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A Framework for Understanding the US Air Bombing Campaign in Korea, 1950-51

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A Framework for Understanding the US Air Bombing Campaign in Korea, 1950-51

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement
for the degree of Bachelors of Arts in History from
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by

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Introduction

“We are no longer fearful of their intervention... They [the Chinese] have no air force. Now that we have bases for our Air Force in Korea, if the Chinese tried to get down to Pyongyang there would be the greatest slaughter.”

– General Douglas MacArthur, October 15, 1950

The above comment reflected the assumption that US air power would suffice to deter the Chinese from crossing the North Korean border. Experiencing endless successes since the Inchon Landing on September 15, 1950, MacArthur was confident that his army could easily defeat a technologically deficient enemy. Yet as the allied armies approached the Sino-Korean border, roughly 200,000 soldiers of the People’s Volunteer Army (PVA) intervened in late October of 1950 and pushed the UN and South Korean forces into full retreat back below the 38th Parallel. A modern army possessing air superiority was not invincible against outside attacks.

By the end of the Second World War, America possessed a superior air force and integrated technology as part of its military strategy. US air power and the bombing of cities were developed, perfected, and utilized to bring Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan to their knees. This success led to the creation of the US Air Force (USAF) as an independent branch from the Army, which suggested that military and political leaders acknowledged not only the advantages of air power but also the “American way of war”:

a military strategy emphasizing on finesse, sophistication, and efficiency in the post-war world. However, during the Korean War, the US unexpectedly struggled to handle the complex challenges in regional conflicts. This thesis will examine these complexities by understanding how and why there was a discrepancy between popular belief in the superior capability of air power and the USAF’s actual performance against the Chinese.

Although various scholars have studied and analyzed the Korean War, the most important works can be categorized into three distinct yet overlapping camps: 1) politically and ideologically biased narratives of the war; 2) self-criticisms of America’s military and its foreign policy; and 3) examinations of operational issues within the military.

Within the first camp, there are some authors who favorably see the US involvement in Korea. More importantly, however, a good number of scholars have been harshly critical of US military action in Asia. Bruce Cumings and Cullen MacDonald are two of the most notable authors who believe that Washington’s Cold War policies pushed the US into an unnecessary conflict with the communists. Cumings asserts that the term, “limited war,” is actually a gross understatement in describing the conflict in Korea. He illustrates how Koreans were victims of Cold War imperialism by revealing brutal atrocities committed by US forces as well as their North Korean counterparts. He also argues that the Korean War rather than the Second World War actually “turned the United States into the policeman of the world.”

MacDonald adds to Cumings’s work as he exposes the suffering of the average Korean peasant when he points out that the “advancing army [US Army] adopted a racist attitude towards Koreans which [had] been evident from the earliest days of the conflict” leading to “‘gook syndrome,’ the arrogant

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Both authors portray Korea as a victim of superpower meddling while arguing that China’s intervention was the first of many obstacles to America’s interest in expanding its influence in Asia. The Chinese counterattack is considered a logical and just response to US neo-imperialism. Therefore, Cummings and MacDonald have been criticized for having a communist bias and are labeled as being part of the “anti-American” camp.

The second and by far the largest body of scholarship contains mostly American scholars who are self-critical of America’s military performance as well as its political decisions pertaining to the Korean War. Virtually all of these scholars admire the skill, audacity, and ingenuity displayed by the Chinese as the PVA attempted to overcome its technological inadequacies. However, historians begin to diverge into different schools of thought in examining American military performance, the Truman Administration, and other US institutions. Rosemary Foot and Bevin Alexander are critical of both the US military and the Truman Administration as they examine the micro details of war management as well as the bigger picture of Cold War politics. Foot mainly criticizes US policy for its “inability to perceive the situation from the Chinese perspective” and for the way it “displayed a predilection for action over discussion, for boldness over caution, for glorifying strength and denigrating weakness.” She then explains why the US ultimately struggled to understand the “thinness of the dividing line between limited and expanded conflict.” Alexander, however, views the conflict as a contest of two national

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5 Foot, *The Wrong War*, 240.
6 Ibid., 37.
wills that collide in two smaller, completely separate wars: the first with North Korea; the second with Communist China. He believes that all parties are to blame as “MacArthur was wrong about Chinese intervention, but no more wrong than the top American leadership,… the President of the United States” in predicting and reacting to the Chinese threat.

Regarding the actions of the Truman Administration, a number of historians are at odds with one another. On the one hand, David Halberstam, in *The Coldest Winter*, points out “[t]hat America’s [war] aims were not clearly defined, and that there were significant differences in the attitudes in Washington and Tokyo, had been obvious from the very start.” He criticizes policymakers in Washington for allowing the Chinese to successfully intervene and drive the UN forces out of North Korea, but places the majority of the blame on General MacArthur. Halberstam believes that “Of the American military miscalculations of the twentieth century, Douglas MacArthur’s decision to send his troops all the way to the Yalu stands alone.” He then argues that MacArthur’s own ego and unbending faith in American airpower were more damaging to the UN forces than external players such as the Truman Administration and the Joint Chiefs of Staff. On the other hand, Burton I. Kaufman and D. Clayton James heavily criticize the Truman Administration for America’s failure to unite the Korean Peninsula. Kaufman argues that the Truman Administration “often failed to appreciate the military consequences of its political decisions, with the result that seemingly contradictory orders

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8 Bevin, *Korea*, 248.
were sometimes given to MacArthur.\textsuperscript{11} While Kaufman believes that poor executive leadership and divided politics at home forced MacArthur to choose bad decisions, James strongly argues that the US’s experience in World War II influenced how the war in Korea was fought. In addition, James asserts that the Truman Administration, from the beginning, purposefully set up the UN commander as a potential scapegoat by arranging the Wake Island Conference\textsuperscript{12} in case the situation in Korea deteriorated.\textsuperscript{13} Though he acknowledges MacArthur’s idiosyncrasies as a factor for losing UN gains north of the 38\textsuperscript{th} Parallel, James charges the Truman Administration with abrupt inconsistency by pointing out that “the objectives of the United States in Korea changed at least four times” during MacArthur’s command.\textsuperscript{14} Both authors, however, believe that the unpredictable variables that arise during military operations are not given enough appreciation.

