elections in August, the CIA assessment was somewhat more optimistic, expressing the belief that a strong South Korean army could be built before the expected American military withdrawal, and that such an army could serve as an effective deterrent against communist aggression.³⁶

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The belief, shared by all American estimators, that the unification of the Korean Peninsula would be initiated by the USSR, and not by Kim Il Sung, was expressed in a February 1949 report of a decrease in Communist influence in South Korea. Consequently, the CIA analysts concluded that the conditions were not ripe for “carrying out the Soviet plan for the eventual absorption of South Korea into the Democratic Peoples Republic.”³⁷ This estimate relied on the expectation that “the Politburo would not engage in overt forms of aggression which involved the risk of a general war for the present and several years hence.”³⁸ A more alarmed tone was expressed a week later, noting that the scheduled American military withdrawal in June “would probably in time be followed by an invasion, timed to coincide with Communist-led South Korean revolts, by the North Korean People’s Army possibly assisted by small battle-trained units from Communist Manchuria.”³⁹ This estimate is considered by some as evidence that the CIA correctly foresaw the coming events.⁴⁰

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The South Korean estimate was more pessimistic and also more accurate. Based on the “recent enemy situation and general developments,” ↴ the ROK Army Headquarters warned in its annual intelligence estimate of December 27, 1949, that “the enemy would carry out a full-scale offensive campaign in the spring of 1950.”⁴¹ By March, the warning had become more concrete, forecasting June as the time of the invasion. The KLO and the KMAG G-2 reported this information, but it did not have a considerable impact in Tokyo or in Washington because it had gone through Willoughby, who rejected the Korean predictions.⁴²

Despite the completion of the US military withdrawal in June 1949, and the increase of intelligence indications warning of an upcoming invasion, the CIA provided no specific warning until war broke out. The agency’s “Weekly Summary” of January 13, 1950, shortly before Kim Il Sung obtained Stalin’s green light for the invasion, noted the continued North Korean military buildup in the border area, but estimated that this was probably “a defensive measure to offset the growing strength of the offensively minded South-Korean army.”⁴³ The CIA’s Watch Committee—a small body that was set up in 1948 and met about twice a month with representatives of the army, navy, air force and State Department to discuss indications of incoming threats—was asked on June 14 to consider a list of potential areas of conflict with the USSR in the next six months to a year. Their ranking order was Indochina, Berlin, and West Germany, Iran, Yugoslavia, South Korea (sixth), the Philippines, and Japan.⁴⁴ Less than a week before war started, the CIA issued a report that grossly underestimated the KPA’s capabilities: 66,000 troops organized in at least three infantry divisions and one independent brigade; at least 65 T-34 tanks; and about 35 Soviet-made fighters which probably had not yet attained operational status.⁴⁵ In reality, the KPA had at least 135,000 soldiers, 150 T-34 tanks and an air force of 180 Soviet-made aircraft including 40 fighters and 70 attack-bombers.⁴⁶ This

underestimation probably led the CIA to assess on the eve of the war that North Korea only had “a capability ↳ for attaining limited objectives in short-term military operations against Southern Korea, including the capture of Seoul.”⁴⁷

The Far East Command (FEC) G-2 was even more off the mark. Less than three months before the North Korean invasion, Willoughby estimated:

It is believed that there would be no civil war in Korea this spring or summer. South Korea is not expected to seriously consider warfare so long as her precipitating war entails probable discontinuance of United States aid. The most probable course of North Korean action this spring and summer is furtherance of attempts to overthrow South Korean government by creation of chaotic conditions in the Republic of Korea through guerrillas and psychological warfare.⁴⁸

In contrast, the ROK army estimate of the KPA OB was far more accurate: 103,500 soldiers in six infantry and one armored divisions; 173 tanks, and 190 airplanes. These figures were rejected by the Americans who also rejected South Korean warnings in May that “an invasion by the North was imminent.”⁴⁹

The North Korean attack started at 4 a.m. on June 25 Korean time, or 3 p.m. on June 24 Eastern Standard Time. It caught everyone by surprise, from the American ambassador and his staff in Seoul to President Truman, who first heard about the attack more than eight hours after it started.⁵⁰ Truman and Acheson, who headed the group that was called together to deal with the crisis, processed the incoming information through a Munich analogy, and in an almost Pavlovian response connecting provocation with defense, decided to act militarily. In this sense, the decision to intervene was a product of the gap between strategic thinking that ranked South Korea at the bottom of the Far East order of priorities before the invasion, and political considerations that ranked it high once the invasion took place. At its root stood three intelligence shortcomings:

- Underestimation of the KPA military capabilities, which caused the administration to limit its assistance to the South Korean army, which facilitated its fast collapse. ↳
- Lack of high-quality early warning about the coming invasion, which prevented more effective South Korean and American military and diplomatic preparations to meet the challenge.
- The failure to realistically assess the nature of the triangular relationship between the USSR, the PRC, and North Korea, which led to the mistaken belief that Stalin rather than Kim Il Sung was the driving force behind the invasion. Hence, an American military intervention was perceived as the adequate means to stop aggression.

c. Explaining the lack of preparedness

The first communist military challenge in the postwar era, the North Korean invasion, found the United States unprepared to meet its role as the status quo defender. One source of this problem was insufficient American experience in that role, which manifested itself in the rapid manner in which the American *weltanschauung* moved from postwar optimism to MacArthyism and “red scare,” and an insufficient body of expertise in world affairs inside the administration. The other source, which derived mainly from postwar optimism, was insufficient military and intelligence resources that were needed to support America’s global posture. This was a result of the fast demobilization and the deep cuts in defense budgets in the aftermath of WWII.

Attempting to bridge the gap between its new status and the lack of resources to support it started with a policy of containment as the national strategy, and the concomitant passing away of the Truman Doctrine and Marshal Plan. The 1947 National Security Act that reorganized the administration gave the president

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more effective tools to meet the new American commitments. NATO's establishment in 1949 in reaction to the "Berlin blockade" created the main instrument to limit Soviet expansion in Europe. And following the Soviet nuclear test and the "fall of China" that amplified the "red scare," Paul Nitze, the director of policy planning in the State Department, and his colleagues, formulated the NSC-68 aimed at putting financial and military teeth into the strategy of containment. It was submitted to President Truman in April 1950, but he did not sign it until September, and then, only under the pressure of the Korean War. This was the political envelope in which the failure to forecast the incoming invasion was sealed.

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i. State level

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The issue at stake

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Relatively speaking, postwar Korea was terra incognita for American Far Eastern policy. Japan had been well-known since the time of Commander Perry's visit there in the mid-nineteenth century. Its conversion under MacArthur into a peaceful democratic state attracted much attention. Americans thought of rural life in China in terms of Pearl Buck's books, primarily the *Good Earth*, which also became a major film; these images of course involved wild distortions but many Americans were unaware of the misrepresentations. Extensive American resources, including more than two billion dollars in aid, were invested in Chiang Kai-shek's struggle to win the civil war in China. The Philippines had been an American colony since 1898, and the independent government that was established there after the Japanese occupation received US aid in its war against the Hukbalahap ("Huks") Rebellion.

In contrast, the Korean Peninsula that was occupied by Japan in 1905 had received very little attention in US policy. The summit meetings of Cairo, Yalta, and Potsdam included only vague references to the future of Korea. Its occupation was left to the Soviets, who committed themselves to enter the war against Japan three months after the end of the war in Europe, primarily because Korea was considered to be a secondary target that did not justify the shedding of American blood. According to some reports, secretary of state Edward Stettinius had asked where Korea was during a meeting in 1945. And following Japan's surrender, the separation of the Korean Peninsula along the 38th parallel into two temporary occupation zones had been improvised within hours by two relatively junior officers on a National Geographic map.⁵¹

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The remote role of Korea in American strategy during the war had undergone no change in the postwar years, when a tight order of priorities had to be built because of scarce military resources and new global commitments. Popular pressures to bring American soldiers home and the need to get the American economy back to peacetime production led to a fast demobilization process in 1945–46 and deep budgetary cuts. The 12-million-soldier army of 1945 had shrunk to 1,566,000 soldiers by June 1947,⁵² and defense expenditures dropped from 37.5 percent of the GDP in 1945 to 3.8 percent ↘ in 1947. On the eve of the Korean War, the US Army forces in the Far East Command were made up of four tactical divisions and one regimental combat team, altogether amounting to fewer than 110,000 soldiers.⁵³

The combination of strained resources, global commitments, and a strategic thinking that assigned no prime role to South Korea predetermined its fate. In May 1947, secretary of war Robert Patterson urged the evacuation of American forces from Korea for reasons of both the tight military budget and the relatively strategic insignificance of the peninsula. In September 1947, the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) favored such an evacuation because "the United States had little strategic interest" in Korea and because in case of a general war, "our present forces in Korea would be a military liability."⁵⁴ In June 1949, when the withdrawal of the American forces from Korea was to be completed, the Army chief of staff, Gen. Omar Bradley, raised doubts about the policy, but the consensus in the JCS reaffirmed it:

From the strategic viewpoint the position of the Joint Chiefs of Staff regarding Korea, summarized briefly, is that Korea is of little strategic value to the United States and that any commitment to United States use of military force in Korea would be ill-advised and impracticable in view of the potentialities of the over-all world situation and of our heavy international obligations as compared with our current military strength.⁵⁵

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Besides Bradley, there were others in the administration who tended to regard the Korean Peninsula as a strategically important asset. The CIA assessed that a Communist takeover of South Korea "would seriously diminish US prestige and adversely affect US security interest in the Far East." In addition to this political, economic and psychological damage, having Soviet bases in South Korea would allow the Soviets to launch "air, airborne, or amphibious attacks on Japan, Formosa and the Ryukyus, or submarine forays against shipping in Japanese waters."⁵⁶ MacArthur himself was not too resolved on this issue. On the one hand, he said in private talks that he did not want to get involved in the "messy" Korean situation and estimated that in case of a serious challenge, the ROK would have to be abandoned. On the other, he told President Rhee during a visit to Seoul in August 1948 that "I would defend Korea as I would my own country, just ↳ as I would California."⁵⁷ But this commitment was no more than a gesture. Most soldiers in the Far East believed that "[t]here are only three things the troops in Japan are afraid of: Gonorrhea, diarrhea and Korea."⁵⁸

The political leadership accepted the position of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. In April 1948, President Truman stated that military action in Korea would not be considered a "casus belli" for the United States.⁵⁹ And secretary of state Dean G. Acheson's famous speech at the National Press Club on January 12, 1950, in which he defined the American "defensive perimeter" in the Pacific as a line running through Japan, the Ryukyus, and the Philippines, left South Korea and Formosa out of a US military guarantee. This may have influenced Stalin to approve the North Korean planned invasion.⁶⁰ The administration's temporary failure to pass a \$60 million Korean aid bill in Congress in January 1950, and public declarations such as the one given by Senator Tom Connally, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, who expressed in May concern about a Soviet occupation of Korea and Formosa, increased the impression that the administration was ready to accept the loss of these allies.⁶¹

In the last months before the invasion, some efforts were made to limit this impression. Prominent among them was a special visit of roving ambassador (and later secretary of state) John Foster Dulles to Korea two weeks before fighting commenced. But altogether, its low ranking in the US strategic calculus between 1945 and 1950 meant that the Korean Peninsula received inadequate attention when it came to intelligence collection and estimation. The result was a poor level of intelligence collection, low quality of intelligence estimation concerning the looming threat and its nature, and lack of attention at the top decision-making level to the possibility that the next threat to United States' global interests would come in the Far East rather than Europe. At least part of this difference in the assessments of relative importance of Europe and Asia may have resulted from elements of racism within American leadership.⁶²

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The intelligence information and its estimate

As had been the case with Pearl Harbor, the source of the failure to provide high-quality warning against the KPA's offensive and its impact was insufficient intelligence information. But in December 1941, this intelligence gap had involved a specific issue: the fact that Pearl Harbor was the target of the Japanese attack. In June 1950, the gap was far wider: insufficient information about the KPA preparations for war and, even more important, no information at all about Kim's invasion intentions and Stalin's and Mao's reluctant acceptance of the move. In this sense, the mistaken American estimation of the North Korean threat was rooted in a wider misconception of the real nature of the Communist threat.

This misconception received a clear expression about two months before the war, in the first draft of NCS-68. In essence, it regarded US nuclear capability as sufficient to deter the USSR until 1954, when the Soviet

nuclear arsenal was likely to reach 200 bombs. By the rationale of Paul Nitze and his colleagues, “the date the Soviets possess an atomic stockpile of 200 bombs would be a critical date for the United States, for the delivery of 100 atomic bombs on targets in the United States would seriously damage this country.”⁶³ This would mean that the United States would not be able to deter the USSR from initiating limited conventional wars; therefore such wars were more likely to occur after 1954.⁶⁴

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This conceptual framework involved the assumption that the USSR under Stalin totally controlled the actions of its satellites and, hence, a communist military challenge to the West would be initiated only by the Soviet Union.⁶⁵ Consequently, as Gen. Matthew B. Ridgway had put it, “By 1949, we were completely committed to the theory that the next war involving the United States would be a global war. The concept of ‘limited warfare’ never entered our councils.”⁶⁶ This frame of mind explains specific intelligence mistakes, primarily the underestimation of the KPA’s capabilities; insufficient intelligence collection about a possible

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invasion because of its low ranking in the priority intelligence requirements; and dismissal ↴ of the available alarming information when it slowly came in, because “limited war” was not seen as a Soviet option, and therefore, the possibility of any other instigator of limited war was not considered.

