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United States Policy Vis-a-vis Korea, 1850-1950
Professor John Edward Wilz, 1992

Let me begin by observing that my distinguished colleague at Indiana University, Rohert H. Ferrell, used to rattle doctoral candidates who were defending dissertations by asking, while flashing an impish grin, "What is the thesis of your dissertation- assuming it has a thesis?" Well, I shall announce what I suppose is the thesis, or unifying theme, of my remarks at the outset. Until June 25, 1950, Korea, the ancient "Land of the Morning Calm"- or; as "GI's" often referred to it in 1950-53, the "Land that God Forgot"- never loomed particularly large in the political or strategic calculations of the makers and shakers of United States foreign policy. Rather, those makers and shakers tended to view Korea, a ragged peninsula that traces its history as a nation to the year 2,333 B.C., as a Northeast Asian backwater, one that was populated by a largely ignorant and hapless people- a people whose development had been severely retarded over the centuries as a result of having fallen victim of conquerors and marauders from China, Mongolia, and Japan.1

At the dawn of the nineteenth century, Korea, a tributary state of the Ch'ing dynasty of China, was decrepit and demoralized. And in its tribulation, it had turned inward- had sought to isolate itself from the outer world, save for minimal contacts with its suzerain China and with Japan. By the middle of the century, indeed, Occidentals were wont to refer to Korea as the "Hermit Kingdom"-on the rare occasions when they referred to it at all. As for Americans, they knew next to nothing about Korea through the first half of the nineteenth century. In a volume entitled *An Epitome of Modern Geography*, published in Boston in l820, the author dismissed the Hermit Kingdom in two sentences: "Corea is a small kingdom tributary to China, but is little known. King-kitao [Seoul] is the chief town."2 However deficient his knowledge about the Hermit Kingdom, Zadock Pratt, an obscure congressman from New York, in 1845 proposed that the executive branch of the Washington government effect commercial arrangements with Japan and Korea. His proposal generated no apparent support.3 And the historical record offers no hint that when Commodore Matthew C. Perry prevailed upon the Japanese to accept a commercial treaty with the United States in 1853, leaders in Washington gave any thought to the possibility of ordering a comparable initiative aimed at Korea.

The Washington governrnent's disinterest in Korea aside, American seamen were increasingly active in the waters off the shores of the peninsular kingdom. And in 1855, four crewmen of the whaler Two Brothers, weary of their abusive captain, jumped ship in a small boat and set a course for Japan. But gale winds washed them ashore on the east coast of Korea near Wonsan. The four seamen, so far as anybody knows, were the first Americans to set foot on Korean soil. Korean villagers treated them hospitably until, on orders from authorities in Seoul, the men were trundled overland to China, whence they secured passage back to the United States.4 A decade later, in June of 1866, the American schooner Surprise floundered in the Yellow Sea off the northwest coast of Korea. Like the castaways of the Two Brothers, the shipwrecked crewmen of the Surprise were accorded hospitable treatment by local Koreans and dispatched, again on orders from Seoul, over the Yalu River to China.5

Alas, the outcome for the crewmen of the American schooner General Sherman was not so fortunate when their vessel moved into Korean waters at the same time the men of the Surprise were enroute to China. Chartered by a British trading company, the General Sherman sailed across the Yellow Sea from China into the rain-swollen Taedong River in August of 1866, then moved up river toward the city of P'yongyang, ostensibly for the purpose of exchanging trade goods with Koreans. Ruling out any trading activity, authorities in Seoul issued orders that the General Sherman was to depart Korea at once. Otherwise, the ship was to be destroyed and its crewmen, most of them Chinese

and Malays, put to death. Unfortunately, an immediate departure from Korea by the General Sherman was not possible. The Taedong had fallen, and the American schooner was hopelessly stuck in the mud of the river's bed. Accordingly, frenzied Koreans attacked and burned the vessel, and hacked to pieces 6 crewmen who survived the attack and sought to surrender. To an American naval commander who had sailed into Korean waters in the spring of 1868 to determine the fate of the General Sherman, authorities in Seoul explained that a local mob, under extreme provocation, had attacked the American schooner. According to the Korean authorities, the ensuing battle ended when the heavily armed schooner caught fire and exploded.7

Undaunted by the fate of the General Sherman, Secretary of State Hamilton Fish, in 1869, instructed the United States minister to China, Frederick F. Low, to proceed to Korea for the purpose of negotiating a navigation and trade treaty with the Hermit Kingdom.8 Low was ready to carry out Fish's instructions thirteen months later. Reflecting on his impending mission, he wrote the secretary of state, "I apprehend that all the cunning and sophistry which enter so largely into oriental character will be brought to bear to defeat the object of our visit. . .”9

