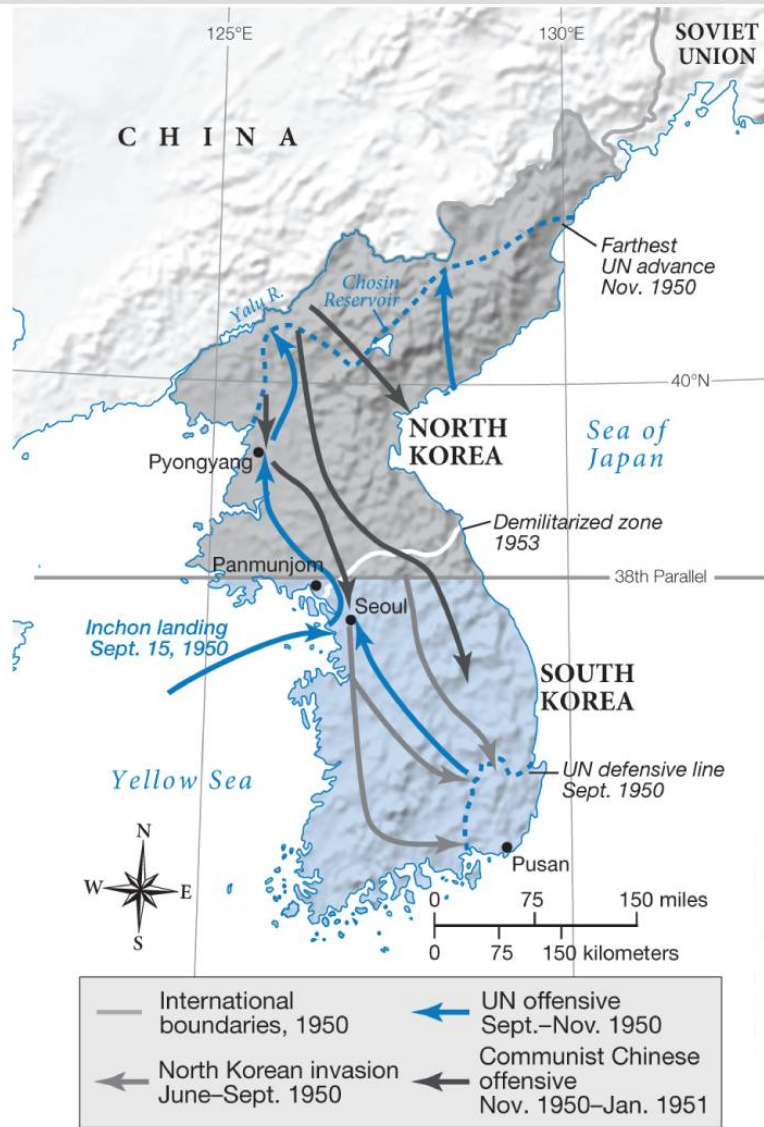


Why did the United States go to war in Korea?

The Cold War erupted into a shooting war in June 1950 when troops from Communist North Korea invaded South Korea. For the first time, Americans would go into battle to implement containment. Confirming the global reach of the Truman Doctrine, U.S. involvement in Korea also marked the militarization of American foreign policy. The United States, in concert with the United Nations, ultimately held the line in Korea, but at a great cost in lives, dollars, and national unity.

Military Implementation of Containment

The [Korean War](#) stemmed from the artificial division of Korea after World War II. Having expelled the Japanese, the United States and the Soviet Union created two occupation zones separated by the thirty-eighth parallel ([Map 26.2](#)), with the USSR in the north and the United States in the south. When Moscow and Washington were unable to agree on unification, the United Nations sponsored elections in South Korea in 1948, and the American-favored candidate, Syngman Rhee, was elected president.



Roark et al., *The American Promise*, 8e, Value Edition
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MAP 26.2 The Korean War, 1950-1953

Although each side had plunged deep into enemy territory, the war ended in 1953 with the dividing line between North and South Korea nearly unchanged from where it had been before the fighting began.

Description

“The places marked on the map are as follows:

International boundaries, 1950: A boundary labeled thirty eight parallel separates North and South Korea, which ran almost along the center of the Korean peninsula, flanked by the Sea of Japan on the east and the Yellow Sea on the west. The northern boundary of North Korea separated the nation from China along the Yalu River and the Soviet Union on the northeast.