This combination of American judgmental errors played a similar role to that of Stalin’s misperception of Hitler’s intentions prior to Barbarossa. The variance between the two cases involved three elements. First, in the Soviet case, the mistake was Stalin’s personally, while in the Korean case it involved all organizations and individuals who participated in the US intelligence and policymaking processes. Second, whereas on the eve of Barbarossa, the NKGB and RU had provided excellent information about the looming threat, on the eve of the Korean War, the US intelligence bodies almost completely failed in this task. Third, while the Soviets estimated quite correctly that the Red Army was not ready in 1941 for a war against the Wehrmacht, the Americans overestimated the military capabilities of the ROK and underestimated the force of the KPA. The result was that “there was the general feeling that if attacked from North Korea the ROK army would have no trouble in repelling the invaders.”⁶⁷

Each of these failures had specific causes. The belief that the Communist block was highly monolithic relied on solid evidence concerning Stalin’s iron rule at home and in Eastern Europe (with the exception of Tito’s Yugoslavia). It paid less attention to the fact that Soviet control over its allies’ actions in the Far East was lighter, although the CIA had noted the existence of sources of tension in the USSR-PRC relationship.⁶⁸ Obviously, the fact that the American intelligence community had no high-quality source in the upper echelons of the administration in either the Soviet Union or the PRC and the fact that it lacked sufficiently experienced analysts for both states (not to mention North Korea) hampered its ability to correctly understand the context in which the decision to invade was made.

The mistaken estimation of the balance of forces between the North and South Korean armies was the product of insufficient information from independent American sources about the buildup of the KPA. At the same time, American analysts believed that the South Korean reports on the KPA exaggerated its capabilities in order to convince the USA to provide the ROK with tanks, artillery and aircraft, which Washington refused to deliver for fear that it would encourage Rhee to attack the North. When it came to estimating the military capabilities of the South Korean army, which was trained by the Americans, there was a natural tendency to overestimate its capabilities. Gen. William L. Roberts, in charge of the KMAG and the ↴ training of the ROK Army, gave a typical example in an interview to *Time* magazine three weeks before the war, when he defined the South Korean army as the “best doggone shooting Army outside the United States.”⁶⁹ There were other, more sober estimates of the quality of this army but they were less heard.⁷⁰

Finally, the failure to provide any warning prior the invasion can be attributed to a number of factors. Fundamentally, it was the mindset in the administration that ruled out the possibility of a limited war, whether in Europe or Asia. The information about KPA deployment for war was scarce, and since it mostly

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came from South Korean sources it did not receive sufficient American attention. Such reports came, moreover, against the background of an ongoing low-intensity conflict along the 38th parallel and, in many cases, were analyzed in the context of this conflict rather than a general war. And, most important, repeated warnings, in 1949 and in April and May 1950, about an incoming invasion that did not materialize created a “cry-wolf” syndrome that eroded the value any future warning.⁷¹ This defect influenced not only the Americans but also the South Koreans. Thus, on May 10, the ROK minister of defense warned that according to intelligence reports, the invasion was imminent. Two days later he told reporters: “Threats of invasion make us nervous but we are getting used to it. We don’t get hysterical or panicky any more.”⁷²

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ii. Decision-making

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Since no specific intelligence warning was provided prior to the North Korean invasion, it was also not preceded by any significant discussion at the decision-making level. In this sense, the American failure of June 1950 constitutes a unique case. Prior to Barbarossa, Pearl Harbor, the Yom Kippur War and other cases in this category of events, there was sufficient intelligence about an upcoming attack available to at least trigger a discussion of the validity of the threat and how best to meet it. In June 1950, the hostile act was so unexpected that it only managed to provoke such a discussion after it started. ↴

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On a flight from his home in Missouri to Washington, President Truman described his gut reaction to the news:

This was not the first occasion when the strong had attacked the weak. I recalled some earlier instances: Manchuria, Ethiopia, Austria. I remembered how each time that the democracies failed to act it had encouraged the aggressors to keep going ahead. Communism was acting in Korea just as Hitler, Mussolini, and the Japanese had acted ten, fifteen, and twenty years earlier. I felt certain that if South Korea was allowed to fall, Communist leaders would be emboldened to over-ride nations closer to our own shores. If the Communists were permitted to force their way into the Republic of Korea without opposition from the free world, no small nation would have the courage to resist threats and aggression by stronger Communist neighbors.⁷³

Truman’s advisers shared a similar mood. Upon arriving in Washington, Truman told secretary of defense Louis Johnson that he was going to “hit them hard.” Johnson thanked him “in a voice broken with emotion.”⁷⁴ Acheson noted in his memoirs that by this stage, he believed that the attack had been instigated by the USSR “and that it would not be stopped by anything short of force.”⁷⁵ Indeed, the discussions in the Blair House, which started immediately on Truman’s return, reflected a high level of “intra-group solidarity” and “the finest spirit of harmony.”⁷⁶ The decision to intervene in the war was taken shortly afterward without any objection.

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As a result, Janis regarded this decision-making process as a typical case of groupthink. It is important to note, however, that the discussions also lacked professional preparedness and coordination,⁷⁷ certainly the product of the complete surprise. Moreover, experts such as Kennan and the CIA Soviet analysts, who regarded the Kremlin’s policy as more cautious, did not participate in the discussions.⁷⁸ It is very possible that within this atmosphere of “they shall not pass” that dominated the discussions, their participation would have made no difference. But the atmosphere itself reflected the frustration of being caught unprepared by what seemed to be a clear case of Soviet aggression. ↴

A timely warning about the North Korean attack could have allowed President Truman to resort to public deterrence. Without it, the US intervention in the war was almost inevitable.

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iii. The personal level

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Like in the case of Pearl Harbor, in which the blame for the mistaken assessment of the Japanese target was shared by everyone, there was no major individual culprit in the initial Korean failure. Hence, and in contrast to Barbarossa and Yom Kippur, the source of the failure is to be found at the other levels.

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d. Summary

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The complete American surprise at the North Korean invasion was the product of two factors. One was the low level of political, military, and intelligence attention that was given to the events in the Korean Peninsula once it was decided that South Korea had no real value for American strategy in the Far East. The other, which derived from the first, was the low level of intelligence collection and analysis concerning North Korea and the Communist bloc. The combination of these two, and the lack of expertise on Korean affairs in the administration, yielded this initial failure.

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Case Study II: Failure II: The Chinese Intervention of Fall 1950

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The North Korean offensive, which started in the early hours of June 25, was highly successful. Within less than three days, the KPA occupied Seoul and by June 30 most of the ROK army was lost. Under these circumstances, the goal of US-UN intervention in the war was defined by Acheson as “solely for the purpose of restoring the Republic of Korea to its status prior to the invasion of the north.”⁷⁹ The intervention by US Eighth Army prevented the complete occupation of South Korea and stabilized the Pusan Perimeter, which made up about 10 percent of the ROK territory.

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Operation Chromite, the landing at Inchon on September 15, turned the course of the war. Although many experts doubted its feasibility, MacArthur’s amphibious landing that combined the principles of surprise and indirect approach was a major operational success. Within two weeks, most of the KPA forces in South Korea disintegrated. X Corps, which landed in Inchon, joined forces with the Eighth Army that broke out of Pusan, and Seoul was recaptured. The main question became whether to exploit this success and cross the 38th parallel in order to unify the Korean Peninsula under a pro-American rule or to avoid making such a move for fear of Chinese or Soviet intervention in the war.

The presidential decision-making process that led to the decision to expand the war to North Korea has been the subject of numerous studies that offer many strategic, domestic political, and psychological explanations for this ill-considered decision. The most critical factor in making the decision was the estimate of policymakers and intelligence experts of the likelihood of Soviet or Chinese military response, as was evident in the September 27 presidential directive. It allowed MacArthur to escalate the ground warfare into North Korea, “providing that at the time of such operation there was no entry into North Korea by major Soviet or Chinese Communist forces, no announcements of intended entry, nor a threat to counter our operations militarily.”⁸⁰

Although MacArthur later received wider room for maneuverability, the risk of a major confrontation with the Chinese army remained the dominant consideration in the US strategy. One indication of Beijing’s intentions was a series of public and diplomatic warnings, which started during the last week of September and threatened intervention if UN forces crossed the 38 parallel. Another indication was accumulating intelligence information about the buildup of PLA forces in Manchuria. Although the massive PLA crossing (about 280,000 soldiers) of the Yalu was missed by the American intelligence community, divisional attacks by the CPVF (Chinese People’s Volunteers Force) that started on October 25 and lasted until November 8 constituted undeniable proof of a large-scale Chinese intervention in the war. Nevertheless, MacArthur’s G-

2, Gen. Willoughby, continued until the very last moment to estimate that an all-out Chinese offensive was unlikely. Consequently, Washington gave the “green light,” and toward the end of November, MacArthur’s UN forces resumed advancing northward into a huge Chinese ambush. The result was a successful CPVF counteroffensive that drove the UN forces south of the 38th parallel and caused the United States one of the worst defeats in its military history.

As the discussion below will show, the failure to correctly estimate the magnitude of the Chinese threat in November 1950 had a number of sources. Essentially, however, it was the product of a lack of proper learning from past estimation failures in the war.

a. The Chinese road to war

The Chinese intervention in the war was the product of a rational decision-making process, which reflected a cautious calculus of military and political considerations. Militarily, the Chinese were well aware of their weaknesses. When making his decision to intervene by the CPVF, Mao wrote to Stalin that the American forces in Korea had over 1,500 guns of 70mm to 240 mm caliber, whereas the CPVF would have only 36 such guns. The American forces, moreover, had a complete control of the air, while the Chinese had just started training their air-force pilots.⁸¹ The Soviet reluctance to provide the Chinese ground forces with air support almost led Mao to avoid intervention and brought a number of Chinese leaders—including Lin Biao, the foremost field army commander of the Chinese civil war and the natural candidate to head the CPVF—to object to this move.⁸²

Politically, as Whiting’s classic study suggested, the decision to intervene was mainly motivated by the desire to prevent the presence of a strong and determined enemy on China’s doorstep.⁸³ The Chinese leadership regarded a pro-Western unified Korea as the least desired and most dangerous outcome of the war.⁸⁴ Mao also considered preserving North Korea as a Socialist state an important factor.⁸⁵ The UN forces’ fast advancement into North Korea was perceived as a direct threat to China itself. Marshal Peng Dehuai, who headed the CPVF and who had participated in the October 2 meeting when Mao made the decision to intervene, gave this fear a vivid expression: “The tiger always wants people, and the time when it wants to eat depends on its appetite. Since America came to invade us, we had to resist its invasion.”⁸⁶

Paradoxically, the Chinese preparations for a military intervention were triggered by the North Korean military success during the war’s first stage. Being aware of the vulnerability of the KPA because of its long supply lines, on August 5, the Central Military Commission under Mao ordered the PLA to complete war preparations before September 30. During the third week of August, high-ranking officers of the Chinese Operation Office and senior Foreign Ministry officials conducted a series of discussions and concluded that the American amphibious landing and counteroffensive was to be launched soon. Of six potential ports suitable for such a landing, Inchon was the most likely one. This estimate was delivered to the Chinese leaders on August 23,⁸⁷ precisely the same day that MacArthur made his final decision to land at Inchon. A senior American civilian official in Japan noted in his memoirs that the fact that Inchon was the site of the planned landing “became almost an open secret in Tokyo.”⁸⁸ It is possible, then, that besides brilliant strategic thinking, the Chinese also had relevant intelligence information.

Mao warned Kim Il Sung about the incoming American Inchon landing, but the KPA avoided taking the necessary measures to meet this threat and continued focusing on the occupation of the Pusan perimeter.⁸⁹ The decision to cross the Yalu and meet the UN forces in North Korea, which from the Chinese perspective constituted a preemptive strike, was taken during the first week of October, and the order to “enter Korea immediately” was given on October 8.⁹⁰ The crossing of the 260,000-strong force started on the night of October 18–19 and a first, unexpected, clash between a CPVF division and the Seventh Regiment of the Sixth ROK Division took place three days later. According to Chinese sources, during this first campaign the CPVF

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eliminated about half a dozen ROK battalions as well as some small American forces. Due to insufficient fire power, the CPVF failed in reaching its original mission—annihilation of three enemy divisions.⁹¹

Following the first campaign, the Chinese generals began preparations for a larger one. In addition to resupplying and enforcing the CPVF, the Chinese generals implemented a deception plan, creating the impression that their forces were weak and were retreating in an unorderly manner to the Yalu. The goal was to lure MacArthur's forces to the north, extending their supply lines. The CPVF also released a hundred POWs, including some Americans, who were told that owing to supply problems, the Chinese forces had to return to China.⁹² MacArthur fell into the trap, and on November 25, a day after he had started his main offensive to end the war by Christmas, the CPVF launched a counteroffensive, causing the American army its worst defeat since the 1944 Battle of the Bulge. At its root was a major intelligence fiasco.