Undaunted by oriental cunning and sophistry, Low boarded the U.S.S. Colorado in May of 1871 and sailed to the waters adjacent to Chemulp'o (present-day Inch'on). Korean emissaries turned aside Low's request that the royal court in Seoul negotiate a treaty with the United States. Then, on June 1, 1871, Korean cannoneers fired their batteries (without effect) at American gunboats and steam launches whose officers and crewmen were exploring the Yom-ha, the narrow passage that separates the Korean mainland from Kanghwa Island (a large island that lies to the north of Inch'on). 10

What was to be done? Low thought it would be a grievous mistake to order the squadron to weigh anchors and sail away. "In estimating the effect it may exert upon our power and prestige, which will affect the interests of our people in the East,” he wrote Fish, "the situation must be viewed from the oriental stand-point, rather than the more advanced one of Christian civilization." Should the squadron now sail away, Low reckoned, both the Koreans and Chinese would be emboldened to give vent to antiforeign impulses.11 The upshot was a punitive operation against the Koreans that has been described as America's first Korean War.

And so it came to pass, on June 10, 1871, that a flotilla of gunboats and steam launches moved up the Yom-ha. In the boats were two companies of marines and an improvised company of sailors armed with rifles. Moving from one Korean fortification to another, the punitive expedition did what Low had directed it to do, namely, administer stiff punishment to the hopelessly outgunned Koreans. The usual procedure was for the gunboats to bombard fortifications, whereupon the marines and sailors, already ashore, would move forward, shooting and burning. Before returning to the anchorage on June 12, the expedition destroyed five forts and killed about 250 Koreans. Three Americans died in the action, three were wounded.12

The dimension of their defeat along the Yom-ha notwithstanding, the Koreans refused to enter negotiations with Low. Accordingly, on July 3, 1871, the American flotilla weighed anchors and sailed away; the so-called Low Mission to Korea ended as a failure. 13

However much Koreans wished to stay clear of the outer world, the passing of Korea's splendid isolation was at hand. And so it happened, in 1876, that the Japanese, flexing naval muscles in Korean waters after the fashion of Commodore Perry in Japanese waters in the 1850s, prevailed on the royal court in Seoul to accept a trade treaty, the Treaty of Kanghwa.14 Two years later, Senator Aaron A. Sargent of California proposed that the United States work out an accord with Korea. Such an accord would result in more than just economic advantages for both countries. In Sargent's view, "the blessings of modern civilization could be conferred on a brave and industrious people (the Koreans), now oppressed by political ideas inseparable from semi-barbarism; and Christianity might displace Buddhism (in the Hermit Kingdom)."15

Several months after Sargent proposed an accord with Korea, officials in Washington directed Commodore Robert W. Shufeldt of the United States Navy to negotiate a trade treaty with Korea.

Which Shufeldt did - in Beijing, the capital of Korea's suzerain, with the Chinese viceroy, Li Hung-chang. At length, the American commodore departed the Chinese port of Chefoo aboard the U.S.S. Swatara and sailed across the Yellow Sea to Chemulp'o. Next, on May 22, 1882, Shufeldt and assorted aides, accompanied by a marine guard, made their way to a tent that had been pitched on a hillside not far from the Swatara's anchorage. They implanted the Stars and Stripes in front of the tent, and with minimal ceremony Shufeldt and Korean emissaries put their hands to a treaty of peace, amity, commerce, and navigation. This was the Treaty of Chemulp'o, the first article of which provided that, "if other powers deal unjustly or oppressively with either Government, the other will exert their good offices, on being informed of the case, to bring about an amicable arrangement, thus showing their friendly feelings." Following a celebratory banquet, the commodore returned to his ship and sailed away.16

The first United States minister to Korea, Lucius M. Foote, took up residence in Seoul in 1883. At the request of the Korean king, Foote offered advice to the Seoul government on a variety of matters. He arranged for a delegation of Koreans to undertake an embassy to the United States. (Apparently the first Koreans to set foot in North America, the members of the delegation were received cordially, and in Washington were granted an interview with President Chester A. Arthur. 17) He prepared the way for two American trading companies to set up operations in Korea,18 and helped Thomas Alva Edison to secure an exclusive franchise to install electric light and telephone systems in the country. 19 His resident physician (who would subsequently become the United States minister to Korea), Horace N. Allen, established a hospital- and staffed it with medical missionaries. Ignoring laws that forbade Christians to proselytize Koreans, the missionaries labored with considerable success to convert Koreans to Protestant Christianity. They also sought to influence the international competition for supremacy in Korea that dominated the political life of the onetime Hermit Kingdom during the quarter-century after the signing of the Treaty of Chemulp'o.20

Question. Was United States policy vis-a-vis Korea during the years following ratification of the Treaty of Chemulp'o driven by imperial impulses? North Korean and Soviet writers have argued that it was, and respected American scholars have been inclined to agree. Donald M. Bishop has argued otherwise: "My reading of the American documents found in the Navy's Asiatic Squadron Letters, the post records for Seoul of the Department of State, the files of the Department of War, and in the personal collections of dozens of ambassadors, diplomats, and army and navy officers… convinces me that Korea provides scant evidence to support the concept of American 'imperialism' or 'gunboat diplomacy'…."21 My distinguished colleague at Indiana University, David M. Pletcher, who recently completed a book-length manuscript on the Washington government's diplomacy of trade and investment during the second half of the nineteenth century, agrees with Don Bishop.