T.R. Fehrenbach and Dominic Tierney are among the few historians who consider America’s cultural values and civilian control over the military as the reasons for the US’s disappointing results in Korea. Fehrenbach boldly states that American liberal society is incompatible with realities of the soldier and that “…liberal society, in its heart, wants not only domination of the military, but acquiescence of the military toward the liberal view of life.”\textsuperscript{15} Such disconnection between American civilian and military values, Fehrenbach argues, negatively affected US military performance during the Cold

\textsuperscript{12} The Wake Island Conference was the first meeting between President Truman and General Douglas MacArthur to discuss the progress of the Korean War. The Conference is mainly known for MacArthur assuring the president that the Chinese will not intervene in the Korean War.
\textsuperscript{14} James, \textit{Refighting The Last War}, 25.
War. Tierney follows a similar argument as Fehrenbach’s but attributes the poor results in Korea to the US’s deviating from its “crusader tradition.”¹⁶ He believes that unlike past overseas conflicts, the US, for the first time, was “not employing all necessary force” in defeating its opponent.¹⁷ The idea of “limited war” did not fit with the American culture of rallying around and fighting in the defense of cultural and religious values. In essence, this second group of historians question America’s overall preparedness to carry out its increased global military responsibilities. They believe that the US stumbled in its first regional conflict because of unexpected political and military shortcomings mixed with clashing domestic and foreign expectations.

The third and final camp consists of military historians who attempt to shed light on the operational issues faced by the US military and expose the tribulations experienced by the individual soldier. The military historian, Roy Appleman, is universally respected for his work, *South To The Naktong, North To The Yalu*, which describes the war’s military operations on a theatre level and provides a trove of information on night-time and cold weather warfare. Russell A. Gugeler’s *Combat Actions in Korea* and S.L.A. Marshall’s *The River and the Gauntlet* present the personal experiences of the fighting in Korea. Both of their works are chronological and contain more personal anecdotes of American and allied soldiers instead of focusing on the overall strategic or geopolitical situation at the time.

Robert F. Futrell and Eduard Mark offer the most valuable secondary information to understanding the USAF’s role and its impact during the war. As a military airpower historian, Futrell’s *The United States Air Force In Korea 1950-1953* has an obvious bias

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as he further outlines in detail about how air power attempted to win the war alone. His work plays down the successful efforts of the Chinese while boosting the influence of air power on the outcome of the war and the USAF’s enormous military contribution.

Although he admits to the shortcomings of air power, Futrell states, “FEAF [Far East Air Force] ‘owned’ the air to the Yalu, but here air superiority ended… because of United Nations Command politico-military restriction” further hinting that it was American policy that ultimately destined the USAF to fail in preventing Chinese successes.\(^{18}\) However, Mark’s piece counters Futrell’s claim by arguing that the Air Force’s impact is actually inflated. While acknowledging the advantages offered by air power, Mark insists “that FEAF failed to achieve not only its maximal objective… but also the lesser goal of rendering the Communists incapable of offensive action” due to the prowess of the Chinese and the failings and difficulties faced by the USAF in Korea.\(^{19}\)

Although a great number of scholars have written about and shed enormous insight on the war, there are still unanswered questions. Why did US policymakers consider air power such an attractive solution for its military interventions in foreign countries? Did air power actually escalate rather than diffuse the hostilities between China and the US? What is the significance of air power, and more broadly, technology in relation to the larger debates on how the US decides its level of military interventions in foreign countries?

Questions like these are not unique to the Korean War but are still relevant in our time. This thesis will contribute to the existing literature by presenting a framework

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through which to analyze how and why technological advantages were not sufficient in consolidating and defending US gains during the Korean War. More specifically, I will argue that US military technology alone failed to prevent Chinese successes because of three interrelated factors: technology, politics, and the will to make necessary sacrifices. This thesis will analyze the interrelationships of these three factors in order to understand how their dynamics conflicted or cooperated with one another. Furthermore, by examining why the US aerial bombing effort failed to prevent China’s counterattack, the framework will attempt to explain how and why this particular air campaign during the Korean War is a clear example of the challenges the US faces when it involves itself in subsequent regional conflicts. Finally, the thesis will highlight the dangers of a technologically driven military strategy and dispel any illusion that waging war is easy and straightforward.

My primary sources consist of periodical clippings from an online database containing the *New York Times* to see how US officials tried to portray the progress of the war to the American public and to identify certain repeated themes the US military issued to the press. I then use the periodicals to compare and contrast the US and allied assessments of the impending Chinese threat. These assessments will consist of archival research involving a large number of declassified State Department, National Security Council (NSC), and CIA documents from the Truman Library and the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. The reports and discussions from various leaders within the Truman Administration will provide considerable insight on how Cold War political realities and the ways in which American culture influenced the rationale behind their confidence in air power and in responding to the Chinese threat. Additional sources
will include an analysis of the US Army’s *The Big Picture* film series, which can assist in addressing American cultural expectations towards waging war. Then excerpts from the memoirs of South Korea’s first four-star general, Paik Sun Yup, will provide a much needed Korean perspective on its alliance with the US and how the South Koreans came to the conclusion that the PVA were operating in northern Korea. Secondary sources contextualize the situation from October 1950 to February 1951; they also provide maps and statistics to help elucidate the role and effectiveness of the US Air Force.

The thesis begins by taking a critical look at the merits and shortcomings of air power and the paradoxical effects of military technology, the political quandary the Truman Administration faced, and China’s asymmetrical response to neutralize a technologically superior opponent. The thesis refines the definitions of “technology,” “politics,” and “will,” and analyzes the outcome of the air campaign as viewed from this three-factor perspective. Finally, the thesis addresses the inherent complexities of regional conflicts and their ramifications on US military commitments around the world.
President Truman Boxed In

By 1950, post-war America symbolized production and industrial efficiency as well as freedom and democracy. The characteristics of the US military were aligned with American values as they also celebrated individualism while emphasizing on industrial-like efficiency of minimum input and maximum output. The US possessed a modern, mechanized military that created a number of options for the government when deciding whether to become involved in a regional conflict.20

When the North Korean People’s Army (NKPA) invaded the South in June 25, 1950, the US was completely caught off guard because Secretary of State Dean Acheson had deemed it clear to exclude South Korea from the US Pacific Defense Line. President Truman hastily ordered General MacArthur, the Supreme Commander of the Occupation of Japan, to deploy available troops into the Korean Peninsula. However, a substantial number of men and supplies of materiel could not be shipped across the Sea of Japan and sent to the frontlines on short notice. Thus, air power acted as a quick reaction force that could stall the NKPA until stronger defenses could be set up.