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b. The American surprise

Headline

i. The intelligence information and its estimate

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The poor state of American intelligence prior to the war did not change much after the war had started. This owed not only to the lack of adequate linguists and equipment but also rigid regulations, bureaucratic rivalry, and leadership deficiencies.⁹³ The result during the war's first months was a low level of combat intelligence.

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Humint, which was of low quality prior to the invasion, was almost entirely wrecked when the KPA moved south, capturing, killing, or neutralizing whatever networks had been active before the war. Although according to one official history, Willoughby requested the CIA to bridge the intelligence gap at the outset of the war,⁹⁴ other sources emphasized his attempts to get rid of the CIA and take complete control.⁹⁵ In any event, CIA and G-2 attempts to infiltrate agents into the occupied territories by line-crossing, parachuting, or boat landing failed. Most of the agents were lost and the information that was brought by the others was old and useless. Consequently, combat information from Humint sources came mainly from interrogations of refugees and of a few KPA POWs.⁹⁶ Aerial reconnaissance was mainly used to support air bombings in North Korea and provided no significant support for the UN ground warfare.⁹⁷

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Although AFSA moved to full shifts, Sigint provided only minor support to the fighting forces. During the war's first weeks, much attention was devoted to the Soviets. Only when it became evident that the USSR had made no preparations to intervene were twelve intercept positions transferred from Chinese and Soviet coverage to Korean duties.⁹⁸ Here, COMMINT suffered from a shortage of high-quality monitoring equipment and skilled manpower. The entire US military had only 20 Korean-speaking linguists, and non-Americans linguists, primarily former Japanese intelligence officers, who had served in Korea, had to be used.⁹⁹ Willoughby, moreover, regarded his only duty to be providing intelligence to MacArthur.

Consequently, he prevented, despite requests from Washington, the transfer of Sigint units to the Pusan perimeter. He also avoided distributing, allegedly for security considerations, operational intelligence to the Eighth Army, which was defending the Pusan parameter, thus denying its commander, Gen. Walton Walker, the information he needed to carry out his missions. The only Sigint support that the Eighth Army received was from an improvised South Korean unit called Group M. Despite its being plagued by many deficiencies in training, expertise, and equipment, a sharp decline in KPA's radio security enabled Group M's cryptologists since the end of July to solve the KPA's codes and cyphers within 24 hours after their weekly change. This locally improvised intelligence was used extensively by Walker and played a role in preventing the fall of the Pusan parameter.¹⁰⁰

The efforts to monitor China, primarily its preparations for a massive intervention in the war, went somewhat better, and the source of the failure here lay within the sphere of analysis. Although the CIA had

lost all its assets in mainland China following the Communist victory there, it succeeded in receiving some relevant information through other sources. On October 19, the same day the PLA started crossing the Yalu, a Hong Kong-based Chinese businessman warned that 400,000 PLA troops had started or were about to start crossing into North Korea.¹⁰¹ CIA officers in Tokyo warned twice of a 300,000-strong PLA force deployed near the Yalu.¹⁰² These warnings had no impact on intelligence estimates. MacArthur himself rejected them, and threatened to arrest a CIA officer stationed in Tokyo for warning about a coming Chinese intervention.¹⁰³

Aerial reconnaissance occasionally yielded some useful information. In early September, one warning indicator concerning possible Chinese intervention involved aerial photographs that showed three air-force bases, capable of handling a total of 300 aircraft, had been built in close proximity to the Yalu.¹⁰⁴ On October 18, aerial photographs showed that close to a hundred Soviet-made aircraft had been deployed in those fields.¹⁰⁵ The obvious conclusion should have been that the Chinese were building air support for a potential large-scale confrontation with the UN forces.

Sigint coverage of the Chinese preparations for war suffered from a number of problems. The Chinese military hardly used radio equipment. On average, a CPV division had about 5 percent of the communication devices \downarrow of a US division.¹⁰⁶ The PRC was also ranked relatively low in AFSA's order of priorities, although it climbed to the top when UN forces crossed the 38 parallel and advanced northward. Sigint collection efforts also suffered from a lack of Chinese linguists, primarily in the Mandarin dialect that was used by the PLA. The Allies' contribution was also limited. The British Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ) operated a listening post in Hong Kong, but it covered southern China, not Manchuria. The Taiwanese Sigint, which provided relevant information, was rejected for being "biased or self-serving."¹⁰⁷

Although one of the best experts on the subject regarded the Sigint contribution as "extremely poor,"¹⁰⁸ the NSA account claimed that the lack of warning about the intervention "was a failure to utilize already available intelligence."¹⁰⁹ Indeed, AFSA's monitoring, mainly of personal and administrative traffic, provided reasonable indications of the preparations to intervene. In May and June, it reported that 70,000 PLA troops, from two army groups, had moved down the Yangtze River.¹¹⁰ On July 17, it provided information that the Fourth Field Army, considered the PLA's best combat force, had deployed units in Manchuria and in east China. Based on this information, the Army G-2 assessed that the PRC intended to attack Taiwan, whereas G-2 in Tokyo concluded that the Fourth Army had "returned to its normal operating area in North China." The Watch Committee did a far better job on July 17, when estimating that "concentration of Chinese Communist troops in Manchuria might be intended for use in Korea."¹¹¹ In early September, AFSA located the deployment of six PLA armies in Manchuria, and in the weeks that followed, it reported their move closer to the border, as well as the transfer by railroad of artillery units and of Chinese aircraft to newly established air bases in Manchuria. On the basis of this information, the Watch Committee \downarrow concluded on September 22 that the PLA could cross the Yalu "with little advance notice."¹¹²

Other indications that were collected by AFSA included the reservation of ferries for military use in the Yalu, the ordering of 30,000 maps of Korea, shipments of medical supplies to the border area, and North Korean traffic mentioning a "regiment that came from China."¹¹³ Nevertheless, neither Sigint monitoring nor other means of collection provided indications for the actual crossing of the Yalu, which started on October 18 and took place at night under strict radio silence.¹¹⁴

MacArthur's G-2 reports usually correctly reflected the available information. On July 3, Willoughby estimated that China "stationed two cavalry divisions and four armies in Manchuria." Since a Chinese Army amounted to about 30,000 soldiers, their total number reached at least 150,000. In late August, he estimated that 246,000 soldiers had been deployed there, and after the Inchon landing he "speculated that 450,000 Chinese troops were massed in Manchuria."¹¹⁵ On October 5, two weeks before the actual crossing had started, MacArthur's G-2 who relied on Taiwanese sources raised the possibility that nine Chinese divisions

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had already deployed in Korea.¹¹⁶ At the same time, and in contrast to the CIA, Willoughby did not report on the buildup of air fields near the border, although this indicated preparations for a confrontation with UN forces.¹¹⁷ When US reconnaissance flights revealed on October 18 that close to a hundred Soviet-made aircraft had been deployed in these airfields, MacArthur's air commander, Gen. Stratemeyer, estimated it to be a means to back up the Chinese intervention threats but, like Willoughby, regarded it as a bluff.¹¹⁸

Chinese public and diplomatic intervention threats constituted a major source of concern, primarily in Washington, which was otherwise completely dependent on intelligence from the Far East Command. On September 26, a day after China's foreign minister Zhou Enlai warned that China would respond if the UN forces crossed the 38th parallel, the Chinese Foreign Office issued another public statement: "The American warmongers are mistaken in thinking that their accusations and threats would intimidate the people of

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China."¹¹⁹ The same day, the acting PLA ↳ Chief of Staff, Gen. Nieh Jung-chen, delivered a warning during a dinner with the Indian ambassador, K. M. Panikkar. He made it clear that China would not "sit back with folded hands and would let the Americans come to the [Chinese-Korean] border." Nieh said that China might pay dearly in such a war but added: "Without sacrifice a nation's independence cannot be held."¹²⁰ On September 30, a day before ROK units crossed the 38th parallel and two days before Mao made the final decision to intervene, foreign minister Zhou Enlai told the Central People's Government Council that the Chinese people would not be "afraid to oppose aggressive war" and "would not tolerate their neighbor being savagely invaded by the imperialists."¹²¹ And following Mao's decision to intervene, Zhou summoned Panikkar to a dramatic ten minute talk at 12:20 a.m. and warned, "If the Americans crossed the 38th parallel China would be forced to intervene in Korea." He thus made an American crossing a "fully defined casus belli." In response to a question by Panikkar, Zhou made it clear that ROK's crossing "did not matter."¹²²

Neither the warning indications about the PLA buildup in Manchuria nor the Chinese public and diplomatic warnings changed the American estimate that an intervention was unlikely. In an October 12 memorandum to President Truman, the CIA did not rule out "full-scale Chinese Communist intervention" but estimated that "barring a Soviet decision for global war, such action is not probable in 1950." The Kremlin, according to the CIA, had no interest in such a confrontation.¹²³ President Truman and Secretary Acheson saw no reason to change their previous assessment. Acheson assessed that the military and political risks involved in intervention were too high and the strategic gains too low.¹²⁴

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Basing his estimate on military factors, Willoughby said, in late September, "If the Chinese were going to intervene they would have done so when we made the Inchon landing."¹²⁵ On the eve of MacArthur's conference with President Truman on Wake Island, Willoughby estimated that the Chinese intervention warnings were "probably in a category of ↳ diplomatic blackmail."¹²⁶ MacArthur echoed this estimate, telling President Truman during their October 15 meeting that the likelihood of Chinese intervention was "[v]ery little. Had they intervened in the first or second months it would have been decisive."¹²⁷

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ii. The decision-making process: Washington, Tokyo, Korea

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Most studies of the surprise Chinese attack in late November have focused on the failure, primarily in Washington, to realistically judge Beijing's public and diplomatic intervention threats. This mistaken estimate contributed to the American surprise, but its main source was the adherence of MacArthur and his G-2 to the belief that China would avoid massive intervention, despite undisputable evidence to the contrary. This misconception was the foundation of MacArthur's decision to advance to the Yalu, of Washington's political and military approval of this move, and of the operational risks taken by the UN forces in order to complete their mission as early as possible, which furthermore exposed them to the CPVF counteroffensive.

The clearest evidence for the PRC's intentions and capabilities was the PVF's First Campaign, which lasted two weeks. On October 25, the CPVF, which by this stage amounted to more than 260,000 soldiers, initiated

~~china~~ a large-scale offensive, mainly against the four ROK divisions that were deployed with the Eighth US Army on the western peninsula and the X Corps on the eastern coast. The ROK First Division fell into a giant ambush by the CPVF 39th Army. Its commander, Gen. Paik, who was considered the best ROK commander, immediately realized that the skilled soldiers his division met were Chinese. Shortly afterward, he personally interrogated the first Chinese POW and heard from him that 20,000 Chinese soldiers were deployed nearby. The information was immediately reported through the Eighth Army's G-2 to Gen. Willoughby in Tokyo.¹²⁸ During the next four days, the ROK Second Corps, made up of three divisions, suffered thousands of losses and was driven back in disarray.