Two countries whose imperial ambitions regarding Korea during the closing years of the nineteenth century are beyond dispute were Japan and Russia. Japan advanced its ambition when, after crushing China in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-95 (a war in which the United States maintained strict neutrality22), it compelled the Chinese to abandon all claims to suzerainty over Korea. The Russians accelerated their activities in Korea in 1895-96, when they befriended the Korean monarch as he maneuvered to prevent the Japanese from achieving dominance in his country. At length, in 1904, the competition between Japan and Russia for supremacy in Korea, and also Manchuria, prompted the Japanese to launch a surprise sea attack on the Russian naval base at Port Arthur on Manchuria's Liaotung Peninsula- an attack similar in conception to that which they would launch against Pearl Harbor thirty-eight years later. Thus began the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05.

As for Korea, the Japanese had moved troops to Korea in advance of their attack on Port Arthur. Three weeks after the attack on the Russian naval base, they compelled the Korean monarch, who in 1897 had proclaimed himself an emperor, to accept a protocol that made Korea a virtual vassal of Japan.23 President Theodore Roosevelt of the United States expressed no objection. Little wonder. Four years before the outbreak of the Russo-Japanese War, the inimitable TR had written a friend, "I

should like to see Japan have Korea. She will be a check upon Russia, and she deserves it for what she has done."24 Or as the historian Tyler Dennett, a staunch defender of Roosevelt, would write two decades later, "(I)t appears to have been evident to the President that Korea, long a derelict state, a menace to navigation, must be towed into port and secured."25 With such views, TR consented to a secret memorandum drawn up in Tokyo, in July of 1905, between the United States secretary of war, William Howard Taft, and the Japanese prime minister, Count Taro Katsura. In the so-called Taft-Katsura memorandum, the secretary of war acquiesced in Katsura's outrageous assertion that Korea was to blame for the Russo-Japanese War, and expressed the view that Korea should be prevented from making treaty arrangements without Japan's consent. 26 Roosevelt also approved an article in the Treaty of Portsmouth of September 1905, which terminated the Russo-Japanese War, that accorded the Japanese carte blanche to take whatever measures they wished to secure their interests in Korea.27 And when the Korean emperor, in the autumn of 1905, dispatched an emissary to Washington to appeal to TR, in the name of the "good offices" provision of the Treaty of Chemulp'o, to act to thwart Japanese plans to establish a protectorate over Korea, the president refused to receive said emissary. (In truth, by the time the emissary arrived in Washington in November of 1905, the Japanese- at bayonet point- had already prevailed upon the Korean emperor to accept Japanese "protection.") Then, at the behest of Japan, the Washington government withdrew the American legation from Seoul, a move that prompted other governments to do the same. The American vice-consul in Seoul, Willard D. Straight, likened the resultant exodus of foreign diplomats from the Korean capital to a stampede of rats leaving a sinking ship.28

As for the Korean emperor, he would have entertained less hope that the American president might intercede on behalf of Korean independence had he known of a comment that TR made to the lecturer-writer George Kennan (an uncle of the later-day diplomat-historian) in October of 1905. Covering the Russo-Japanese War for The Outlook, a periodical that commanded the interest of Roosevelt and other Americans of like mind, Kennan filed several essays on Korea in 1904-05. In one, he wrote, "So far as my limited observation qualifies me to judge, the average town Korean spends more than half his time in idleness, and instead of cleaning up the premises in his long intervals of leisure, he sits contentedly on his threshold and smokes, or lies on the ground and sleeps, with his nose over an open drain from which a turkey-buzzard would fly and a decent pig would turn away in disgust.”29 In an essay that appeared in The Outlook in the autumn of 1905, he compared "the cleanliness, good order, industry, and general prosperity" of Japan with "the filthiness, demoralization, laziness, and general rack and ruin" of Korea. And the Korean emperor? Kennan wrote, "He is unconscious as a child, stubborn as a Boer, ignorant as a Chinaman, and vain as a Hottentot."30 Of the latter article, Roosevelt wrote to Kennan, “I very much like your... article on Korea in the Outlook."31

Question. Did the United States betray Korea in 1904-05? Or, more delicately, did it fail to meet its legal and moral obligations to the Korean nation? Korean patriots have certainly believed that it did.32 I agree with the Korean patriots. During 1904-05, the administration of Theodore Roosevelt condoned and even encouraged the destruction of a nation-state which the United States was bound by the Treaty of Chemulp'o to assist, if only by exercising good offices when said nation-state requested that it do so. To condone and encourage the rape of a victim whom one is pledged to assist when the victim requests assistance, if only by proposing that the rapist terminate his attack, can scarcely be viewed as anything less than a betrayal of the victim. That the Japanese conquest of Korea was inevitable, it seems to me, is beside the point.