By early July, the army defenses of the Republic of Korea (ROK) had rapidly deteriorated and were falling back to southeast Korea. Task Force Smith, a contingent of US soldiers who were originally sent to bolster the South’s defense, found itself ill prepared against the North Koreans, many of whom were former anti-colonialists against the Japanese. It looked like the ROK was going to suffer the same fate as the Chinese Nationalists. When it became evident that MacArthur’s large occupation force of about 50,000 men in Japan could not halt the North Korean advance, President Truman

recognized that he could not ask able-bodied Americans to take up arms and die for an obscure country in East Asia.\textsuperscript{21} With the fall of Republican China to Mao Zedong’s communists one year earlier, the Truman Administration found itself in a political impasse by 1950. As a new-found superpower, the US found itself shouldering the bulk of responsibility after the Second World War, primarily through stabilizing war-torn nations by providing a political and economic bulwark against communism. The American public also demanded that the Administration be tough on communism. But then Truman had to tend to domestic concerns and fulfill his constituents’ expectations by demobilizing military divisions, bringing soldiers back home and adjusting them to civilian life, and lifting wartime restrictions as soon as possible. In the end, he could not fully separate the domestic and international interests because the latter was a subset to the former.

The Korean War tested the inherent contradictions of the Administration’s policies—stopping the spread of communism and concurrently catering to domestic needs—towards regional conflicts. To evaluate Truman’s dilemma and subsequent decisions, this thesis develops an integrated framework of three factors or analytical viewpoints: (1) the will to spend national resources; (2) military technology, more specifically, air power; and (3) politics. This thesis will refer to these three factors using the keywords “will,” “technology,” and “politics.” And each keyword has dual attributes: the will to spend money or lives; the promise or peril of technology; and domestic or international politics. This essay focuses on one particular campaign during the Korean War because it is one of the best examples on how these factors are

intertwined in that one factor reinforces or negates the effects of another factor. It then analyzes the campaign by employing three pair-wise factors: will/technology; will/politics; and politics/technology.
Will and Technology

At the outbreak of the Korean War, the Truman Administration faced the all-too-familiar dilemma—spending money or lives—for handling a foreign regional conflict. As the strongest economy in the world, the US possessed enough power to fund various programs to defend against communism. But it could not ask its people to sacrifice lives for expensive foreign adventures. Spending money was more convenient for the US to exercise its hegemonic influence around the world. Furthermore, the choice became easier because its strong industrial economy focused on creating technology.

Increasing defense spending became more important than ever with the development of aircrafts and nuclear bombs, the technologies that allowed the US to project its power to the far corners of the world. The sheer distance between the US and Korea made the investment in aircraft even more relevant. Out of various military technologies, air power became a vital one that could quickly respond to crises and protect American interests whereas mobilizing ground forces would take enormous amounts of time and money. By relying on military technology, prominently air power, to fight a foreign war, the Truman Administration could keep the war popular at home, utilize the industrial strength of the United States, and pursue the policy of “containment,” its strategy for fighting the Cold War with the Soviet Union.

The promise of technology

Unlike its Chinese opponents, the American government did not have a problem of supplying their troops with the necessary weapons and heavy equipment despite cutting defense spending after 1945. In fact, as recommended by National Security
Council Paper NSC-68\textsuperscript{22}, the Truman Administration increased its defense budget in response to the conflict in Korea. America’s main advantage over its opponents was its robust economic strength. In contrast to its enemies as well as its allies, the American economy was virtually untouched and even thrived during the Second World War. Government officials realized that specialization, automation, and the assembly line produced more weapons, supplies, and ammunition faster than the opponent could destroy them. Armed with its robust economy, the US military bought the idea of applying the industrial production and technological efficiency to military affairs; and it wholeheartedly embraced the doctrine of “Mobility of firepower is the key to victory,” which means that pure firepower could overwhelm an opposing army regardless of its numbers. The doctrine had many ramifications: the will to spend money on industrial production could be the ultimate factor in winning a war; investment in military technology would reduce the necessity of mobilizing the entire populace and mitigating the disadvantages of limited troop involvement. The promise of military technology, especially air power, was so alluring in that it could stay away from messy human businesses—families, political opinions, language barriers, or cultural differences. Air power was essentially a military version of liquid capital that provided the perfect outlet for a nation not willing to sacrifice bodies in the name of defending the free world.

The strong faith in military technology can be best evidenced by \textit{The Big Picture}, a television series program funded by the US Army. Its broadcast began in the early stages of the Cold War. The program intended to inform the American public of the latest military weaponry and the heroic deeds by US armed forces. Although this

\textsuperscript{22} NSC-68 is a Top-Secret memorandum by the U.S. Department of State on April 7, 1950. It is among the most influential foreign policy documents during the Cold War.
particular episode, *The Army Combat Team*, aired in 1951, *The Big Picture* focused on the US regimental combat team and emphasized the dynamic fighting force that developed within the US armed forces since World War II. The film starts out with a display of various US military personnel who are dispatched around the world “to defend our nation, you the American people, against aggression” and thereby establishing that America lives in a dangerous world of ideological conflict.\(^{23}\) The host, Captain Carl Zimmerman, explains the capabilities of the army combat team and its performance in Korea. The narrative underscores two themes: inter-branch cooperation and the central idea that firepower will triumph against manpower. The voice of the narrator tries to show the American public “the world’s greatest fighting team—the American Army combat team, a tough and mobile assault force which can hit anywhere, anytime,” which supports the notion that the US armed forces were omniscient and omnipotent in the post-war world. The narrator goes on to suggest that the US Army has evolved beyond the traditional methods of waging war via manpower.\(^{24}\) With a particular emphasis on industrial efficiency, the US military asserts that the American method of waging war is now “firepower, teamwork, and mobility… to do any size job in the shortest time and with the fewest casualties possible.”

The film quickly cuts to a short scene of the Russian Red Army marching on parade in Red Square. The narrator announces how “other armies commit vast manpower resources to battle and rely on man’s expendability.” This scene shows that America had a technologically superior military, and it portrays the communist military as an organization that possesses no human sympathy towards its own soldiers. The


\(^{24}\) “The Army Combat Team,” 1951 episode of *The Big Picture*. 
following scene intends to differentiate the US military from its foes by showing how the army combat team adopted the method of employing firepower to achieve maximum effectiveness in destroying the enemy. The film completely disregards the high probability of civilian casualties that often comes with this combat technique. The narrator goes on to delineate the weapons that provide the firepower by going beyond the traditional infantryman, and he introduces “tanks, artillery, and planes of the Air Force.” The narrator includes the words, “Air Force” as homage to the newly recognized, independent branch of the US armed forces after World War II. He continues: when the army combat team faces a more difficult task, the answer to enemy opposition is greater firepower. If the infantryman cannot do the job, the tank brings in heavier firepower. And if armor is not enough, the combat team reverts to the power of artillery, which then relies on air power to finish the task.