North Korean invasion June to September 1950: A route starts from Seoul, moves southward, and then takes an eastward turn to Pusan. One route from the southern part of North Korea and another from Seoul moves to the southeast corner of the Korean Peninsula including Pusan.

U N offensive September to November 1950: A route across the Yellow Sea leads to Inchon landing on September 15, 1950 and an inland route from the U N defensive line (September 1950) along the southeast corner of the peninsula to Seoul take a northward turn to Panmunjom and move further north to Pyongyang. From Pyongyang, the routes move toward the Yalu River and along the Chosin Reservoir. The Chosin Reservoir is labeled Farthest U N advance, November 1950.

Communist Chinese offensive November 1950 to January 1951: A route moves from the Chosin Reservoir toward the east of North Korea. Another route from the northern part of North Korea moves toward South Korea passing the Thirty-eighth parallel boundary. A route from Pyongyang moves southward toward Seoul.

The demilitarized zone extended from Panmunjom on the western coast to the eastern coast, a few miles off the Thirty-eighth Parallel in North Korea.

The map also shows the Yellow Sea, China, Soviet Union, and the Sea of Japan.”

Although unsure whether Rhee’s repressive government could sustain popular support, U.S. officials prioritized his

anticommunism. After the election, the United States provided economic and military aid to South Korea but withdrew most of its troops. That same year, the Soviets established the People's Republic of North Korea under Kim Il-sung and also withdrew.

Skirmishes between North and South Korean troops at the thirty-eighth parallel began almost immediately. In June 1950, ninety thousand North Koreans swept into South Korea. Truman's advisers assumed that the Soviet Union or China had instigated the attack, an assumption later proven incorrect. The president quickly decided to intervene, viewing Korea as "the Greece of the Far East." With the Soviet Union absent from the Security Council, the United States obtained UN sponsorship of a collective effort to repel the attack. Truman's choice for commander of the UN force was World War II hero General Douglas MacArthur.

Sixteen nations sent troops to Korea, but the United States furnished most of the weapons and personnel, deploying almost 1.8 million soldiers. By dispatching troops without asking Congress for a declaration of war, Truman violated the spirit if not the letter of the Constitution, contributing to the expansion of executive power that would characterize the Cold War.

The first American soldiers rushed to Korea were unprepared and ill equipped: "I didn't even know how to dig a foxhole," recalled a nineteen-year-old army reservist, who was told by his sergeant to "Make it like a grave." As a result, U.S. forces suffered major defeats early in the war. The North Koreans took the capital of Seoul and drove deep into South Korea, forcing UN troops to retreat to Pusan. Then in September 1950, General MacArthur launched a bold counteroffensive at Inchon, 180 miles behind North Korean lines. By October, UN and South Korean forces had retaken Seoul and pushed the North Koreans back to the thirty-eighth parallel. Now Truman had to decide whether containment or reunification was the goal.



Carl Mydans/The LIFE Picture Collection/Getty Images.

U.S. Troops Head to Korea These men were part of the 1st Cavalry, some of the first American troops sent to Korea in 1950. This photograph was taken as they departed from Japan, not yet aware of where they were shipping out to next.

From Containment to Rollback to Containment

“Troops could not be expected ... to march up to a surveyor’s line and stop,” remarked Secretary of State Dean Acheson. His comment reflected a transformation of the military objective from containment to elimination of the enemy and unification of Korea. It would be the only time during the entire Cold War that the United States tried to roll

back communism by force. With UN approval, Truman authorized MacArthur to cross the thirty-eighth parallel. Concerned about possible intervention by China, the president directed him to keep UN forces away from the Korean-Chinese border. MacArthur disregarded that order. The general moved troops within forty miles of China, whereupon 300,000 Chinese soldiers crossed into Korea. With Chinese help, the North Koreans recaptured Seoul.

After three months of grueling battle, UN forces fought their way back to the thirty-eighth parallel. At that point, Truman decided to seek a negotiated settlement. MacArthur was furious, considering mere containment a defeat. Taking his case to the public, he challenged both the president's authority to conduct foreign policy and the principle of civilian control of the military. In response to this insubordination, Truman fired MacArthur in April 1951. All the top military leaders supported the president. Many Americans, however, agreed with the general. Why should Americans die simply to preserve the status quo? Why not destroy the enemy once and for all? Those siding with MacArthur blamed the stalemate in Korea on the government's ineptitude or softness toward Communism.