Well, the Japanese gradually tightened their grip on Korea, and in 1910 formally annexed the onetime Hermit Kingdom to their empire. They accelerated their efforts to revitalize and strengthen the economic foundations of their new colony, and the results of their enterprise impressed assorted Americans and Europeans.33 They also set about to complete the subjugation of Korea's people, subvert its national culture, and transform Koreans into loyal subjects of the Japanese emperor. Korean patriots, of course, chafed under Japanese rule, and in early 1919, inspired by the famous Fourteen

Points of President Woodrow Wilson of the United States, which appeared to proclaim the right of self-determination for all nations, organized demonstrations in which they demanded self-determination for Korea. The demonstrations turned into riots that Koreans to the present day celebrate as the Mansei Revolution. (The word mansei is the Korean equivalent of the Japanese word banzai.) From President Wilson came not a word of support for the Korean rebels, against whom the Japanese moved with efficiency and dispatch.34

During the 1920s and 1930s, Korea seldom crossed the minds of the men who fashioned United States foreign policy, save in 1934-35 when, on behalf of the Oriental Mining Company, one of the last American firms that continued to operate in Korea, the Washington government protested a gold-export tax imposed by the Japanese.35 No documents pertaining to Korea may be found in the pages of Foreign Relations of the United States for the years 1923 through 1933 and 1936 through 1940.

Then, on December 7-8, 1941, the Japanese plunged themselves into war with the United States by attacking Pearl Harbor and the Philippines. Korean patriots were ecstatic, none of them more so than Syngman Rhee, a leader of a government-in-exile, the Korean Provisional Government (KPG), since the time of the Mansei Revolution. To Rhee's chagrin, the Washington government turned aside his appeal that it recognize the KPG as the legitimate government of Korea.36 At length, during the Cairo Conference of autumn 1943, leaders of the United States, Great Britain, and China proclaimed that Korea should receive independence "in due course."37 A short time later, during the Teheran Conference, the Soviet dictator, Josef Stalin, consented to the Cairo Declaration.38 What the Allied leaders had in mind was that, after Japan's defeat, Korea would be under the governance of a trusteeship comprised of representatives of the victorious powers for several or even many years until such time as it was deemed prepared to assume the responsibility of governing itself. 39 And how did Korean patriots respond to the "due course" conception? They were at once dismayed and incensed. The patriots wanted Korea to become independent the moment the Allies expelled the Japanese from Korean soil.40

In August of 1945, the war in the Pacific moved to a sudden and dramatic climax. Although the Soviets, who entered the Pacific War one week before the Japanese agreed to surrender, were in a position to sweep over and occupy all of Korea before United States forces could make their way from Okinawa to the Korean peninsula, Stalin consented to an American operational directive whereby the Soviets would accept the surrender of Japanese forces down to the thirty-eighth parallel, while the Americans would do likewise to the south of that line.41 Why did the dictator in the Kremlin consent to an arrangement that would allow Americans to occupy the southern half of Korea? Probably because he hoped- in vain, it turned out- that his forthcoming response to the Washington government's proposal regarding Korea would prompt the Americans to allow the Soviets to share in the occupation of Japan.42

Question. Should the United States have occupied the southern half of Korea in 1945? Assorted historians in the United States and elsewhere have argued that the North American superpower should have stayed clear of the old Land of the Morning Calm at the end of the Pacific War. In the view of one prominent scholar, a preponderance of the people of Korea in 1945 yearned for a sweeping revolution of the sort that communists engineered in North Korea during the postwar years and communists and other leftists hoped to bring about in South Korea. But Americans, bent on making Korea a citadel of anticommunism and an outpost of capitalism, pursued policies that produced a repressive and reactionary regime in the southern half of the Korean peninsula.43 Even if one rejects the foregoing scholar's idyllic view of North Korean communism, he or she must ponder that, if the Washington government had acquiesced to a Soviet occupation of all of Korea in 1945, a development that would have assured that all of Korea would have become a bastion of Marxism-Leninism, the Korean War of 1950-53 would not have come to pass- a war that claimed the lives of an estimated two million people, more than fifty thousand of them Americans. Such a decision by the Washington government in 1945 also would have precluded what for many Americans was the embarrassment of

their government's complicity with what even the current president of the ROK concedes was several decades of authoritarian rule in South Korea.44 One wonders, though, what percentage of the citizenry of the pulsating South Korean republic in the early 1990s, whatever that republic's shortcomings, believes the United States should have stood by and allowed the Soviets and their client Kim Il-sung to assert authority over all of the Korean peninsula at the end of the Pacific War.