Another recurring theme of *The Big Picture* is inter-branch cooperation: Everything is coordinated smoothly and without a glitch. The display of military technology combined with examples of engineering feats paints an idealized picture of American values and way of life. Although industrial efficiency and individualism may be seemingly contradicting, the emphasis on “teamwork” and “mobility of firepower” goes beyond the battlefield doctrine and suggests a new dynamic in that technological development can fuse collectivism and individualism. *The Big Picture* exploits American popular culture (e.g., recreational competition) and the ‘go-getter’ spirit to help reconcile these contradictory concepts. In an attempt to connect with its viewers at home, Zimmerman compares the dynamics of the army combat team to those of an American football team. A scene depicts American tanks and soldiers moving forward as the
narrator talks about how the “tanks and infantrymen fight together as a team, making up for each other’s shortcomings… By fire and movement, our army advances.”

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25 “The Army Combat Team,” 1951 episode of *The Big Picture*
(Map 1 will assist our understanding of event discussed in this thesis. It shows the
progress of the UN advance in a six week time period starting from the NKPA rout in
September 15, 1950 to US and ROK troops reaching the Yalu River.)

The successes of air power during Naktong Bulge (July-August, 1950)

The defenses along the Naktong River protected Busan, the last major deep water
port in South Korea. Despite initial struggles and defeats, the ROK and US troops
contained breakthroughs along their defense line and successfully resisted against the
NKPA offensive. Air power immensely contributed to the ROK and US victory because
of its numerous advantages, which further persuaded the Truman Administration to opt
for spending dollars over bodies. The most notable capabilities of air power were
interdiction, Close Air Support (CAS), resupply, and evacuation: these leveled the
playing field for US and UN troops during the beginning months of the Korean War.

The first capability of air power was interdiction. Interdiction was officially seen
as an aerial tactic where fighter-bombers would attack enemy supply lines and bivouacs
to cut off supplies of materiel for an advancing army. The Far East Air Force (FEAF)
interdiction campaigns ranged in scale from a minor strafing by a single fighter-bomber
to a massive air campaign involving hundreds of bombers dropping thousands of tons of
ordinance on bridges and cities. The purpose of interdiction was to “isolate the
battlefield” using bombers, weaken the enemy’s offensive capabilities, and provide
decisive advantages for friendly ground troops. Air power interdiction brought such
notable successes during the Battle of Naktong River: it blunted the NKPA offensive

Force History, 1983), 51
Despite the UN having fewer soldiers; it severely disrupted North Korean logistics to prevent supplies from arriving at the frontlines in adequate quantities; and it utilized psychological warfare to demoralize the enemy, which could clearly be seen in September 1950. According to historian Eduard Mark, between June 25, 1950 and November 1, 1950, 148 out of 825 captured North Korean soldiers (17.9%) cited that the fear of aircraft (second to shortage of food) was the reason for their low morale.\(^\text{28}\)

Close Air Support (CAS) was another vital component to the US military and certainly was a key factor in the UN’s survival against the NKPA advance in the summer of 1950. Virtually uncontested in the air, FEAF provided significant assistance to UN forces in their defense of the Busan perimeter. (\textit{Map 1} shows the dire situation of UN and ROK military as they only maintained less than 10% of the Korean peninsula. With the perimeter getting smaller by the day, it looked as if MacArthur’s forces would be driven into the sea.) For example, the renowned Korean War historian Roy Appleman described an incident when FEAF discovered a large North Korean convoy immobile: it “rushed every available plane to the scene... in a massive air strike. Observers of the strike reported that it destroyed 38 tanks, 7 half-track vehicles, 117 trucks, and large number of enemy soldiers.”\(^\text{29}\) Despite the exaggerated numbers, this example displayed just how air power could deliver a high rate of firepower from the air onto enemy ground forces.

CAS also played a critical role in providing extra fire support for friendly ground troops along the mountainous terrain of Korea. During the war, it took about forty


\(^{29}\) Roy E. Appleman, \textit{South To The Naktong, North To The Yalu} (UNITED STATES ARMY IN THE KOREAN WAR. Washington, 1961), 95.
minutes for FEAF to arrive on the battlefield from when ground troops requested CAS. Access to such aviation marvels and witnessing the destruction inflicted on the enemy further reinforced the military’s commitment to spending money. For the Truman Administration, spending dollars on technology was a more convenient military policy than enormously investing in clothes, supplies, training, and transporting a soldier for a relatively minor regional conflict in East Asia.

With the successful defense at Busan and the amphibious assault at Inchon, the fortunes of war began to turn in favor for the UN and ROK forces in September of 1950. The once desperate and beleaguered UN army transformed itself into a mechanized fighting force that chased the routed NKPA northward at such speed that ground logistics had trouble keeping up. However, General MacArthur believed that “he could not supply both Eighth Army and X Corps from Inch’on for a quick continuation of the pursuit north.” Unless he captured another deep water port in North Korea, MacArthur had to overcome three challenges: distance, geography, and high consumption. Inchon and Busan were the only developed deep-water harbors in the southern half of Korea that could bring in troops and supplies. Any rapid advance would have eventually come to a grinding halt, as the logistical capabilities of the military would be overstretched. The second problem was that Korea was an undeveloped country with very few roads that could sustain heavy transport. While some roads only existed on maps, others were mere goat paths. The last problem was that a modern, Western army consumes elephantine amounts of food, medical supplies, ammunition, and gasoline.

31 The Eighth Army was the largest US military unit during the Korean War. Its area of responsibility was on the western half of the Korean peninsula while the smaller X Corps was on the Eighth’s right flank and was advancing on Korea’s eastern half.
32 Appleman, *South To The Naktong*, 610-611.
Air power again came to the rescue by offering its logistical capabilities, which sustained the speedy advance of UN ground forces. Air transports—e.g., the C-119 Flying Boxcar, the Douglas C-124 Globemaster II, and the newly developed helicopter—allowed the US and UN forces to send supplies to advancing troop columns that were racing on the few roads that led to the 38th Parallel. According to the *New York Times*, official statistics state, “Combat Cargo Command… flying 307 sorties, lifted 1,589 tons of essential cargo”33 while “aircraft continued to airlift more than 1,000 tons of cargo daily into Korea.”34 By looking at these numbers alone, it is evident that the Army depended on these channels of supplies to continue its rapid advance. Such capabilities were essential especially in Korea because the few, dilapidated roads put enormous logistical strain on feeding the Army.