Truman never recovered from the political fallout. Nor was he able to end the war. Negotiations began in July 1951, but

peace talks dragged on for two years while twelve thousand more U.S. soldiers died.

Korea's Political Fallout

Truman had won the election of 1948 based on the continuing popularity of the New Deal and bipartisan consensus around foreign policy. The fall of China and the protracted war in Korea weakened both the president and the Democratic Party. Popular discontent with “Truman’s war” boosted Republicans in the 1952 election. Their presidential nominee, General Dwight D. Eisenhower, was a popular hero. As supreme commander in Europe during World War II, he won widespread acclaim for leading the Allied armies to victory over Germany, and in 1950 he was Truman’s choice for the first supreme commander of NATO forces.

Although Eisenhower believed that professional soldiers should stay out of politics, he found compelling reasons to run in 1952. He largely agreed with Truman’s foreign policy, but he criticized Democrats for solving domestic problems with expensive federal programs. He also disliked the foreign policy views of leading Republican presidential contender Senator Robert A. Taft, who attacked containment and sought to cut defense spending.

Eisenhower won the nomination, but the old guard prevailed on the party platform. It condemned containment as immoral for its failure to turn back communism and charged the Truman administration with shielding “traitors to the Nation in high places.” By choosing the thirty-nine-year-old California senator and anti-Communist crusader Richard M. Nixon for his running mate, Eisenhower helped to appease the right wing of the party. Elected to Congress in 1946, Nixon had quickly made a name for himself as a member of HUAC, defeating Helen Gahagan Douglas in the Senate race of 1950.

His public approval ratings plummeting, Truman decided not to run for reelection. The Democrats nominated Adlai E. Stevenson, the popular governor of Illinois, but he could neither escape the domestic fallout from the Korean War nor match Eisenhower’s widespread appeal. Shortly before the election, Eisenhower announced dramatically, “I shall go to Korea,” and voters registered their confidence in his ability to end the war. Cutting sharply into traditional Democratic territory, Eisenhower won several southern states and garnered 55 percent of the popular vote overall. His coattails carried a narrow Republican majority to Congress.

An Armistice and the War’s Costs

Eisenhower made good on his pledge to end the Korean War. In July 1953, the two sides reached an armistice that left Korea divided, again roughly at the thirty-eighth parallel, with North and South separated by a two-and-a-half-mile-wide demilitarized zone. The war fulfilled the objective of containment, the United States backing up its promise to aid nations resisting communism. Truman and Eisenhower had managed to contain what amounted to a world war — involving twenty nations altogether — within a single country and to avoid the use of nuclear weapons.

Yet what was described as a “limited war” took the lives of 36,000 Americans and wounded more than 100,000.

Thousands of U.S. soldiers suffered as prisoners of war.

South Korea lost more than one million people to war-related causes, and 1.8 million North Koreans and Chinese were killed or wounded. The war also set a precedent for “police actions” that bypassed the traditional U.S. requirement of a congressional declaration of war, even in cases involving extensive commitments of U.S. troops and treasure.

The border separating North and South Korea may not have budged as a result of the war, but the conflict had a pronounced effect on American defense policy and spending. In 1950, just before the war began, the National Security Council completed a top-secret report, known as [**NSC 68**](#), which urged that national survival required a

massive military buildup. The Korean War triggered nearly all of the military expansion called for in that document, vastly increasing U.S. capacity to act as a global power. Military spending shot up from \$14 billion in 1950 to \$50 billion in 1953, and remained above \$40 billion thereafter. By 1952, defense spending claimed nearly 70 percent of the federal budget, and the size of the armed forces had tripled.

For Eisenhower and other military leaders, one lesson of Korea was that U.S. forces should never again fight a land war in Asia. But even during the Korean War the Truman administration was expanding its role in that part of the world by increasing aid to the French, who were fighting to hang on to their colonial empire in Indochina. As U.S. Marines retreated from a battle against Chinese soldiers in 1950, they sang, prophetically, “We’re Harry’s police force on call, / So put back your pack on, / The next step is Saigon.”

REVIEW

What were the causes and consequences of the Korean War?