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Simultaneously, Gen. Almond's X Corps advancement was blocked by a strong Chinese force. A Chinese POW who identified himself as a soldier of the 5th PLA Regiment of the Chinese 8th Army said that another 4,000 to 5,000 troops were nearby.¹²⁹ Additional POWs said in interrogations that they belonged to the 124th Division. Almond, who personally interviewed them, reported to MacArthur that PLA units were deployed in northeast Korea.¹³⁰

At the end of October, "the frontline commanders did not doubt that the Eighth Army and the X Corps had encountered powerful, organized elements of CCF [Chinese Communist Forces] armies across a wide spectrum of extreme North Korea."¹³¹ By November 1, as an American official history of the war concluded, "the CCF had driven back the ROK II Corps, crippling it disastrously, and was south of Chongchon on the open right flank of Eight[th] Army. And disaster was also threatening in the center of the Eight[th] Army front of Unsan."¹³² It came a day later, as another official account described it: "The climax of this early Chinese intervention came on the night of 1–2 November when the 8th Cavalry Regiment, 1st Cavalry Division, was attacked by a full Chinese division in positions near Unsan and very roughly handled."¹³³ Practically, the regiment lost more than half its men.¹³⁴ It was the first major clash between American and Chinese forces and the first American defeat since the landing in Inchon. The outcome sent shock waves through the Eighth Army. Walker's G-2 concluded that the Eighth Army now faced two PLA armies with "improved tactical capabilities" displaying "an unusual capability to fight at night."¹³⁵ The X Corps' G-2 reached a similar conclusion: following a number of limited battles with the CPVF and after interrogating at least 30 POWs, he reported, on October 29, "Integral PLA have been committed against UN Forces."¹³⁶ On November 2, US Marine forces destroyed the PLA's 124th Division in a fierce battle that was supported by tanks. The destroyed division was immediately replaced by another one—a clear indication of the magnitude of the CPVF.¹³⁷

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Altogether, the Chinese First Campaign (October 25–November 8) took a high toll on UN forces. In October, the American losses were 40 per day. They rose to 326 per day in the first week of November.¹³⁸ By Chinese accounts, 12,325 South Koreans, 3,518 Americans, and 147 other nationalities were killed, wounded, or captured during the campaign. The CPVF sustained 10,700 casualties including MIAs.¹³⁹

Willoughby's reaction to the reports about the Chinese intervention was mainly denial. Shortly after X Corps soldiers caught the first Chinese soldiers, Almond told Willoughby about it and asked him to come and see them with his own eyes. Willoughby refused, saying that they were only a "token force."¹⁴⁰ Close to four weeks later, he did come, saw a number of the POWs, but insisted that they were North Koreans and not Chinese.¹⁴¹ In between, he passed on to Washington the information about captured PLA soldiers, accepting that organized Chinese units were in Korea, but denying what that meant:

From a tactical standpoint, with victorious United States divisions in full deployment, it would appear that the auspicious time for intervention has long since passed; it is difficult to believe that such a move, if planned, would have been postponed to a time when remnant North Korean forces have been reduced to a low point of effectiveness.¹⁴²

In the following days, Willoughby's reports labeled the Chinese forces in Korea "volunteers." Even more importantly, the numbers of soldiers he reported did not reflect the magnitude of the threat. On November 2, he reported that 16,500 Chinese soldiers were in Korea and a day later (11/3) that their number had risen to 34,000, while an additional 415,000 were deployed in Manchuria.¹⁴³ On November 11, he estimated that 76,800 Chinese troops were in Korea.¹⁴⁴

The figures provided by Willoughby, which were based on the information from the interrogated Chinese POWs, systematically decreased the size of the opposing force. This was accomplished by a selective use of the available data. On October 29, for example, many reports based on POW interrogations indicated that a massive PLA crossing of the Yalu had taken place. Nevertheless, Willoughby's assessment cited only one report and estimated that "only token forces from the Fortieth Army Headquarters and from each of its divisions entered Korea on 20 October."¹⁴⁵ Later, while admitting that elements of four Chinese armies were in Korea, he counted the specific units of the captured soldiers but not their parent units. Thus, when visiting the X Corps in November he estimated that "probably only a battalion of volunteers of each division identified was actually in Korea."¹⁴⁶ Justin Haynes rightly concluded: "Due to this method of analysis Willoughby accounted for only one third of Chinese Communist troops inside North Korea at that time."¹⁴⁷ In fact, on the eve of the Second CPVF Campaign, Willoughby accounted for less than a fifth of the Chinese power.¹⁴⁸

In order to prevent challenges to his estimates Willoughby, strove to monopolize the estimates of the CPVF OB. Upon learning that CIA officers were participating in the interrogations of the Chinese POWs and reporting their findings to Washington, he began denying them access to the captured CPVF soldiers.¹⁴⁹ He also threatened to close down a CIA shop in Tokyo after learning that it had reported, based on information from Taiwanese intelligence, that the Chinese army had crossed the Yalu.¹⁵⁰ As a result, the CIA estimates of the Chinese threat had to rely on Willoughby's reports. The same was true with the Joint Chiefs of Staff: 90 percent of their intelligence was based on Willoughby's reports.¹⁵¹ Consequently, the Far East Command evaluation of Chinese intervention capabilities and intentions "seem to have been the determining factor in shaping the future course of U.N. military action" in the war.¹⁵²

Following the end of the first Chinese campaign, the JCS considered three possible courses of action: hold the present line; resume the advancement to the Yalu; or withdraw to a better line of defense. In light of the lack of clarity about the extent of Chinese threat, the JCS preferred the first option. Attempting to occupy the rest of North Korea was considered too risky and withdrawal was deemed morally and politically problematic.¹⁵³ Nonetheless, under pressure from MacArthur and the JCS concern about an emerging State Department plan to create a buffer zone along the Yalu, the JCS gave the general reluctant approval to resume the offensive. Willoughby's underestimation of the Chinese force in Korea, as well as his assessment that the weakened CPVF was withdrawing northward, which was based on a Chinese deception to lure MacArthur to resume his offensive, significantly influenced this decision. Obviously, the prize of ending the war by Christmas outweighed a more cautious policy.¹⁵⁴

On the eve of the "home-by-Christmas offensive," the Eighth Army held 96 POWs, who testified that six Chinese armies (18 divisions) were in Korea. A day later, when the Eighth Army started its advancement, FEC G-2 provided its estimation of the enemy forces—82,799 North Korean and from 40,000 to 70,935 Chinese soldiers. Willoughby also assessed that the Chinese forces lacked ammunition reserves and stated, "Constant United Nations pressure along the entire line during the past few weeks should make it perfectly clear to the Reds that this drain on fire power is certainly not apt to be decreased but increased."¹⁵⁵ This optimism proved to be completely wrong. The Chinese were aware that the Americans underestimated their capabilities and intentions and planned to use this to achieve another surprise. By this stage, they had accumulated 380,000 soldiers in Korea (309,065 more than Willoughby's precise estimate indicated) and prepared for a counterattack.¹⁵⁶

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The systematic underestimation of the magnitude of the Chinese forces in Korea had a dramatic impact on the way the war developed. At the strategic level, the failure to realize that Beijing had already committed significant forces to Korea led to the mistaken conclusion that the relatively small number of Chinese forces in Korea was merely a means to save face after the public intervention threats. Hence, giving MacArthur the green light to renew the offensive was not seen as too risky. As the Army Chief of Staff, Gen. J. Lawton Collins, concluded, an American offensive "might well provide an out for the Chinese Communists to withdraw into Manchuria without loss of face."¹⁵⁷ At the operational level, Willoughby's assessment that most of the Chinese army had not crossed the Yalu but remained in Manchuria made the option of reaching the Yalu more feasible and less perilous. The commanders of both the Eighth Army and the X Corps estimated that the enemy forces they were to confront "would fight only a delaying defensive action."¹⁵⁸ This had a devastating effect on force deployment when the UN offensive was launched. In the case of the X Corps, for example, it "led to an ill-advised thinning out of American forces" when they started their offensive on November 27.¹⁵⁹ And at the tactical level, Willoughby's gross underestimation of the magnitude of the Chinese threat left the forces at the front completely unaware of the enemy who confronted them, and completely unprepared when the full blow fell on them.

On November 25, a day after the beginning of MacArthur's offensive into what Halberstam defined as "the largest ambush in the era of modern warfare,"¹⁶⁰ the Chinese counteroffensive was launched. It lasted until December 24 and delivered the United States one of the greatest defeats in its history. Under difficult weather conditions, and against a highly capable enemy, the surprised Eighth Army and X Corps had to withdraw to south of the 38th parallel. According to Chinese accounts, by the end of the Second Campaign, the UN losses amounted to 36,000 casualties and POWs, of which 24,000 were Americans. The CPV losses were 30,700.¹⁶¹ The war turned into a Chinese-US confrontation, and instead of ending in 1950, it lasted for another two-and-a-half years and took the lives of many more.

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c. Explaining the intelligence failure

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A gross intelligence failure following an earlier one is the exception rather than the rule, as demonstrated by the other two dyads in this study. Our hypothesis has been that a second failure in a row will not result from insufficient information about the looming threat but, at least partially, emerge as the product of ineffective learning process after the first fiasco on the part of critical decision-makers. The American failure of November 1950 supports this hypothesis.

Broadly speaking, the fundamental sin of the American estimation process, especially in the FEC, was that of hubris. MacArthur's successful landing in Inchon and the fast collapse of the KPA eroded the impact of the more painful events of the war's first months. This success, moreover, increased the American belief in its military superiority against any Asian opponent, and nurtured the cult of MacArthur's omnipotent leadership.

The lack of an effective learning process was manifested in other forms as well. A major cause for the failure to provide a timely warning in June 1950 was the mistaken perception of the Communist bloc as a monolithic one. By this logic, a local North Korean military initiative was unlikely as long as the USSR was not ready for a global conflict. Five months later, the belief in a monolithic Communist world remained. For example, in the terminology of the FEC G-2 priority requirements, China was not defined as an independent entity but as "Soviet satellite China."¹⁶² As in the past, this belief was supported by military considerations, primarily the assumption that the PLA's inferiority in firepower and air power made an all-out Chinese intervention unlikely "without material assistance by Soviet naval and air-power." Since such a move by the Soviets would mean World War III,¹⁶³ the probability of a massive Chinese intervention was low. The fact that a rather similar conception had proved wrong five months earlier had little impact on this estimate.

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A large percentage of the studies of the American intelligence failure in November 1950 focus on the processes in Washington that led to authorizing MacArthur to cross the 38th parallel. Richard Neustadt emphasized that the unification of Korea had become the prime war goal despite being ranked very low on President Truman's order of priorities.¹⁶⁴ Irving Janis, who regarded the crossing into North Korea as "the ↳ Truman administration's Bay of Pigs," convincingly used his groupthink hypothesis to explain how sober and experienced policymakers "could succumb to the 'intoxication of success,' indulge in 'wishful thinking,' and collectively take enormous risks in a state of 'euphoria and optimism.'"¹⁶⁵ Others emphasized the dominance of MacArthur's wishful estimation, which reflected Willoughby's underestimation of the Chinese threat.¹⁶⁶ Another explanation involved the influence of the hawkish group, primarily John Allison, Dean Rusk, and John Foster Dulles (a.k.a., the "Acheson group") in the State Department's discussions and the insufficient impact of Soviet and Chinese affairs' experts, such as George Kennan, "Chip" Bohlen, and George Butler. The military urge, particularly after the humiliating retreat in the first stage of the war, to exploit success and advance into North Korea proved irresistible, and public opinion supporting escalation and the atmosphere of McCarthyism in the country at the time contributed to this outcome as well.¹⁶⁷ Some explanations focus less on the atmosphere in which the decision was made and more on the role of the mistaken perception of the Communist world as monolithic, or on the American tendency toward mirror-imaging when asserting the Chinese war intentions.¹⁶⁸

This study does not focus on the decision-making processes in the JCS, the State Department, or the White House, but on the more significant failure, the one attributed mainly to FEC G-2, to warn of an incoming massive Chinese counteroffensive prior to MacArthur's "home by Christmas offensive." This failure is, indeed, striking in light of Beijing's public and diplomatic warnings, repeated reports from POWs that the PLA had crossed the Yalu, and the military confrontations of October 25 through November 8, which proved that a massive Chinese intervention had already taken place without any earlier intelligence warning. It was this unrealistic and overly optimistic estimate that convinced Washington's policymakers to approve MacArthur's renewed offensive to the Yalu. And it was this estimate, which proved to be a major mistake, which facilitated the strategic military fiasco and the loss of so many additional American lives.

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In contrast to the situation prior to the beginning of the war, when the Korean Peninsula ranked low in American intelligence priorities, the issue of Chinese intervention was considered critical and was ranked accordingly. Section 2 in the presidential directive of September 27 allowed MacArthur to cross the 38th parallel provided that by this entry there was "no entry into North Korea by major Soviet or Chinese Communist forces, no announcements of intended entry, nor a threat to counter our operations militarily." Although a latter directive expanded his room for maneuverability, the closer his forces advanced to the Yalu, the more critical the Chinese reaction became.

The importance of the Chinese factor was manifested in the FEC G-2 intelligence requirements priority list. On October 5, when the UN forces started crossing the 38th parallel, the possibility that the Chinese would send reinforcements to the KPA forces ranked the highest.¹⁶⁹ Although it dropped to the second and the third ranks in the week that followed, President Truman's concern about Chinese intervention during his meeting with MacArthur brought the issue back to the top in the aftermath of the Wake Island conference. "Strangely enough" as Appleman put it, the Chinese factor dropped to second place on October 25, the day the CPVF launched its First Campaign.¹⁷⁰

The CPVF campaign constituted a clear answer to the question of whether China intended to intervene independently or not. But the command G-2's miscalculation of the CPVF OB led the JCS and the White

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House to misperceive the motivation behind it. The Chinese factor continued to loom large in November and hindered the political and military approval for the UN advance to the Yalu. When the approval was given, it was not because of disregard of the Chinese threat but because of a mistaken intelligence estimation of its magnitude.