*The peril of technology after UN Troops Cross the 38th Parallel (October 1950)*

Along with the immense promise of military technology, air power had its dark side and had paradoxical effects: (1) engendering complacency, (2) fostering inter-branch competition, (3) underestimating China’s will to spend bodies, (4) breeding cultural and historical ignorance, and (5) leading to a perverse practice of quantifying warfare. These unexpected aspects of America’s technological supremacy were slowly revealed as the UN forces crossed the 38th Parallel and raced northward under an umbrella of the US air cover.

*Increasing Complacency*

On Oct. 15, 1950, MacArthur met with President Truman on Wake Island and assured him that the Chinese were not a threat to UN forces in North Korea. When the President inquired about the “chances for Chinese or Soviet interference…,” MacArthur confidently replied, “[v]ery little… We are no longer fearful of their intervention. The Chinese have 300,000 men in Manchuria… Only 50/60,000 could have gotten across the Yalu River. They have no Air Force… if the Chinese tried to get down to Pyongyang [sic] there would be the greatest slaughter.”35 MacArthur was not alone in advancing this argument; in fact, complacent sentiments began to permeate the American ranks after months of endless victories. The majority in the US military organization in Korea disregarded the basic infantry strategy carelessly while ignoring the evidence of substantial Chinese presence in North Korea.

The US troops were so eager to push north that they completely disregarded Korea’s geographic terrain. As mentioned earlier, Korea was an underdeveloped country that possessed very few quality roads and contained “the northern Taebaek Range [rose] to rugged heights… The principal routes of travel follow the deep mountain valleys in a generally north-south direction.”36 Thus, the road-bound vehicles that were responsible for the UN’s rapid advance lost its effectiveness on the ground. Carl von Clausewitz, the famous Prussian military strategist, also stressed on the dangers as well as opportunities during an offensive on a mountainous area. He states, “an army on the offensive… would consider itself extraordinarily lucky to find that the enemy had not occupied a mountain range between them” but if he did,

“…he [the enemy] is no longer in doubt about the route the attacker is taking; and the latter has not been able to choose his roads with the

35 WIC.
36 Appleman, South To The Naktong, 610.
enemy’s position in mind... 1. Mountains... do not allow one to diverge from the road and split... as the needs of the moment may require... The advance, therefore, should proceed on several roads from the start or, better still, be made on a somewhat broader front.”37

The major consequence of such blatant disregard for basic infantry tactics was that the enemy possessed a major advantage on the ground. Vehicles driving on the poorly kept roads not only alerted the enemy of a unit’s location, but also made a unit’s movement very predictable. Appleman perfectly describes how the advance of the Eighth Army toward the Yalu River went against Clausewitz’s advice as its attack lacked coordination and “resembled a series of rapier thrusts of individual units along roads that promised the swiftest penetration... Each [column] was free to advance as fast and as far as it could, without considering the gains (or problems) of the others.”38 There was no way to discover potential ambushes or ensure an effective defense from them. The best case study that could accurately demonstrate the consequences of military carelessness is the Battle of Unsan, which will be addressed in a later section in the thesis.

*Inter-branch competition*

Before the Korean War, the air force technically did not have its own independent branch. Fighters and bombers belonged to either the Army or the Navy. However, after its contributions to the war effort during the Second World War, including the successful efforts to drop the atomic bomb, Washington felt that it was necessary to create an independent branch for its own airplanes, the United States Air Force (USAF). Its

38 Appleman, *South To The Naktong*, 261.
advocates such as Major General Curtis E. LeMay were eager to prove to their peers and superiors that air power alone could win a war.  

The formation of the USAF created a number of problems within the armed forces community. Although the army and navy in the US military had always vied for funding from Washington, the two branches never felt the need to compete over who destroyed the enemy because there was a definitive line of military responsibility. Logically, the navy had jurisdiction on the sea while the army had complete control on land. Both branches would cooperate when the situation involved both parties. How did the air force fit in this balance? Air power could cross over land and sea. Air power had obviously displayed a versatile role in combat. But was there anything unique air power alone could bring to the table?

During the Korean War, the USAF was expected to carry out its responsibilities by following an army-dominated war doctrine. General Headquarters was dominated by Army staff and lacked equal representation from the other branches. Obviously, USAF commanders such as General Stratemeyer were apprehensive about auxiliary roles within the greater war effort. According to Futrell, “MacArthur’s staff was telling FEAF how to conduct its air operations” all the way from Tokyo creating rising resentment from Stratemeyer toward MacArthur’s HQ. Army commanders such as General Edward M. Almond believed that FEAF should have more of a supporting role for his troops on the ground by mainly providing resupply, interdiction, and CAS. The consequences of this inter-branch competition were that US intelligence failed to locate the PVA contingents

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40 Futrell, *The United States Air Force In Korea*, 52.
41 Ibid., 48.
within North Korea. FEAF was either providing fire support to ground troops who also were not aware of Chinese presence, or it was pushing for a bombing campaign on the cities and bridges in northern Korea.

Throughout the war, the three main branches of the US military squabbled over *target selection* - identifying and prioritizing enemy targets according to value and threat. This terminology rose to prominence with the formation of the Joint Strategic Plans and Operations Group, which consisted of representatives from each branch of the US military. Its purpose was to coordinate and delineate the areas of responsibility. FEAF was essentially being pulled apart from three different directions since there were not enough planes in the Korean theatre to meet the needs of the entire military. And the main source of friction was that MacArthur’s High Command wanted to direct FEAF from Tokyo instead of allowing regional commanders to make decisions in Korea.43 There was a heavy bias for air-to-ground targets to assist the army’s advance into North Korea. FEAF increasingly felt the pressure to replicate its unique contribution to the UN effort in Korea. It needed to prove that the Truman Administration’s funding was not for naught.

*Underestimating China’s will to spend bodies*

So far, this thesis has only examined the interrelationship between the willingness to spend dollars and military technology. However, what if a nation were completely willing to spend bodies to fight a war? How would the willingness to sacrifice soldiers’ lives affect military technology? On the other hand, how could advanced military

42 Futrell, *The United States Air Force In Korea*, 50.
43 Ibid., 51.
technology affect a nation’s willingness to spend bodies? The Chairman of the newly formed People’s Republic of China (PRC), Mao Zedong, was perfectly willing to spend bodies rather than dollars to fight the advancing UN troops in northern Korea. The fighting style of the Chinese military reflected their nation’s economic and demographic realities of being undeveloped, agrarian, and massive in population size. These characteristics were the complete opposite of those of America’s industrialized society.