The foregoing aside, the Washington government elected to resist what it believed was the Kremlin's determination to turn Korea into a bastion of Sovietism. 45 So it occupied the southern half of Korea, and insisted that a provisional government to be established by an Allied joint commission- a provisional government that would prepare the way for a permanent government for the onetime Hermit Kingdom- must be made up of representatives of a wide spectrum of Korean political parties and social organizations. It expected that such a broadly based provisional government would establish a permanent government whose leaders would be chosen by the Korean people in free, multiparty elections. A freely elected government, Americans believed, would be noncommunist, probably anticommunist, for Americans of the early postwar era accepted as an article of faith the proposition that, in free multiparty elections, voters in any part of the world would reject communism. Such a government, of course, would be ipso facto sympathetic with the interests and ideals of the United States.

Whatever the view of various later-day historians that at the end of the Pacific War most Koreans shared what one might describe as a Kim Il-sung vision of Korea's future, the Soviets were unwilling to trust the Korean people to opt for a Soviet-style regime. Hence they insisted that a Korean provisional government must be comprised only of representatives of parties and social organizations that had not denounced the plan of the victorious powers in the late war to place Korea under a temporary trusteeship. Korean leaders of the moderate and rightist persuasion, including the irascible Syngman Rhee, had, to borrow a present-day expression, gone ballistic when the Allied foreign ministers, meeting in Moscow in December of 1945, announced the intention of their governments to establish a trusteeship to preside over Korea's destinies during the next half-decade. On orders of the Kremlin, or so American leaders believed, communists and assorted leftist confederates of the communists had expressed no opposition to the trusteeship conception. A provisional government comprised almost exclusively of communists and other leftists would doubtless prepare the way for a Soviet-style permanent government.

Complicating matters from the perspective of the United States during 1946 and 1947 were intermittent demonstrations, riots, and strikes in South Korea. Most of them, in the view of the American military government, were instigated and orchestrated by communists and other leftists. In response to what was obviously an anti-American campaign, the United States commander in South Korea, Lieutenant General John R. Hodge, in September of 1947, ordered American military police to raid the offices of leftist newspapers, one of them the official organ of South Korea's Communist Party, and arrest their publishers and editors and many of their writers. 46

By late summer of 1947, leaders of the United States, their attention increasingly fixed on the task of containing what they perceived to be the expansionist ambitions of a manifestly evil Soviet empire in Europe and the Middle East, had given up hope that the two halves of Korea might eventually be brought together under a freely elected government. And in early September of 1947, policy planners meeting in Washington reached an almost unanimous decision that the best course for the United States was to abandon South Korea to its fate.47 A few weeks later; the American joint chiefs of staff reported to the secretary of defense that "from the standpoint of military security, the United States has little interest in maintaining the present troops and bases in Korea."48 Following a discussion that involved Secretary of State George C. Marshall, on September29, 1947, George F. Kennan of the State Department's Policy Planning Staff wrote in a memorandum that an aim of the United States was "to get the best bargain we can regarding Korea.”49

The Washington government thereupon, in the autumn of 1947, passed to the United Nations a Soviet proposal for removing both Soviet and American troops from Korea, as well as an American recommendation that a freely elected government be established for all of Korea. As anticipated by leaders in Washington, the Soviets had no interest in free elections, hence refused to allow UN election commissioners to enter North Korea. So the commissioners arranged elections in South Korea for representatives to a national assembly. Boycotted by the communists, the elections, which took place in May of 1948, resulted in an overwhelming victory for rightist parties. In subsequent weeks the National Assembly drew up a constitution for the Republic of Korea and elected Syngman Rhee the ROK's first president. The new South Korean government was inaugurated on August 15, 1948. A few weeks later, in P'yongyang, communists established the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, and designated Kim Il-sung the DPRK's first premier.

Meanwhile, in the spring of 1948, a paper prepared by the National Security Council in Washington, NSC 8, was approved by President Harry S. Truman, and thus became the basic statement of United States policy vis-a-vis Korea. According to NSC 8, the United States should assist the South Koreans in building up their economy and their armed forces. But it categorically rejected the option that the United States "guarantee the political independence and territorial integrity of South Korea, by force of arms. . . against external aggression."50

As for Soviet and American troops, they began to withdraw from Korea in August and September of 1948. But in the face of a new wave of civil disturbances, apparently communist-inspired, officials in Washington directed General Douglas MacArthur, commander of United States forces in the Far East, to deploy a regimental combat team of 7,000 men in South Korea for an indefinite period.51 A short time later, in January of 1949, MacArthur, in response to a query by superiors in Washington, made clear his view that the South Koreans could not turn back an invasion from the north and that the United States should commit no military forces to bolster the South Koreans in the event of an invasion. He went on to say that the Japanese must be conditioned to the prospect of Soviet domination of all of the East Asian mainland.52