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The quality of the intelligence information

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The quality of the intelligence information on the coming Chinese intervention was uneven. Sigint and Humint had provided a reasonable coverage of the PLA deployment in Manchuria in the months that preceded its crossing ↳ of the Yalu. As Willoughby's sharp critic noted, FEC G-2 "accurately identified the massive Chinese build up in Manchuria, [and] recognized that PLA forces may have been committed in Korea by mid-October."¹⁷¹ The failure was in identifying the massive CPVF crossing into Korea. One FEC G-2 report typically illustrates both success and the failure: The success was the reporting of the October 19 warning, from a source in Hong Kong, that 400,000 PLA troops were ready to cross the Yalu, reported by the FEC G-2 on October 20. With it came the failure: the report also indicated that reconnaissance flights revealed no indications of a massive Chinese military crossing into North Korea.¹⁷² By this point, thousands of Chinese soldiers had already crossed the Yalu. Aerial photography failed to identify them because the flights took place during daytime over main roads, while the Chinese forces crossed at night using back roads and trails. Sigint was not much better. It provided indications of the concentration of forces in Manchuria but—due to a combination of effective Chinese radio security and ineffective American Sigint collection—failed to provide indications for the CPVF massive crossing and deployment in Korea. Ineffective learning from the Sigint failure to provide information on the KPA's deployment five months earlier played a significant role here as well.

The poor quality of intelligence collection on the CPVF deployment can account for the American surprise in the First Chinese Campaign. But it cannot explain the surprise of the Second Campaign of late November. As Appleman argued, "It is obvious that the FEC was in possession of a great amount of intelligence concerning the Chinese and their relations to the Korean War."¹⁷³ Haynes was even sharper, arguing, "By the end of the first week of November 1950, the FEC G-2 had enough data to identify the Chinese order of battle in Korea and should have been able to determine that the Chinese Communists had fully committed to entering the Korean War."¹⁷⁴ Indeed, the battles that took place during the First Campaign and the reports provided by POW interrogations sufficed to warrant a conclusion that the CPVF OB in Korea was far larger than Willoughby's estimates indicated.

Some students of the subject tried to explain this failure as the consequence of a sophisticated deception effort by the Chinese to make the CPVF forces look smaller than what they actually were. The plan involved Sigint deception, false reports by POWs, and a hasty withdrawal to the ↳ north aimed at portraying the First Campaign as a solitary intervention in the war.¹⁷⁵ But although one should not disregard the Chinese capacity for deception, it cannot count for the American estimation failure. Thus, for example, while Roe highlighted the objective difficulties involved in locating the CPVF crossing into Korea by aerial photography, a semi-official history of the air war emphasized that the air reconnaissance units involved "might have done a better job if they had known what they were expected to discover." Nor was the mission considered as too important, since "[I]ntelligence officers . did not view reports of an enemy build-up in the mountains south of Huichon with much concern."¹⁷⁶ In other words, ineffective tasking and lack of concern by intelligence officers contributed to this failure no less than the objective difficulties, including Chinese deception.

By this stage, it is clear that neither disregard of a possible Chinese intervention nor insufficient information about it can account for the surprise of late November. The best and most accurate explanations, indeed, are to be found once again in the human factor.

ii. Decision-making

The decision to allow MacArthur to renew his offensive was taken in an ambiguous atmosphere. Acheson noted in his memoirs: "All the president's advisers in this matter, civilian and military, knew that something was badly wrong, though what it was, how to find out, and what to do about it they muffed."¹⁷⁷ Ridgway described a similar atmosphere in the JCS:

There was no joy in the Pentagon at seeing our forces dispersed in the manner that MacArthur has now dispersed them, especially when the threat of massive Chinese intervention looked now so probable and so imminent. But in the pentagon as well as in the field there was an utmost superstitious awe of this larger-than-life military figure who had so often been right when everyone else had been wrong—who had never admitted a mistake in judgment, yet whose mistakes in judgment had been remarkably few. Then there were those who felt ↴ that it was useless to try to check a man who might react to criticism by pursuing his own way with increased stubbornness and fervor.¹⁷⁸

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Consequently, as an official history of the war concluded, "the most critical element in weighing the risks of Chinese intervention was the deference paid to the opinions of Gen. MacArthur."¹⁷⁹ In addition, both civilian and military policymakers were dependent on information concerning the magnitude of the CPVF threat. The information came from MacArthur and his G-2. In this sense, the center of gravity of decision-making in November 1950 was not Washington but Tokyo, and the most relevant actors were MacArthur and his staff officers, primarily Willoughby.

Decision-making in the Far East attracted insufficient attention, certainly in comparison to the volume of studies of the corresponding processes in Washington. This is peculiar not only because of MacArthur's mythological place in American military history and the critical role he personally played at this stage in the war, but also because of the impact of what can be termed the "Bataan Gang mentality" that dominated intelligence-making and operational planning in October and November 1950.

The "Bataan Gang" (a.k.a. "Bataan Boys") was the nick-name of the group of staff officers that MacArthur had started to assemble around him in the late 1930s.¹⁸⁰ In July 1941, when he was nominated to command the newly established Far Eastern Command, the nucleus of the group was made up of seven officers, including Willoughby.¹⁸¹ In March 1942, when MacArthur escaped by torpedo boat from the Corregidor Island in the Philippines to Australia, he took fifteen officers with him, who made up what became known as the "Bataan Gang." The group was divided into the upper-level faction made up of eight higher-rank and position officers, and the rest were personal staff.¹⁸²

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In addition to providing a cohesive body of staff work under MacArthur's leadership, the group dynamic was nourished by the three necessary conditions for the creation of charisma: a leader with charismatic qualities (a spark); followers who are open to his charisma (flammable material); and ↴ an environment favorable to charisma (oxygen).¹⁸³ In this case, MacArthur's military skills combined with his personal charisma and his paranoia (see below), provided the spark. The group of personally devoted officers he cultivated during his many years of Army service and built up around him, first in the Philippines and later in Australia, made the flammable material. And the oxygen was made up of elements such as the risky travel by torpedo boats to Australia, the sense of being left behind by Washington when it came to allocation of the resources needed to win the war in the Pacific, MacArthur's subsequent battle victories in the face of opposition, and his personal paranoia that ascribed negative developments to personal persecution. Together they made the Bataan Boys "an extension of his ego,"¹⁸⁴ leading them to give up their individuality. As one of them told John Gunther, "I honestly can't tell you anything. He's too enormous, too unpredictable. I don't really understand him myself. No one could."¹⁸⁵

Although some of the symptoms of this group dynamic—such as the illusion of invulnerability, rationalization, and the unshakable belief in the group's morality—bring to mind Janis's groupthink notion, this dynamics did not rule the Bataan Gang. Its members were hand-picked by MacArthur over the years first and foremost according to their degree of personal loyalty to him. Remaining in the group was primarily the function of the members' ability to please MacArthur, and the way to do it this was through automatic (and motivated) agreement with him and consent to him. There were, furthermore, intergroup rivalries, and not all group members respected each other. Lastly, in many cases the interactions were between MacArthur and specific assistants rather than whole-group discussions, where groupthink dynamics would more likely arise. "They catered," Manchester wrote, "to his peacockery, genuflected to his viceregal whims, and shared his conviction that plotters were bent upon stabbing him in the back."¹⁸⁶ This is not how groupthink works; it sounds far more like cult of personality.

Since arriving in Australia, the group members had built a barrier around MacArthur. Their utmost loyalty and devotion, which gained them his personal backing and support, defined as MacArthur's only "blind spot,"¹⁸⁷ turned them into an exclusive and powerful group, to the extent that "[t]he mere mention that a particular staff officer was one of the Bataan Boys was often enough to quell opposition." Nevertheless, until recently, they did not receive the attention they deserved.¹⁸⁸

By 1950, most of the Bataan Boys had left for the United States, and only two of MacArthur's original upper-level class remained in his Tokyo inner circle, which now amounted to twelve officers. Willoughby was one of the two. He had first met MacArthur in the mid-1930s while serving at the rank of Lieutenant Colonel as a teacher of military history in a military academy. According to his own testimony, his whole teaching was based on a summary of MacArthur's ideas as a Chief of Staff. Upon Willoughby's request, he joined MacArthur in the Philippines in 1939, and became his G-2 in 1941. Despite this fast rise to power, Willoughby did not win the respect of others and was generally regarded as a mediocre man who held his post because of his "doglike devotion" to MacArthur.¹⁸⁹ By some accounts, this devotion spilled over into his professional work, which reflected his tendency to "cloud his judgment" based on MacArthur's views.¹⁹⁰ After the war, Willoughby gained more power and influence and became MacArthur's closest confident.¹⁹¹ At the same time, he continued cultivating the Bataan Gang mentality, thus helping to create "a command environment that rewarded sycophants and isolated those who challenged the conventional wisdom."¹⁹²

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Devotion to the boss ranked as Willoughby highest goal. In describing Lt. Gen. Richard Sutherland—MacArthur's Chief of Staff during the war and a personal rival of Willoughby—he counted his "devotion to the 'old man'" and "his quick perception of the General's wishes" as the keys to his success.¹⁹³ John Gunther, an early biographer of MacArthur, wrote that for Willoughby "MacArthur is the only man in the world [for] whose opinion he cares anything."¹⁹⁴ This was evident in the early stage of the war in Korea. Perceiving himself as MacArthur's personal intelligence officer, rather than as a provider of intelligence to the relevant consumers in Washington and on the battlefield, he prevented the transfer of means of collection as well as intelligence information to Gen. Walker, who was defending the Pusan parameter.¹⁹⁵ Walker was not part of MacArthur's inner circle; MacArthur did not trust him and considered relieving him of his duty. On top of that, Walker's relations with Willoughby were hostile.¹⁹⁶

The Inchon landing—"the most masterly and audacious strategic course in all history" as praised by Admiral William Halsey¹⁹⁷—increased the sense of self-assuredness and further decreased openness to opposing views among MacArthur and his inner-circle. The near collapse of the KPA and the speedy re-occupation of South Korea increased MacArthur's confidence and his sureness that victory could be reached by the end of the year. MacArthur and his inner circle even "punished those officers who cast doubt on the invasion's success."¹⁹⁸ Walker, who knew that he was not getting the necessary engineering equipment to meet his tasks, certainly in comparison to Almond's X Corps, told the JCS: "We have been bastard children."¹⁹⁹ He received a vivid confirmation of his feelings when MacArthur arrived in a liberated Seoul on September 29. The general completely snubbed Walker, who sided with those who had been opposed to

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Inchon and warmly greeted Almond, his former chief of staff, who was an enthusiastic supporter of the operation.²⁰⁰

Willoughby, who in early July had admonished the commander of the 24th Division to expedite preparations for the controversial landing operation or be left behind,²⁰¹ was no exception. The fact that his forecasts of only light North Korean resistance proved to be wrong shortly after the successful landing had taken place did not diminish his self-assuredness. Shortly after the invasion, James M. Gavin, an experienced airborne officer visited the Kimpo airfield, the main airbase near Seoul. He found that it had been readied for use by a modern air force and told Willoughby that this most likely indicated a possible Chinese intervention. Willoughby assured him that the Chinese would never cross the Yalu and march into the peninsula. He had his sources. He knew.²⁰²

Indeed, by this stage, Willoughby's reports matched the available intelligence information he had. While various sources indicated that the Chinese army had moved large forces to Manchuria, hardly any reliable ones, particularly not Comint, showed that they had made any large-scale crossing of the Yalu. Hence, the estimate that a massive intervention had become militarily too dangerous for the Chinese could constitute a reasonable foundation for MacArthur's commitment to end the war by December. The situation changed in late October when the Chinese offensive created a gap between MacArthur's optimism and the battlefield reality. Within the Bataan Gang, the way to bridge this gap was by adjusting reality to accord with their leader's view. It would be done by providing policymakers in Washington and commanders in the battlefield with intelligence estimates that would support MacArthur's optimism. Willoughby was precisely the man to do it, and the monopoly he held over the intelligence from Korea made this fabrication so effective.