The first contingents of the PVA lacked heavy weaponry but could traverse Korea’s difficult terrain. The average Chinese soldier in Korea did not have vehicular transport, adequate artillery support, or sufficient air cover. Most of the small arms used by the PVA consisted of old Chinese, Russian, and United States equipment. How did the PVA mitigate their technological disadvantage? First, the Chinese had the advantage of fighting so close to home. With the UN troops nearing the Chinese border, the Chinese politburo galvanized the populace and its soldiers to defend their homeland from foreign invaders. Secondly, in stark contrast to their American opponents, the one of the core values of the PVA was based on Mao Zedong’s firm belief that the energies of the people will prevail over any formidable weaponry. He thus asked: if one resisted with “this [human] spirit, what enemy can we [sic] not conquer and who can say that ultimate victory will not be ours?”

Mao felt that his previous fighting experience against the Japanese and the Nationalist Chinese validated his belief in the strength of the human spirit to overcome all odds. His forces were constantly outnumbered and outgunned

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The Chinese Communist Forces (CCF) displayed their immense tenacity to go toe to toe with a modern, mechanized army throughout the entire Korean War. The main component of Mao’s military strategy was his willingness to accept high casualties. He understood that it was ultimately the US public that would decide how long the war was going to last. It is fair to say that will power went beyond the ability of those who were fighting. A war of attrition cannot be won by technology alone. Accurately explained by Fehrenbach, the Korean War proved to Americans that “you may fly over a land forever; you may bomb it, atomize it, pulverize it and wipe it clean of life – but if you desire to defend it, protect it… you must do this on the ground.” ⁴⁶ Therefore, a military victory requires popular support for a prolonged war, especially in a democratic society.

The Chinese resupplied their troops by utilizing their abundant manpower. Thousands of laborers and pack animals carried the necessary supplies to sustain an offensive against US troops. By sacrificing speed and a steady supply flow offered by technology, PVA logistics could move undetected and traverse the mountainous terrain, which was inaccessible to a mechanized, road-bound army. The Chinese logistical system ensured that multiple routes were available in case one was attacked. They used the “so-called delivery forward principle used by the Soviets in World War II,” which consisted of a top-down supply chain where the higher unit was responsible for supplying the lower unit. ⁴⁷ Although UN air superiority virtually halted Chinese military and logistical movement during the day, it lost its effectiveness during the night because few

⁴⁷ Mark. _Aerial Interdiction_, 307.
Chinese vehicles would be driven with lights on. Despite UN air power reducing the movement of supplies, Chinese logistics were never entirely cut by interdiction from the air because of the Chinese practice of strict light and noise discipline along with effective camouflage.

How successful were the PVA in deceiving US intelligence of its presence in North Korea? Following a style of warfare that accepted high casualties, what were the strategies or methods employed by the PVA to neutralize superior US military technology? Before delving into specifics, it is essential to understand the strengths and weaknesses of the Chinese peasant soldier. Chinese soldiers were most effective as light troops, whose role specialized in reconnaissance and quick maneuvers, which “demonstrated that [they] were well trained disciplined fire fighters, and particularly adept at night fighting… Their patrols were remarkably successful in locating the positions of the U.N. [sic] forces.”

In his research on light infantry, Army Major Scott R. McMichael included an examination of the PVA during the Korean War. He went beyond the stealth and infiltration and shed special attention on how the superior physical conditioning and stamina of Chinese soldiers allowed them not only to survive the harsh elements and lack of supplies but also to keep up with the pace of a mechanized army. Ironically, the tough Chinese peasant solider displayed a high level of self-reliance, a virtue that is traditionally portrayed as a unique part of American culture.

Cultural and historical ignorance

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48 Appleman, *South To The Naktong*, 718-719.
The reliance on military technology also encouraged US troops to be culturally and historically ignorant of East Asia, which affected their ability to work with their South Korean allies and consequently allowed the PVA a decisive advantage at the beginning of the Chinese intervention. American soldiers and the higher command looked down on the South Koreans, showed their ignorance on East Asian geopolitics, and underestimated China’s military capability. The poor performance of the ROK army early in the war gave General MacArthur and his commanders some justification to view their allies with some contempt. In his interviews with war veterans, the historian Appleman wrote about how one observer complained, “The Koreans haven’t had time to learn our Army technique. An American doughboy hated to have his life dependent on whether his Oriental buddy” would react properly under enemy fire.50

Although the most experienced ROK general, Paik Sun Yup, reported to his American superiors as early as mid-October that Chinese troops were operating in North Korea, General MacArthur’s command ignored and discounted his observations. Yet on October 28, 1950, there were multiple reports “that a large force of Chinese troops had come into North Korea,” and US military advisors “were skeptical… of the radio report…” and thereby considered it “scare treatment.”51 However, US Army officials “[concede] the possibility that a token force of Chinese communists… may be somewhere in North Korea,” but that it was not large enough to warrant any concerns.52 This statement contrasted sharply with the October 27 Associated Press report about how “General Paik Sun Yup, commander of the Republican First Division, was quoted

50 Appleman, South To The Naktong, 388.
officially as saying that the three enemy regiments fighting his division were Chinese communists.”

In his memoirs, General Paik Sun Yup, who spoke fluent Chinese, personally interrogated a Chinese POW. He wrote: “the Chinese prisoner [gave] the most shocking news I had heard since the war began… I lost no time in contacting my corps commander, Major General Milburn.” After the interrogation, “General Milburn reported these facts through Eighth Army to Charles Willoughby, General MacArthur’s deputy chief of staff for intelligence… however, General MacArthur’s headquarters held… an optimistic view… and decided the interrogation… was an anomaly. I had no other Chinese Army POW I could trot out to challenge the conclusion of the UN command.”

Historians differ on who was to blame for the UN intelligence failure. Some attribute it to the US ground commanders; others fault MacArthur himself or Charles Willoughby. But racism towards Asians probably played a large role in dismissing General Paik’s reports. The historian Bruce Cumings revealed how the British journalist, Reginald Thompson, “was appalled by the ubiquitous, casual racism of Americans, from general to soldier, and their breathtaking ignorance of Korea.”

Referring to Donald Knox’s work on the oral histories of the Korean War, Cumings mentioned that American

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55 Paik, From Pusan, 87.
56 Major General Charles Willoughby was MacArthur’s Chief of Intelligence during World War II, the Occupation of Japan, and the Korean War. During the Korean Conflict, Willoughby was suspected of distorting intelligence on the number of Chinese communist troops massing in Korea to confirm MacArthur’s belief that UN troops were in no danger from a Chinese intervention.
soldiers considered the South Koreans cowardly and unreliable.\textsuperscript{58} New York Times reporter Hanson Baldwin also mentioned how “[t]he South Koreans exaggerate and are unreliable in their reports, and if the going gets too tough they may melt away.”\textsuperscript{59} American commanders agreed with Baldwin’s assessment.