Then, in March of 1949, President Truman approved NSC 8/2, an updated statement of American policy respecting Korea. Reiterating the view of American leaders that the aim of Soviet policy in Korea was an eventual takeover of the entire peninsula, NSC 8/2 nonetheless announced that the last American troops, save for a small advisory group that would instruct the ROK army, would be withdrawn from South Korea by June 30, 1949. After departure of its combat soldiers, the Washington government would continue to provide economic, military, and technical assistance to the Republic of Korea. Otherwise, or so it appeared, the ROK would be on its own.53

Over the anguished protest of President Rhee,54 the remaining American combat troops moved out of South Korea in June of 1949. And what should the United States do in the event the North Koreans crashed over the thirty-eighth parallel? In a paper that was transmitted to the State Deparunent on June 27, 1949, officials in the Pentagon made clear their conviction that the United States ought to undertake no armed intervention to rescue South Korea from the clutches of Kim Il-sung.55 Civilian leaders registered no objection to the views of the military chieftains. A few weeks later, in July of 1949, General MacArthur's Far East Command (FECOM) completed Plan CHOW CHOW, FECOM's operational plan in the event of a North Korean invasion of South Korea. As for the possibility of redeploying United States combat troops in Korea, CHOW CHOW contained no provision whatever. In the event of a North Korean invasion of South Korea, FECOM would evacuate to Japan all American civilian and military personnel as well as designated foreign nationals. 56

A few months later, in December of 1949, President Truman approved NSC 48/2, a document that spelled out the Washington government's policy in the Far East. To prevent the expansion of communist power into the Pacific, the document made clear, the United States intended to rely on its bastions in the Philippines, the Ryukyus, and Japan. As for South Korea, mentioned almost in passing, the United States should continue to provide economic, military, and technical assistance.57 Then, on

January 12, 1950, Secretary of State Dean G. Acheson delivered his famous speech to the National Press Club in which he sketched the American defensive perimeter in the Far East. The ROK was on the other side of the perimeter. Should an "area" lying beyond that perimeter prove incapable of turning back an aggressor, it would be up to "the entire civilized world under the Charter of the United Nations" to protect the area's independence.58

Acheson's speech touched off alarm bells in Seoul. The result was anguished appeals by the South Korean government that the United States extend its defensive line in the Far East to include South Korea.59 Had they known the substance of testimony offered by Acheson the day following the National Press Club speech to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, meeting in executive session, they would have felt even greater anguish. After telling the senators that South Korea could not turn back an invasion by North Korea that was powerfully supported by China or the Soviet Union, the secretary testified, "I do not think that we (the United States) would undertake to resist it (an invasion of South Korea by North Korea) by military force." He also conceded that the Soviets probably would veto any resolution introduced in the Security Council of the UN mandating a military response by UN members to an invasion of South Korea.60 When in April of 1950 the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Connmittee, Tom Connally of Texas, rattled leaders in Seoul by telling a reporter that abandonment of the ROK by the United States was a distinct possibility,61 Acheson issued a statement that the United States valued the independence of South Korea-but declined to offer the slightest hint that the United States might rally to the defense of the ROK in the event it fell victim to an invasion from the north.62 Even the formulation by the National Security Council of its renowned paper NSC 68, a bellicose document that indicated a renewed determination by the United States to stand up to Soviet and Soviet-supported expansion across the entire world,63 brought no apparent change in the thinking of the Washington government about Korea.

Then, on June 25, 1950, the North Korean army swept across the thirty-eighth parallel. And when it became clear that the South Koreans could not stay the North Korean tide, President Truman, in what in my judgment was a one hundred and eighty-degree turnabout of United States policy vis-a-vis Korea, ordered American armed forces into combat in support of the Republic of Korea. Shortly after the outbreak of the Korean War, it is worth noting, the Soviet diplomat Andrei Vyshinsky was quoted as remarking to an American businessman: "Well, we don't know what to think about you Americans. Look at Korea. You did everything you could to tell us you were not interested in Korea, and when the North Koreans went in there [in South Korea], you put your troops in.”64

Question. Did the Truman administration, as critics subsequently charged, emit signals indicating that the United States would not make an armed intervention on behalf of South Korea in the event the North Koreans invaded the ROK, and in so doing inadvertently invite a North Korean invasion? Like Vyshinsky, I believe it did - when it withdrew American combat troops from South Korea, when Acheson excluded South Korea from the United States defensive perimeter in the Far East, when Acheson responded as he did to publication of the Connally interview.