That Willoughby falsified intelligence in order to please MacArthur is supported by good evidence from the X Corps and the Eighth Army staff officers. Almond's deputy chief of staff, Colonel William J. McCaffrey, who had served under Almond as the chief of staff of the 92nd Division in WWII, believed that Willoughby "was more interested in staying in MacArthur's good graces than in rendering objective assessment of the available facts" and that this was particularly the case regarding the estimate of the magnitude of the Chinese threat.²⁰³ Almond's G-3, Jack Chiles, remembered: "MacArthur did not want the Chinese to enter the war in Korea. Anything MacArthur wanted, Willoughby produced intelligence for. In this case, Willoughby falsified the intelligence reports. He should have gone to jail."²⁰⁴ Almond's G-2, Colonel James H. Polk, wrote that "we had the dope but old CAW (Willoughby) bowed to the superior wisdom of his beloved boss and didn't fight him as a good staff officer should."²⁰⁵

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In the Eighth Army, the situation was more complex. While Walker was not considered by MacArthur and his inner circle as "one of 'them,'" his G-2, Lieutenant Colonel James Tarkenton, had been nominated for his position by Willoughby, despite his lack of combat experience, and he owed Willoughby his loyalty. But Tarkenton had done a good job in the Pusan perimeter and won Walker's trust.²⁰⁶ Nevertheless, when it came to estimating the magnitude of the Chinese threat, Tarkenton followed Willoughby's methodology and estimates. This was not an innocent mistake. The Eighth Army's G-3, Colonel John Dabney, defined Tarkenton's estimates as "unduly influenced" and "colored" by Willoughby's views.²⁰⁷ William Train, Dabney's senior planner who estimated the Chinese force as far greater than the official estimate, explained Tarkenton's motivation: "It was MacArthur's Command, not a US Army command, and if you crossed Willoughby it was not just a ticket out of there, it was probably a ticket straight out of your career."²⁰⁸ Train did not mince words about Willoughby's behavior: "What he was doing in those days was fighting against the truth, trying to keep it from going from lower levels to higher ones where it would have to be acted on."²⁰⁹

The impact of the Bataan Gang mentality was not limited to intelligence estimates alone. Both Walker and Almond received the same intelligence reports, yet their effect on them was very different. Walker, an

experienced general, considered by Gen. Patton "the most eager to attack,"²¹⁰ was aware of the lack of solid information concerning the enemy he faced. His G-2 estimated it at 27,000 CPVF and 23,000 KPA soldiers, altogether about 50,000 troops.²¹¹ Although the Eighth Army was more than 100,000 strong and enjoyed superior firepower and mobility, and despite pressure from MacArthur, Walker avoided pushing his commanders to move too fast and cautioned them of potential dangers.²¹²

The commander of the X Corps, as a professional US Army study shows, acted differently: "General Almond and his staff had blindly followed the guidance of the supremely optimistic Far Eastern Command, which seemed to ignore or discount sign after sign of possible massive Chinese intervention. Almond directed his units to race to the Yalu without regard to their flanks or to the location of any enemy forces."²¹³ Whether it was Almond's personal fault or his and his staff officers' is a matter of controversy. Post factum, his chief of staff wrote that the X Corps plan was "insane." Almond's deputy chief of staff explained it, "General Almond was not about to protest an order from Gen. MacArthur. After all, everyone said Inchon wouldn't work."²¹⁴ Almond's Bataan Gang outlook made the X Corps offensive that started on November 27 "the most ill-advised and unfortunate operation of the Korean War."²¹⁵ Others, who did not share Almond's

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attitude, like Maj. Gen. Oliver P. Smith, the commander of the First [↳] Marines Division, showed it. Almond ordered him to widely disperse his forces without considering the difficulties involved in occupying, under difficult weather conditions, a thousand square miles area of rugged mountains terrain, possibly defended by the Chinese army. Smith tried to resist the order as much as he could, and took precautionary measures to limit its potential damage.

Almond had a reputation for being an aggressive commander but Marines commanders are known to be aggressive too and Smith was no exception. Nevertheless, he took into account the reality of the battlefield and thus saved his division from a disaster. Conspicuously, Almond's optimistic estimate did not change even after the Chinese counteroffensive had begun. On November 28, he told the officers of an isolated task force: "The enemy who is delaying you for the moment is nothing more than remnants of Chinese divisions fleeing north. We're still attacking and we're going all the way to the Yalu. Don't let a bunch of Chinese laundrymen stop you."²¹⁶ This "Gung ho" manner was unusual by any professional standard, but Almond was not a standard officer. He was a typical product of the Bataan Gang mentality, an officer who's "greatest weakness as a commander in Korea was his conviction that MacArthur could do no wrong."²¹⁷ In Halberstam's words, Almond "was MacArthur's boy, the true loyalist, headstrong and arrogant, determined to make the reality of the Korean battlefield fit the dreams of the commander in the Dai Ichi [MacArthur's headquarters in Tokyo]."²¹⁸

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The Bataan Gang mentality penetrated also lower ranks. Maj. general John Coulter served under MacArthur in World War I, and MacArthur brought him to the Far East to command the US Seventh Division in 1948. After taking two more positions, he returned to the USA. When the war started, MacArthur brought him back to command the First Corps of the Eighth Army but actually to be his man in Walker's headquarters. Walker, who was not too impressed by Coulter's qualities as a battlefield commander, nominated him to command the IX Corps, which had only become operational in September. When the Chinese offensive of late November struck his forces, Coulter refused to grasp that a new reality thwarted MacArthur's intention to swiftly end the war. As Halberstam put it, his orders reflected "the vast distance that by then existed between the reality on the battlefield and the illusions that existed in Tokyo."²¹⁹ ↳

Important as it was, the Bataan Gang mentality was not created in a vacuum, but according to the preferences of senior officers in the FEC. The intelligence failure of late November, moreover, was ripened in an atmosphere that was created by human beings. And to fully comprehend the sources of this failure, we have to understand certain aspects of the minds of the persons most responsible for this fiasco.

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iii. The individual level

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Two prominent figures stand out in the process that led to the failure of November 1950. One is MacArthur, who inspired the Bataan Boys' mentality. He also exhibited groundless optimism concerning the magnitude of the Chinese threat and took unnecessary risks in pressuring his commanders to end the war by Christmas. The second is Willoughby, his G-2 beginning 1941 and the officer most closely identified with this fiasco.

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MacArthur: paranoia and narcissism

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Until his April 1951 dismissal, the Korean War was MacArthur's war. Summarizing its first six months, Blair concluded that it had not been fought well, and that MacArthur was responsible for the main mistakes,

grossly underestimating the professionalism of the KPA; the inhumane piecemeal commitment of the untrained Eighth Army; the shift of X Corps after Inchon from hot pursuit to a meaningless amphibious landing at Wonsan; scandalously underestimating CCF strength and intentions; the foolish "race" to the Yalu in both the Eighth Army and the X Corps sectors. As a result 60,000 American soldiers and Marines and probably five times that number of ROK soldiers were dead, wounded, or missing.²²⁰

The most critical mistakes ("scandalous" and "foolish") involved MacArthur's mistaken estimate of the magnitude of the Chinese threat in November. In part, it was the outcome of the Bataan Gang mentality that provided him with information and estimation please. But it was MacArthur, primarily his paranoia and narcissistic personality, who created this atmosphere, and we will elaborate on this subject. We will also present two additional patterns of behavior which he exhibited prior to the November fiasco: an overly optimistic estimate of the balance of forces before the outbreak of war; and a drive, motivated by political and operational considerations, to end every confrontation as soon as possible.

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Although many biographies discuss the relationship between MacArthur's strategy and personality, only a few attempted to analyze his strategy as a function of his personality²²¹ and none did it within the Korean War context. Manchester provides a good short description of this personality:

He was a great thundering paradox of man, noble and ignoble, inspiring and outrageous, arrogant and shy, the best of men and the worst of men, the most protean, most ridiculous, and most sublime. No more baffling, exasperating soldier ever wore a uniform. Flamboyant, imperious, and apocalyptic, he carried the plumage of a flamingo, could not acknowledge errors, and tried to cover up his mistakes with sly, childish tricks.²²²

Manchester specifically relates MacArthur's paranoia as a salient component of his psyche:

The General's paranoia never lay more than a fraction of a millimeter below the surface of his thoughts. "They" had conspired against his father, "they" had refused to decorate him after his Vera Cruz adventure, "they" had undercut him in France in 1918, "they" had forced him into retirement in 1937, "they" had refused to reinforce his defense of Corregidor and Bataan, "they" had sent an inferior B-17 to Cagayan, and "they" were waiting even now to thwart him again.²²³

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The prime suspect of MacArthur's envy and paranoia was George Marshall, who was the same age and had performed brilliantly as a staff officer under Pershing in WWI. Marshall was probably one of the "deskbound men who envied and resented" MacArthur as "a fighting officer."²²⁴ When MacArthur became chief of staff, he exiled Marshall to run the Illinois National Guard. No wonder then that during the war MacArthur, now serving under Marshall, who had become chief of staff in 1939, believed that Marshall and others plotted

against him. Sheer classic projection may have added to his belief, whereby he assumed that others would behave toward him as he would toward them if their situations were reversed. He even expressed the belief that the “Germany First” policy formulated by Roosevelt and Churchill was a conspiracy to deny him the resources he needed to win the war in the Pacific. In addition to Marshall, who was “working against him at all times,” he also blamed the Supreme Allied Commander in Europe, Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower. The two had had a stormy relationship since Eisenhower ended his job as MacArthur’s assistant in the Philippines in the late 1930s, and MacArthur blamed him for undermining his work and “stealing publicity.” Gen. Robert Eichelberger, a corps commander under MacArthur, noted when describing this paranoid way of thinking that stealing “any publicity from MacArthur was like driving a dagger into his heart.”²²⁵

MacArthur’s paranoia did not fade away after 1945. During the Korean War he was certain that the chief of staff, Omar Bradley, hated him since he had rejected Bradely as a senior commander when planning the invasion of Japan in 1945.²²⁶ And even his 1964 memoirs were colored by his paranoia. Twenty-two years after the decision to prevent the release of a statement he prepared on Japanese atrocities in the “Bataan Death March,” he wrote, “Perhaps the Administration, which was committed to a Europe-first effort, feared American public opinions would demand a greater reaction against Japan.”²²⁷

MacArthur’s paranoia can be linked to his deep sense of family heritage, particularly his father’s career.²²⁸ He was born into an aristocratic family. His father was the youngest colonel in the Union Army during the Civil War and occupied the Philippines in 1900. Afterward, however, despite being the highest ranking officer in the Army, his military career came to a dead end (for which his son blamed others). MacArthur’s mother lived through his success—she spent four years in West Point watching over him during his studies in the military academy—and she “sent him out not merely to avenge the wrongs done to his father but to compete against him.”²²⁹ ↴

Douglas MacArthur’s need to be worthy of the heritage of his family and redeem his father’s end of career constitutes a partial explanation for his narcissist personality: his grandiose sense of self-importance, conviction of his rightness, sensitivity to criticism and demand for admiration, tendency to get into power struggles, and his desire to take credit for himself and place blame on others.²³⁰ Narcissism in general, and paranoia in particular, explain his need to form a group of loyal and admiring officers—some of whom were highly talented—who would provide the recognition he so desperately craved, particularly during the difficult years in the Philippines and Australia. In November 1950, this mentality provided support that was needed to bridge the gap between his goal of ending the war by Christmas and the reality of the battlefield.

In addition to narcissism and paranoia, other patterns help to understand MacArthur’s conduct on the eve of the fiasco. One was his constant unrealistic optimism concerning the balance of forces prior to the breakout of war, and disregard of his Asian enemies. In 1939, he doubted if “an enemy could concentrate superior forces at any vital Philippine area” and estimated that a Japanese blockade would be “practically unfeasible without the tacit agreement of the other nations surrounding the Pacific.” On the eve of the attack on Pearl Harbor, he was certain that war would not start before spring. When it started, he defined the Japanese blockade on the Philippines as a “paper blockade.”²³¹ When the Korean War started, he was contemptuous of the fighting capabilities of the KPA, and despite their initial military achievements did not change his mind, believing that if he could put the First Cav Division into Korea, “those fellows scuttle up to the Manchurian border so quick, you would see no more of them.”²³²

The same pattern, considered by Halberstam as his worst professional sin,²³³ dominated his strategic thinking in November 1950. Despite the reports by this stage that massive Chinese forces had deployed in Korea, and even though the CPVF soldiers proved their military effectiveness in the First Campaign, MacArthur avoided taking this factor into account when ordering the Eighth Army and the X Corps to rush to the Yalu. When assessing the four options that were available to China, he ruled out the option of full intervention because of fundamental Chinese military ↴ weaknesses.²³⁴ Ridgway believed that “with the

prize within his grasp, holding tight to his conviction that Red China was a paper tiger, MacArthur had simply closed his ears to all counsel save his own.”²³⁵

MacArthur’s excessive optimism was influenced by prejudice, mirror imaging, and a belief in American air superiority as a panacea. As Halberstam emphasized, MacArthur was familiar with the traditional Chinese army of the pre-WWII era but showed no interest in the new army that Mao had built over the intervening years. Since he was certain that he knew “the mind of the Oriental,” he refused to absorb that the PLA commanders and soldiers were very different from the ineffective militaries of the East that he had previously known. The PLA learned to meet its technological inferiority by primitive yet effective means, such as night movement by foot, emphasis on camouflage, and minimal use of wireless traffic. MacArthur knew nothing about it and, accordingly, he estimated that the Communist forces were “grossly overrated.”²³⁶

MacArthur’s disregard of the Chinese enemy, and his inner circle’s support for that attitude, explains his decision to advance northward despite the CPVF threat. But it does not suffice to explain the pressure he exerted on his subordinates, primarily Walker, to reach the Yalu as fast as possible. Here, MacArthur’s record shows that exerting this kind of pressure was a pattern of his military leadership style. It was vividly seen in the Papuan Campaign, his first as the Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces in the Southwest Pacific area:

He sent order from his headquarters in Brisbane and later Port Moresby, to officers on the fighting front, often bypassing the chain of command. His dissatisfaction with the speed of the advance resulted in pressure on the Australian senior commanders, who on more than one occasion replaced lower ranked generals and brigadiers in order to satisfy the need for a quick success.