The superiority of technology, tinged with subtle racism, let the US troops and commanders forget what was at stake, as in a New York Times reporter’s critique of US foreign policy from the war front on October 31, 1950. The author argued for a “far closer liaison between military and foreign policy and improved intelligence services, and the necessity for a clearer understanding of Asian psychology, are among the high-level lessons taught by the Korean War.”\textsuperscript{60} The reporter masterfully brought into question the American method of waging war when he condemned the “prophets of the easy way out and of the soft life had lulled even many of our military men into a complacency that guided us into erroneous beliefs.”\textsuperscript{61} He further shed light on how American bias and assumptions were essentially hamstringing US efforts in the war:

\begin{quote}
“the enemy usually knew what we were doing but too often we did not know what he was doing. The great need for more linguists trained in oriental languages and dialects also was emphasized. But perhaps one of the basic reasons for inadequate intelligence in Korea was the American lack of understanding of the Asian and of the oriental mind. We tended... to look down upon the Koreans as an inferior race. It was with this attitude of patronizing contempt that we went into action in Korea. We
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{58} Cumings, The Korean War, 80.
\textsuperscript{59} Hanson W. Baldwin, “KOREA SHOWS NEED FOR FOOT SOLDIER: Theory of a Cheap and Easy Victory Against Strong Foe Is Exploded Once Again FOREIGN UNITS WERE USED Integration of South Koreans in U.S. Forces Established a Pattern for Future Wars An Expensive War Fought Pattern Established in Korea Unreliable in Their Reports,” The New York Times, November 1, 1950, 8. Proquest Historical Newspapers (111619914).
quickly discovered that the ‘gook’ was a tough soldier.” “More knowledge of Asian psychology... would have provided a framework into which we could have fitted what often seemed completely illogical actions on the part of the enemy.”  

In another one of his articles, Hanson Baldwin stated that the “peninsular geography of Korea favored our [US] efforts to cut enemy communications and aid our sea and air power.” In the early days of the war, the US military capabilities appeared to support Baldwin’s statement. But nobody on the US side seemed to take into consideration the geopolitical history of Korea and China. Traditionally, Chinese and Korean relations had been characterized by a Confucian relationship where ‘big brother’ China looked after ‘little brother’ Korea. The Korean Peninsula had always acted as a security buffer for the Chinese against foreign invasion. And China effectively utilized geopolitical history to justify its intervention to the international stage. In a special news release on November 12, Beijing dispelled US assumptions that the Chinese motives for intervening on behalf of the DPRK were purely economic. The Chinese spokesperson revealed that “the presence of United States troops in Korea constituted a threat to Red China’s [sic] security.” China essentially won the propaganda war when it cited historical ties of security interest by stating that, “the Korean people… not only participated in the war of liberation but also in the anti-Northern expedition of 1925-27, in the land reform war of 1927-37 and in the anti-Japanese war of 1927-45.” This statement was difficult to rebut because it was drawing the line between truth and myth.

Regardless of whether it was right or wrong for the Chinese to intervene, the historical statement at the time was difficult for Western critics to rebut.

The total disregard of cultural differences and historical context was a major disadvantage for MacArthur and his UN command. Many US decision makers falsely believed that a superior, modern military could handle any resistance from a backward, undeveloped Asian one. Defeating the Japanese Empire during the Second World War bolstered this condescending mentality towards Asians. The US military valued “firepower over manpower,” which did provide undeniably numerous advantages on the battlefield. Yet it was evident that when used improperly, the foundations of American battlefield advantage would crumble if these weapons were put out of action. Roy Appleman along with numerous historians would often cite a captured Chinese army pamphlet, *Primary Conclusions of Battle Experiences at Unsan*, as a document that revealed the strength and weaknesses of a technologically reliant military. The Chinese acknowledged that the American

“artillery is very active. ... Aircraft strafing and bombing of our transportation have become a great hazard to us... Their infantry rate of fire is great...” Yet, they highlight that American soldiers “…depend on their planes, tanks, and artillery... They specialize in day fighting. They are not familiar with night fighting or hand to hand combat... If defeated, they have no orderly formation... They are afraid when the rear is cut off. When transportation comes to a standstill, the infantry loses the will to fight.”

*Quantification of Warfare*

The final paradox from the will/technology relationship is that quantifying war created unrealistic expectations of the entire US war effort in Korea. Developing military

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66 Appleman, *South to the Naktong*, 720.
technology needs investment, which the Truman Administration was more than willing to make. The sign of a successful investment in anything can only be measured by the quantifiable results. US officials moved away from the abstract notions of war and brought in some hard evidence, which could be seen as equivalent to the US effort to bring some clarity and certainty in the messy business of war. The *New York Times* published a statement from General MacArthur’s headquarters to show how successful UN forces had been in North Korea. Essentially, the military quantified war for the audience by writing how FEAF “[claimed a total] nine tanks, ninety-one vehicles, three locomotives, twenty-two gun positions, seven supply dumps and seventy-seven supply or fortified buildings destroyed or damaged.”67

Production and, to a certain degree, destruction are quantified so that policymakers and the average citizen can determine the progress of US effort in a conflict. It is easier to show numbers to the public as evidence of progress, which in turn sustains the public support of US involvement in foreign regional conflicts. Progress is equated to success, which can only be measured in miles gained or damage to the opponent. The Korean War was no exception. The biggest take-away from analyzing government and military attraction to technology was the gradual rationalization of combat into quantitative figures. The grittiness and progress of ground warfare were measured by miles, but aerial combat, as a proxy for the effectiveness of technology, provided the number of enemies destroyed in relation to expenditure or the quantity of bombs dropped. For example, FEAF dropped “a total of 40,000 incendiaries in eleven

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Positive quantified results, whether deceptive or not, created myopia for both the military command and the American public to measure the standards of success; and the Administration funneled itself into a narrow, simplified view towards war.