Question. Did leaders in Washington have any reason to suspect that the North Koreans might actually undertake an invasion of South Korea in the foreseeable future? I believe they did. The documentary record includes numerous references from 1949 to early 1950 by officials of the American foreign policy-military establishment to the possibility of a full-powered drive by the North Koreans over the thirty-eighth parallel, some of them doubtless inspired by the almost incessant border clashes that took place during 1949 and early 1950 between the forces of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) and the Republic of Korea (ROK) that were entrenched along the parallel. President Truman later recalled in his memoirs that "(t)hroughout the spring (of 1950) the Central Intelligence reports said that the North Koreans might at any time decide to change from isolated raids (against South Korea) to a full-scale attack.”65 General MacArthur's intelligence people surmised in March of 1950 that the North Koreans would be prepared to invade South Korea by the following autumn, perhaps in the spring, that is, during the next three months.66

Question. Did the Truman administration have reason to believe (or seriously hope) that the South Koreans might prove capable of turning back a North Korean invasion? I think it did not. You will recall that Acheson himself told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on the day after his speech to the National Press Club that South Korea would fall before an invasion from the north that was supported by China or the Soviet Union. As also noted in the present paper, General MacArthur did not believe the South Koreans could turn back communist invaders. In March of 1950, General William L. Roberts, the commander of the United States military advisory group in South Korea, concluded that in the event of an invasion from the north the ROK "would be gobbled up to be added to the rest of Red Asia."67 On June 1, 1950, the intelligence section of America's Far East Air Force concluded that "South Korea will fall before a North Korean invasion."68 A fortnight later, eleven days before the actual invasion of South Korea, the United States ambassador in Seoul, John J. Muccio, struck a similar note.69

Question. Did the Washington government blunder in the matter of Korea in 1949-50? I am inclined to think it did.

Now one might argue that the blunder took place following the North Korean invasion of the ROK, that is, when Truman ordered United States combat forces to rally to the defense of South Korea. After all, had the Washington government stood by and, in the language of General Roberts, allowed the communists to gobble up South Korea, perhaps a couple of million Asians and Occidentals who died in the old Land of the Morning Calm in 1950-53 would not have died. Korea would have endured nothing like the devastation that it did endure in those years. Arguments of that sort, of course, may be made against a decision to rally against an invader in any war. Without getting into specifics, I think the reasons for the armed intervention in Korea by the United States in the summer of 1950 were manifestly legitimate. And I find it inconceivable that anybody might fashion a persuasive argument that the people of South Korea would be better off in 1992 had South Korea fallen under the rule of Kim Il-sung in 1950.

As mentioned, I am inclined to the view that the Washington government blundered in the matter of Korea in 1949-50. Perhaps the word blunder is too harsh. After all, the men who fashioned United States foreign policy during those years were honorable and capable men. They were the men who inaugurated the policy of containment of Soviet power that brought victory to the United States and its allies and friends in the Cold War during the 1990s. They were men who were rightly and properly preoccupied in 1949 and early 1950 with the Berlin blockade, the formation of NATO, the Tito revolt against Soviet hegemony in Yugoslavia, expanding Soviet influence in the oil-rich Middle East, and the triumph of communism in China. Regarding Korea, those men felt compelled to avoid any action or statement that might prompt the prickly Syngman Rhee, on the assumption that the United States would rush to his support, to provoke full-dress hostilities with the DPRK in the hope that the South Koreans, with American support, might drive Kim Il-sung and his henchmen from power in North Korea.

Still, one conclusion seems inescapable. If leaders of the United States had made the same determination regarding Korea during the six or so months (or perhaps the year or two) before June 25,1950, that they made in the days after that date- and if they had made their intentions clear to the Soviets and North Koreans and left a contingent of United States combat troops deployed along the thirty-eighth parallel, say, in the historic invasion corridor to the north of Seoul- they almost certainly would have headed off a horrendous tragedy (assuming, of course, that they could have succeeded in keeping Syngman Rhee on a tight leash) Inasmuch as the premises that informed their momentous determination of late June of 1950, (to wit, that the global interests of the United States and the rest of the noncommunist world required the containment of communist influence and power at the thirty-eighth parallel in Korea) had been no less valid during the months (or even years) before June 25, 1950, it is hard to escape the judgment that the failure of the leaders of the United States to make it abundantly clear before June 25, 1950, that the Washington government would do whatever was

required to save the Republic of Korea from the grasp of Kim Il-sung and his mentor Stalin- also their failure to order the deployment and preparation of United States forces in the Far East in accord with the foregoing premise- constituted a blunder, or at least a mistake, of truly historic proportions.

As stated at the outset of the present paper, during the century or two before the events of late June of 1950, Korea never loomed particularly large in the diplomatic calculations of the United States. The reason why Korea claimed minimal attention by Americans down to the time of the Second World War is manifest. Korea was a small, poor, and backward country, one that lay a third of the way around the world from the United States, one that was of little or no economic, strategic, or political importance in the perspective of Americans and their leaders.