American generals were also dismissed, and replaced by men who were more willing or able to achieve a quick finish to the fighting. MacArthur attempted to gain victory in Papua before his rivals, the Navy, could beat the Japanese in Guadalcanal in the Solomon Group.

The fighting in Papua had created disproportionate losses in dead and injured and the reason lay in MacArthur private problems. He had suffered ignominy after his Philippines loss, had marred the proud legacy of his father, had abandoned his men, had enemies in the American government and armed forces, and needed to prove that he was still worthy of commanding an army.²³⁷

During the Korean War, this pattern repeated itself twice. First, it manifested in MacArthur’s urge to occupy Seoul by September 25, precisely three months after the North Korean invasion had started. Practically, the pressure to meet this date was exerted by Almond, who like MacArthur in the Papuan campaign, intervened directly in the fighting, bypassing Gen. Smith, the commander of the First Marines Division that was occupying the city. From Smith’s perspective, “Almond was risking his Marines unnecessarily for a couple of extra lines in the newspapers back home because that was what his commander wanted.”²³⁸ Smith himself, Walker and the JCS estimated that a wiser strategy was for the X Corps to cut off Seoul and advance eastward to meet the Eighth Army, thus capturing the remains of the KPA.²³⁹

The second case of unnecessary pressure was prior to the “home-by-Christmas offensive.” Its main target was Walker. One of the clearest indications for the effect it had on him was his October 26 letter to MacArthur, which explained why, in light of the CPVF counterattack, he had to stop his advance to the Yalu. Knowing MacArthur’s reputation for replacing officers whom he deemed insufficient achievers, the letter explained the halt in an apologetic tone and assured MacArthur that the attack would continue: “There has never been and there is now no intention for this Army to take up or remain on a passive perimeter or any other type of defense. Every effort is being made to retain an adequate bridgehead to facilitate the resumption of the attack as soon as conditions permit.”²⁴⁰

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By fall 1950, MacArthur reached a status that no one—not even the US president or the JCS—could oppose. Recall that MacArthur was only fired after the military defeat that had made him far weaker politically. Combined with his political ambition and his mistaken estimation of the magnitude of the Chinese threat, the combination of his character and status accounts for much of the explanation for the catastrophic outcome of the “home by Christmas offensive.”

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Maj. Gen. Charles A. Willoughby

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Willoughby is the person most identified with the intelligence fiasco of November 1950 and, as Haynes argued, “The most important person to influence intelligence assessments” in the FEC and in Washington.²⁴¹ Indeed, no matter what MacArthur’s role was, every war plan is based on intelligence, and the US war plan to reach the Yalu was no exception. In this case, the operational plan was completely faulty because it was based on a completely mistaken intelligence picture. Willoughby was the man who personally prepared and provided it, and it was mistaken not because of lack of relevant information. The opposite is true:

By the end of the first week of November 1950, the FEC G-2 had enough data to identify the Chinese order of battle in North Korea and should have been able to determine that the Chinese Communists had fully committed to entering the Korean War. Rhetoric from the communist leadership in Beijing mirrored the political indoctrination and guidance given to the lowest ranking Chinese soldiers captured by the United Nations forces. One common theme stands clear: the bulk of the Chinese Communist Army deployed in Manchuria since July, 1950, had entered Korea in order to defeat the Americans before they could reach the Manchurian border.²⁴²

Despite his personal responsibility for one of the worst intelligence failures in American military history, Willoughby’s personality and the role he played in facilitating the fiasco have not received the attention they deserved until recently. Even now, only sketchy details about him are available, and although they provide some insight into relevant key elements of his personality, they do not suffice to give us a full explanation.

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Willoughby’s family background is unclear. According to his official biography, he was born in 1892 under the name Adolf Tscheppé-Weidenbach, to a German Baron from Baden and an American mother, Emma Willoughby of Baltimore, Maryland. But the German weekly *Der Spiegel*, which investigated his ancestry in 1950, found out that there was no registry for such a birth in 1892, and that Willoughby was probably born as an illegitimate child to a German rope maker and a German mother.²⁴³ He came to the United States and became an American citizen in 1910, and the same year enlisted in the army as Adolf Charles Weidenbach—the family name of his alleged rope maker father.²⁴⁴ He later Americanized his name to Willoughby. It is possible, then, that Willoughby fabricated a family background and, if this indeed was the case, it fit well with certain patterns of his behavior.

According to Willoughby’s official biography, in 1914, following studies at Heidelberg, the Sorbonne, and Pennsylvania College at Gettysburg, he received his bachelor of arts degree and continued his master’s studies at the University of Kansas at Lawrence. Given that he left Germany at the age of eighteen, and that students were not enlisted in Heidelberg before the age of nineteen, the validity of this account is dubious as well.²⁴⁵ The same year he started a military career, first as a commissioned Volunteer (Reserve) officer and, then as a career infantry officer. Between mid-1917 and late 1918 he served as an aviator (flying combat missions in France) and then returned to the Infantry. Until 1940, when he joined MacArthur’s headquarters in the Philippines as a supply officer, he served, among others, as a military attaché to Venezuela, Colombia, and Ecuador and at various staff schools as an instructor and lecturer. He wrote a number of books on history and military studies, and built a scholarly reputation in these fields.²⁴⁶

Although Willoughby adopted an American name, his Teutonic accent, his tendency to use a monocle, his natty custom-tailored uniforms, and his aloofness made him somewhat of an anomaly among his American peers. For many of his colleagues, he was the personification of “the old-school Prussian army officer,”²⁴⁷ “more of von Stroheim than von Rundstedt” type.²⁴⁸ Even within MacArthur’s ultraconservative inner

p. 179 Content circle, Willoughby was noted for his pro-fascist inclination.²⁴⁹ He was an admirer of Fascist Spain and regarded Francisco Franco as “the second greatest military commander in the world.”²⁵⁰ This inclination led MacArthur to call him “my lovable fascist,”²⁵¹ but his more common nicknames for him were “Sir Charles” and “the count.”

MacArthur’s relations with Willoughby, the only “Bataan Boy” that remained with him until the end of his military career in 1951, were complex. Willoughby admired MacArthur and saw him, even before they met, as the greatest military leader in US history. It is quite probable that his “doglike devotion” to his boss was not a product of sycophancy, as many believed, but of a sincere admiration. MacArthur, for his share, respected his G-2’s intellect, shared with him a love of military history, allowed him unrestricted access, and was as “fanatically loyal” to him as he was to other officers from his inner circle.²⁵² MacArthur trusted his G-2 with nonprofessional tasks as well. In 1944, when a group of conservative republican politicians considered nominating him to run for president against Roosevelt, Willoughby acted as the liaison between Senator Arthur Vandenberg and the general. In June, he was sent by MacArthur to Washington to discuss the issue with Vandenberg and other prominent republicans.²⁵³

When it came to Willoughby’s service as MacArthur’s G-2, the picture is less clear. By one testimony, MacArthur thought that he was “[t]he finest G-2 officer he had encountered in his fifty-odd years of service.”²⁵⁴ At the same time, in 1943, he paid almost no attention to “what Willoughby told him” and no operation was called off or mounted because of his intelligence, though, as the quality of intelligence improved in 1944, he paid it more attention.²⁵⁵ Probably the best definition for the relationship between the two was given by Drea, who wrote in his excellent study on MacArthur and intelligence in the Pacific war that Willoughby “served MacArthur unquestioningly, and in exchange MacArthur tolerated Willoughby’s uneven intelligence appreciations throughout the Pacific War.” Summing up MacArthur’s attitude toward his G-2, he noted that MacArthur “accepted Willoughby’s loyalty but never confused it with exceptional competence.”²⁵⁶

Willoughby’s professional record after becoming MacArthur’s G-2 was a mixed bag, too. Within a short period of time (June–September, 1942), he succeeded, despite having no prior experience, in building an effective intelligence system made of three sections: a geographical and terrain section that produced the necessary information for MacArthur’s operations in an unfamiliar territory; a translation and interpretation section that collected and produced information from Japanese POWs; and a Humint section that was used for collection and clandestine operations.²⁵⁷ The Sigint unit (Central Bureau) was outside his perimeter of responsibility and was established and directed by Spencer B. Akin. Willoughby was even excluded from seeing some of its products.²⁵⁸

Willoughby’s record as an estimator, which is more relevant for our subject, was less bright. By Campbell’s analysis, he “made nine badly flawed estimates in the Pacific War, which he later tried to cover up, whereas he was correct in only four key estimates.”²⁵⁹ No wonder then that Willoughby’s colleagues thought that he had “the best hindsight of any intelligence officer in the army,” or that he was “a better historian than an intelligence officer.”²⁶⁰

While Willoughby’s record as an intelligence estimator in WWII was dubious, three tendencies that he exhibited during his service are relevant to understand his mistakes in November 1950. The first was his tendency toward centralism, as evidenced by his attempts to gain organizational monopoly over the intelligence process and his practice of personally handling the process of making intelligence estimates. Shortly after becoming MacArthur’s G-2, he dismissed Australian intelligence summaries (which proved to

be correct),²⁶¹ and throughout the war he prevented the OSS from operating in his theater of operations. After the war, he boasted that this was a major achievement.²⁶² On the eve of the Korean War, he dismissed South Korean warnings that the KPA was preparing an attack. After war began, he lessened his tight centralistic policy, allowing the CIA limited freedom of action, but he later prevented its agents from interrogating Chinese POWs for fear that they would produce estimates different from his own. His centralistic tendencies were also exposed in the way he estimated intelligence. Earlier in Bataan, he did the estimate while Akin was in charge of Sigint, and Sutherland, MacArthur's chief of staff, decided which intelligence would be passed on to MacArthur.²⁶³ After that, with the exception of MacArthur, there is no record of any collective intelligence estimation process under Willoughby's command. Almond testified that Willoughby "was not receptive to alternative analysis or ideas." Personal monopolization explained his personal involvement in producing the Daily Intelligence Summary.²⁶⁴ Sometimes, when MacArthur rejected his estimates, he took it as a personal insult.²⁶⁵

In November 1950, Willoughby's tendency toward centralism led him to exclude any organization or person—apart for MacArthur himself—from interfering with the intelligence process. As a result, MacArthur, either because of wishful thinking or because of Willoughby's influence or both, underestimated the magnitude of the Chinese threat.

Willoughby's second tendency was toward mirror imaging, that is, the inclination to estimate the opponent's policy through the prism of one's own culture, logic, and prejudice. Drea, who claimed that Willoughby often made mirror-imaging estimates, regarded it as one of his "cardinal sin."²⁶⁶ In April 1942, Willoughby reached the conclusion that the rational target for the coming Japanese attack would be northern Australia. His naval counterpart, Edwin T. Layton assessed, on the basis of the same intelligence information, that it would be Port Moresby in New Guinea. The May 1942 battle of the Coral Sea, the first major naval engagement since the Japanese attack of Pearl Harbor, showed that Willoughby "rationale" was mistaken and Layton was right.²⁶⁷ Similarly, during the Battle of Hollandia in the summer of 1944, Willoughby misjudged, despite the excellent available intelligence information, the target and the timing of the Japanese counterattack. As he later admitted, the enemy had carried out the attack "regardless of the odds against him."²⁶⁸ Then, during the invasion of the island of Leyte in the Philippines in October 1944, he

p. 182 "assessed Japanese intentions according to what he would do" and concluded that they would avoid reinforcing their army due to American air-superiority.²⁶⁹

Willoughby learned nothing from these mistakes. His persistent estimates, despite intelligence evidence to the contrary, that the PRC would avoid a massive intervention in Korea were based on a military logic that asserted that the best time to intervene was prior to the Inchon landing. This way of thinking did not take into account the possibility that the Chinese strategy was based on other factors—such as the reluctance to intervene at too early a stage, when the UN forces were still far from Manchuria and did not constitute a viable threat to Chinese territory. Willoughby's refusal to accept that massive Chinese forces had crossed the Yalu also reflected a belief that such a move could not take place without significant Sigint indications. He did not take into account that, unlike the American army, the CPVF was poorly equipped with wireless sets, that it was well-trained in maintaining radio silence, and that it used primitive but efficient means of communication, such as runners or dispatch riders.