Nor is it hard to discern why Korea did not rank high on the list of concerns and interests of Americans and their leaders during the pristine years of the Cold War. The onetime Hermit Kingdom was little more than a pawn on the chessboard of internatiotial politics in those years when nearly all Americans came to believe that the security of their continental republic, indeed their very way of life, was threatened by what they perceived to be the expansionist and rapacious impulses of the Soviet Union and its clients; the rooks and knights on the international chessboard were Germany and the democratic nation-states of Western Europe, Greece and Turkey, Iran and China and Japan. Or so thought most Americans (on the fleeting occasions when images of Korea touched their consciousness), including those who commanded the levers of power in Washington, at least through the first days of the summer of 1950. Evidence in support of the foregoing assertion may be found in the aforementioned hearings in which the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, meeting in executive session on January 10 and 13, 1950, reviewed "the world situation." During two days of hearings, in which senators interrogated leaders of the Washington government's diplomatic and defense establishments, including Secretary of State Acheson, Under Secretary of State Dean Rusk, Secretary of Defense Louis Johnson, and the chairman of the joint chiefs of staff, General Omar N. Bradley, Korea received only random mention, usually in passing references in which it was grouped with such Asian countries as Burma and Indonesia, Malaya and Thailand. During the review, indeed, Indochina was obviously much more on the minds of the senators and witnesses than was Korea. 70

There may be another probable reason why Korea was viewed during the years immediately following the Second World War as little more than a pawn in the grim struggle that the North American superpower was waging with the Soviet Union and what Americans came to refer to as the international communist conspiracy: a perception of Korea that was not much changed from the perceptions of Theodore Roosevelt and the journalist George Kennan during the first years of the twentieth century and the historian Tyler Dennett in the 1920s.71

In a word, Americans of the years 1949-50, to the extent that they knew anything at all about Korea,72 tended to view the onetime Hermit Kingdom as a primitive backwater- a largely pastoral country peopled by unsophisticated and parochial people and boasting of few physical resources of any consequence. Such was the portrait of everyday life in Korea that usually emerged from articles that on rare occasions appeared in American periodicals during the period.73 And any American military person who served in Korea before and during the war of 1950-53 can testify to the contempt with which most ordinary "GI's" and officers alike viewed the "Gooks," as American service people routinely referred to Koreans. GI's often made a point of not saluting officers of the ROK army. They chuckled at the sight of a leathery-skinned and bent-over Korean man or woman transporting an outrageous cargo on an A-frame strapped to his or her back. They laughed uproariously at the sight of two Koreans digging a ditch with a two-man shovel (that is, one man pushing a spade into the earth with his foot and a second man thereupon jerking a rope tied to the shank of the spade's wooden handle, an action that would cause a small quantity of earth to scatter in all directions). They bemoaned the seemingly pervasive ineptitude of Koreans when confronted with the tasks of operating and maintaining the mechanical wonders of the American armed forces.74 Certainly no American who served in Korea before or during the Korean War, it seems fair to say, envisioned in his or her wildest

imagination that in less than forty years the southern half of "the Land that God Forgot" would become an economic powerhouse- one that would export, of all things, automobiles and television receiving sets for sale in the United States.

To be sure, Americans and their leaders wished Koreans well during the years following the Second World War, and clearly hoped for the survival of South Korea as a noncommunist entity. In the interest of the survival of South Korea as a noncommunist entity, the government in Washington provided South Korea with considerable economic and military assistance-$181 .2 million in 1946-48, $498.1 million in 1949-52.75 Still, in the perspective of America's leaders, South Korea was expendable- a pawn. America's leaders reckoned that, in the foreseeable future, South Korea was not apt to be anything more than what it appeared to be at the time, that is, a primitive backwater. Unlike Western Europe and Japan, it assuredly was not worth going to war over.

But then, in the last days of June of 1950, Americans suddenly decided that South Korea, after all, was not expendable. Rather, the credibility of America's commitment to contain the Soviet scourge, particularly in Western and Southeastern Europe, the Middle East, and the Western Pacific, required that the United States rally to the defense of the ROK. And as a result of the decision by President Truman to dispatch armed forces of the North American superpower to rescue the beleaguered South Korean republic from Kim Il-sung's onrushing legions, Korea suddenly catapulted to the center of the collective consciousness of the people of the United States. It would remain at or near the center of the collective consciousness of Americans for the next three years, a period during which approximately a million American military personnel, at one time or another, were deployed in the defense of South Korea,76 more than thirty-three thousand of whom died as a direct result of combat, another twenty thousand as a result of disease and accidents.77

Seldom, if ever, near the center of the popular consciousness, Korea has nonetheless remained fixed in the minds of Americans and their national leaders ever since that day at the end of July of 1953 when the guns fell silent along the battle line in the ancient Land of the Morning Calm. And it seems fair to say that so long as the North American republic survives, Korea will never again recede, or virtually recede, from the collective consciousness of Americans- or ever again be perceived by Americans as a primitive backwater of little or no importance in terms of the interests, mainly political and economic, of the United States.

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