Willoughby's third relevant tendency involved his need for cognitive closure. While most descriptions portray him as an authoritarian type and, hence, a person with a high need for closure, this was not always the case. Very much like Stalin during the battle for Moscow in late 1941, Willoughby was consumed by fear of invalidity at the beginning of his career as MacArthur's G-2. This was mainly the product of his lack of intelligence experience, the humiliating defeat MacArthur suffered in the Philippines, and the high cost of being mistaken at this critical stage of the war. These pressures led him, especially in 1942, to avoid fast and persistent freezing. Sometimes he even went to the other extreme, reversing major interpretations

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overnight without apparent reason.²⁷⁰ In addition, when he presented his assessments to MacArthur, he used to include in them all possible courses of action available to the enemy.²⁷¹

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This was not the situation in the fall of 1950. By then, Willoughby was an experienced (though not necessarily appreciated) intelligence officer. He effectively supported his chief in the conduct of the brilliant Inchon landing, which was carried out against the opinion of many others. And now his admired boss wanted to reach the Yalu as soon as possible in order to end the war by Christmas. By this stage, Willoughby exhibited the main symptoms of a person with a high need for closure²⁷²: his thesis that the Chinese had lost their opportunity to intervene and therefore would avoid such a move was clear, orderly, and coherent. His intelligence-making process, which lacked any form of brainstorming, reflected a highly authoritarian leadership style, reluctance to listen to different perspectives, and no tolerance for any pluralism of opinion. His high level of confidence was exhibited by his “knowledge” (rather than estimate) that the Chinese would not intervene. It was enhanced by a similar confidence on the part of MacArthur. Willoughby, moreover, refused to consider novel information that was inconsistent with his thesis, and denied undisputed facts, as seen for example in his claim that the captured Chinese soldiers were North Koreans. As one officer had put it, “None of this [evidence for a possible large-scale Chinese intervention] was going to affect Willoughby. The Chinese were not going to come in. *He knew it. And he was never wrong.*”²⁷³

The combination of an intelligence officer who monopolized the intelligence process, estimated the enemy according to his own logic, and exhibited the symptoms of a high need for closure and an unshakable faith that MacArthur could not be wrong provides, then, another explanation for one of the worst American intelligence fiascos in the post-WWII era.

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62. For this argument about World War II, see John Dower, *War Without Mercy: Pacific War* (New York: Pantheon, 2012). For intimations of this tendency in John Foster Dulles, see Stephen Kinzer, *The Brothers: John Foster Dulles, Allen Dulles, and Their Secret World War*. (New York: Times Books, 2013).
63. Nelson S. Drew, ed., *NSC-68: Formulating the Strategy of Containment* (Washington DC: National Defense University, 1996), 53.
64. Paige, *Korean Decision*, 60-61.
65. P. K. Rose, "Two Strategic Intelligence Mistakes in Korea, 1950," *Studies in Intelligence* 45, no. 5, (2001): 11, [http://www.dtic.mil/cgi-bin/GetTRDoc?Location=GetTRDoc&docName=GetTRDoc.html](http://www.dtic.mil/cgi-bin/GetTRDoc?Location=GetTRDoc&docName=GetTRDoc&GetTRDoc.html). Accessed: November 30, 2016.
66. Ridgway, *The Korean War*, 11.
67. Paige, *Korean Decision*, 71.
68. Matthias, *America's Strategic Blunders*, 66-67.
69. The quote itself was published in the July 3 issue of *Time*, a few days after war started.
70. Paige, *Korean Decision*, 71.
71. Richard J. Betts, *Surprise Attack: Lessons for Defense Planning* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution, 1982), 53-55.
72. Paige, *Korean Decision*, 72.
73. Harry S. Truman, *Years of Trial and Hope* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1956), 332-33.
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75. Dean Acheson, *Present at the Creation* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1969), 405.
76. Irving Janis, *Victims of Groupthink* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1972), 51.
77. Paige, *Korean Decision*, 128.
78. Matthias, *America's Strategic Blunders*, 73.
79. David S. McLellan, "Dean Acheson and the Korean War," *Political Science Quarterly*, 68:1, 16-39, 16.
80. Michael Hickey, *Korean War: The West Confronts Communism, 1950-1953* (London: John Murray, 1999), 84. It is important to note that NSC report 81 (September 1, 1950) that was adopted by the JSC and the president, made a distinction between two situations: A Soviet intervention that should lead to MacArthur's withdrawal to the parallel, and a Chinese intervention, which should not stop military operations "as long as action by UN forces offers a reasonable chance of successful resistance." James I. Matray, "Truman's Plan for Victory: National Self-Determination and the Thirty-Eighth Parallel Decision in Korea," *Journal of American History* 66, no. 2 (September 1979): 314-33, 328.
81. Bin Yu, "What China Learned from Its 'Forgotten War' in Korea," in Xiaobing Li, Allan R. Millet, and Bin Yu, eds., *Mao's Generals Remember Korea*, trans. Millet and Yu (Lawrence: University Press Kansas, 2001), 9-29, 12.

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83. Allen S. Whiting, *China Crosses the Yalu: The Decision to Enter the Korean War* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, references), 159.
84. Richard C. Thornton, *Odd Man Out: Truman, Stalin, Mao, and the Origins of the Korean War* (Washington DC: Brassy's, 2000), 258–59.
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87. Xu Yan, *Diyici jiaoliang: kangmei yuanzhao zhanzheng de lishi huigu yu fansi* [First trial of strength: reflection of the history of the war of resisting America and aiding Korea] (Beijing: Zhongguo guangbo dianshi chubanshe, 1990), 18–19. We would like to thank our colleague, Professor Yu Bin, for providing us with this information. For a good discussion of this often-ignored Chinese coup, see Halberstam, *Coldest Winter*, 304–5.
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91. Peng Dehuai, "My Story," 32–33; Bin Yu, "What China Learned," 15–16.
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94. Central Intelligence Agency, *Clandestine Services History: The Secret War in Korea, June 1950–June 1952* (CS Historical Paper no. 52, 17 July 1968), 21. Willoughby defined his G-2 and CIA relations as "fraternal solidarity." Willoughby and Chamberlain, *MacArthur*, 354.
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95. Justin M. Haynes, *Intelligence Failure in Korea: Major General Charles A. Willoughby's Role in the United Nation Command's defeat in November, 1950* (thesis presented to the Faculty of the US Army Command and General Staff College in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, 2009), 68.
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96. Aid, "US Humint and Comint in the Korean War," in Aldrich, *Clandestine Cold War in Asia*, 41–42; Finnegan, "Evolution of US Army HUMINT," 58–59.
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97. Aid, "US Humint and Comint," in Aldrich, *Clandestine Cold War in Asia*, 42.
98. Langeleben Reunion Association. "Untitled Document from UK Signals Unit Historical Society," 4, http://www.langeleben.co.uk/gallery_pages/misc/Korea%20is%20often%20seen%20as%20a%20Sigint%20failure%20but%20was%20it.pdf. Accessed: December 12, 2016. ↗
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109. David A. Hatch, "SIGINT against the Chinese Intervention in the Korean War," National Security Agency, Cryptologic Almanac 50th Anniversary Series, 2, <https://www.nsa.gov/news-features/declassified-documents/crypto-almanac->

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125. Manchester, *American Caesar*, 693. Even before the landing in Inchon Willoughby ruled out the possibility of a Chinese intervention. Roy E. Appleman, *United States Army in the Korean War: South to the Maktong, North to the Yalu* (June–November 1950) (Washington, DC: Center of Military History United States Army, 2000), 764.
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126. Appleman, *United States Army in the Korean War*, 759.
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127. Manchester, *American Caesar*, 707.
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128. Korea Institute of Military History *The Korean War*, 2:117; Halberstam, *Coldest Winter*, 13–15.
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130. Appleman, *United States Army in the Korean War*, 686–87.
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131. Blair, *Forgotten War*, 375.
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137. Schnabel, *United States Army*, 236.
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139. Yu Bin, "Chinese People's Volunteers," 272.
140. Richard W. Stewart, *Staff Operations: The X Corps in Korea, 1950* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: US Army Command and General Staff College, 1991), 71, n.28.
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141. Lieutenant General Edward L. Rowny, *Engineer Memoirs* (Alexandria, VA: Office of History US Army Corps of Engineers, December, 1995), 41–42, http://www.publications.usace.army.mil/Portals/76/Publications/EngineerPamphlets/EP_870-1-49.pdf. Accessed: December 3, 2016.
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142. FEC G-2 Daily Intelligence Summary, October 28, 1950, in Schnabel, *United States Army*, 233–34.
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145. Ibid., 35–36.
146. Appleman, *United States Army in the Korean War*, 764. Willoughby's reasoning was reflected also in the enemy OB estimation of the Eighth Army's G-2 (ibid., 752–54). Since the Eighth Army's G-2, Clint Takenton, was a Willoughby man, he followed Willoughby's methodology despite objection from his junior officers (Halberstam, *Coldest Winter*, 380–81).
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147. Haynes, *Intelligence Failure*, 51.
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148. Playing with numbers was not unique to Willoughby, as evidenced later by the Viet Cong numbers debate, in which General William Westmoreland, the commander of Military Assistance Command Viet-Nam, ordered changes in intelligence reports on Viet Cong troop strengths for political reasons. See, for example, C. Michael Hiam, *Who the Hell Are We Fighting? The Story of Sam Adams and the Vietnam Intelligence Wars* (Hanover, NH: Steerforth Press, 2006). For a different view of the affair, in a wider context, see James Wirtz, *The Tet Offensive: Intelligence Failure in War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell, 1994).
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149. Matthew M. Aid, "Sins of Omission and Commission: Strategic Cultural Factors and US Intelligence Failures during the Cold War," *Intelligence and National Security* 26, no. 4 (August 2011), 478–494, at 482.

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151. Haynes, *Intelligence Failure*, 63.
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153. Schnabel, *United States Army*, 252–55.
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154. Ibid., 266–72.
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155. Ibid., 273.
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156. Yu Bin, “Chinese People’s Volunteers,” 273. This may also have reflected a degree of wishful thinking, whereby motivated there existed a systematic motivated assimilation of evidence to prior theory. Lord, Charles G., Lee Ross, and Mark R. Lepper. “Biased assimilation and attitude polarization: the effects of prior theories on subsequently considered evidence.” *Journal of personality and social psychology* 37, no. 11 (1979): 2098. For application to International relations, see in particular chapter 6 of Jervis, Robert. *Perception and misperception in international politics*. Princeton University Press, 2015. Also Koopman, Cheryl, Eric Shiraev, Rose McDermott, Robert Jervis, and Jack Snyder. “Beliefs about international security and change in 1992 among Russian and American national security elites,” *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology* 4, no. 1 (1998): 35. But if only biased assimilation at work, the question becomes why this tendency affected Willoughby and MacArthur but not Smith. The answer likely lies in the reality that these behaviors and outcomes result not only from personality but also from motivated political as well as psychological biases. In this way, wishful thinking presents a universal risk which can provide an essential necessary, but not always sufficient, explanation upon which personality and political preferences are overlaid in unique ways.
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173. Ibid., 763.
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180. Geoffrey Perret, *Old Soldiers Never Die* (Holbrook, MA: Adams Media, 1996), 228–31; Manchester, *American Caesar*, 202.
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181. Michael Schaller, *Douglas MacArthur: The Far Eastern General* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 48.
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185. John Gunther, *The Riddle of MacArthur: Japan, Korea, and the Far East* (New York: Harper, 1951), 65.
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186. Manchester, *American Caesar*, 19.
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187. James, *Years of MacArthur*, 3:595.

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189. Perret, *Old Soldiers Never Die*, 231, 367.
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247. James, *Years of MacArthur*, 3:382.
248. Kluckhohn, “Heidelberg to Madrid.” Gerd von Rondstat was a brilliant commander of the Wehrmacht and, on a few occasions, disobeyed Hitler’s orders. Erich von Stroheim, an actor and a director in Hollywood, was known for his roles as a typical stiff-necked Prussian officer. Notably, von Stroheim arrived in the USA a year before Willoughby and also fabricated an aristocratic origin.
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250. Kluckhohn, “Heidelberg to Madrid.” The greatest military commander was, of course, MacArthur.
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252. Gunther, *Riddle of MacArthur*, 68.
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256. Edward J. Drea, *MacArthur’s Ultra: Codebreaking and the War against Japan, 1942–1945* (Lawrence: Kansas University Press, 1992), 18, 187.
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258. Drea, *MacArthur’s Ultra*, 21.
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260. Perret, *Old Soldiers Never Die*, 367.
261. *Ibid.*, 367.
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265. For a typical incident, see Max Hastings, *Retribution: The Battle for Japan 1944–45* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 2009), 224.
266. Drea, *MacArthur’s Ultra*, 59.
267. *Ibid.*, 36.
268. *Ibid.*, 146.
269. *Ibid.*, 168.
270. *Ibid.*, 59.
271. Perret, *Old Soldiers Never Die*, 367.
272. For a concise list of these symptoms, see Bar-Joseph and Kruglanski, 81.
273. Halberstam, *Coldest Winter*, 380 (emphasis in the original).