The promise and peril of military technology, accompanied by the will to spend money or lives, were vividly displayed during the Korean War. The will to spend dollars led to the reliance on technology, which, in turn, justified the will to spend dollars. Technology greatly mitigated the problem of “being overstretched” not only on the battlefield but also on the world stage, which allowed the Truman Administration to fulfill its containment policy. In the case of the Korean War, airplanes and jet-propelled aircraft best represented the technological innovations developed by the US military. Air power created advantages for US forces on and off the battlefield. The US could simultaneously expand and defend its hegemony in East Asia without mobilizing the entire country and committing a substantial number of its citizens to fight abroad. By providing a relatively easy and cheap victory during the early months of the Korean War, air power ultimately increased the American public’s tolerance towards US military involvement in regional conflicts. However, the Chinese intervention in late 1950 revealed the unresolved contest of technology against the will to spend lives; in the end, technology was not the panacea for the intricate challenges of regional conflicts.

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Will and Politics

Although the Administration enjoyed political leeway by choosing to spend money over lives, President Truman faced divided domestic and foreign policy goals. Was the increase in defense expenditure to gain domestic votes or to strengthen and maintain American international influence? At one time, it looked as if Truman would have achieved both goals. Funding the war allowed the US to project its influence in East Asia while bringing military victory with minimal ground commitment; he could make the Korean War popular at home and enjoy the validation of his containment policy. However, the possible threat of a Chinese intervention loomed in the minds of military and civilian leaders in Washington. Air power soon emerged as a solution for the Truman Administration because of a combination of hubris, a fixation on absolute victory, and a lack of consensus among policymakers and politicians. Instead of heeding British advice to establish a buffer zone and consolidate UN gains, the US pursued an air campaign to bomb bridges across the Yalu with high hopes to secure the Korean frontier from China.

At the height of the UN’s success in Korea around late October and early November 1950, the US government had to contend with conflicting political objectives. As the leader of the free, capitalist world, the Truman Administration wanted not only to reduce the military and financial burdens of protecting Korea but also to deal with the rise of the Soviet Union as a new threat to American global interests. In addition, the US also had to contend with the British and the French, who had a tense relationship with the US and resented being used to fulfill US foreign policy. As American troops comprised the majority of UN ground forces, President Truman and his cabinet could more or less
shape the UN agenda in Korea to fulfill US interests. Yet the Administration as well as MacArthur needed other democratic nations participating in the war to uphold an air of international legitimacy for military action. While the defense of South Korea provided a common cause for all UN nations to follow, crossing the 38th Parallel proved to be a different matter. The Administration’s priority towards avoiding general war in Korea went as far back as September 9, 1950. The declassified document, NSC Council 81/1,\textsuperscript{69} shows that the US supported the UN’s political objective of uniting Korea. However, NSC 81/1 also stated the importance of confining initial military action below the 38th Parallel and asserted that if there was indeed a need to extend UN operations north, then the majority of the UN participants must agree because a “stalemate freezing the U.N. forces indefinitely in Korea... would be undesirable.”\textsuperscript{70} But in little over a month, US foreign policymakers experienced the consequences when they mistakenly equated US international interest with that of its allies.

\textit{The British Proposal of Cordon Sanitaire: An Appeasement?}

On November 13, 1950, the British Ambassador to the United States, Sir Oliver Franks, passed a classified message written by the British Foreign Secretary, Ernest Bevin, to the US Department of State expressing wariness toward the possibility of a Chinese intervention in Korea. Bevin argued for an alternative approach to dealing with the threat of Chinese intervention while hoping to steer the UN away from overt military action and more towards reinforcing its political and diplomatic legitimacy. The most

\textsuperscript{69} This government document essentially shaped the Truman Administration’s response to the Korean conflict and established American political and military goals regarding the defense of the ROK.

notable point of Bevin’s proposal was to establish a demilitarized area or a *cordon sanitaire*, which would require UN troops to abandon all territory north of Chongju and Hungnam.\(^7\) Below is a map with two notable characteristics: The dark shades represent high elevations (above 200 meters) covering most of northern Korea; and the black

![Map of Korea showing high elevations and race to the Yalu](image)

**Map 2**

dashed line is the would-be buffer zone if Bevin’s proposal was followed.⁷²

Bevin cited political and fiscal benefits of such an action because it would end the war sooner and “thus liquidating a costly military commitment, but also satisfying the Chinese that the United Nations have no aggressive intent against Manchuria.”⁷³ The British Foreign Secretary even went so far as to outline the strategic benefits of a UN withdrawal in case of military confrontation. In doing so, he addressed the limitations of air power. *Map 2* further confirms Bevin’s contention that a solid UN front running from Chongju to Hungnam offered a defensible perimeter – one that is shorter than the Korean frontier. By stopping the advance, the UN forces not only could consolidate their gains and strengthen the depth of their frontline but also would gain political leverage over the Chinese. Although there was no guarantee that Beijing would have honored its pledge of not becoming involved in Korea, an attack on a stabilized UN line of resistance that was relatively far away from the Manchurian border would have portrayed the PRC as the unjustified aggressor. Bevin warned that if UN forces continued to advance to the frontier, its advantage in air power will be neutralized since the area of operations would violate Chinese territory.⁷⁴ Bevin seemed to have a better grasp of the geopolitical situation in Korea when he stated the following: “(3) It is doubtful whether, without striking at air targets in Manchuria, General MacArthur has sufficient forces to fight his way to the North Korean frontier and maintain himself there once he reaches it.”⁷⁵

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⁷⁵ Ibid., 1140.
acknowledging the decisive advantages provided by air power, the British also understood the limitations of UN military capability to resist a Chinese intervention.

Unfortunately, Secretary Acheson and General MacArthur disagreed with Bevin’s alternative proposal. MacArthur interpreted the proposal as a “British desire to appease the Chinese Communists” and mentioned the oft-cited European inaction at Munich and German occupation of the Sudeten Lands in 1938.\(^76\) Acheson also argued, in his response to Bevin on November 24, that the UN should not establish a *cordon sanitaire* but instead continue with current military operations in North Korea. He cited a variety of reasons ranging from diplomatic interests to troop morale to operational issues. Strangely, his main reason was that MacArthur already began his offensive and any order of ‘retreat’ would hurt US troop morale. Then, he clearly demonstrated America’s political power in the UN when he reminded Bevin that everyone must be sensitive to the “public opinion in the US which [had] furnished the great bulk of the troops.”\(^77\) He was essentially masking American unilateral action as multilateral intentions as he stated that, “we are all trying to do the same thing … to bring about the end of the fighting” and “keep western forces away from direct contact with Chi [Chinese]… forces at the Korea frontier.”\(^78\) MacArthur was convinced that any proposal that would alter the current course of American-led action could be disastrous. The classified telegrams between Bevin and Acheson on November 13 and 24 were quintessential examples demonstrating


\(^78\) *FRUS*, 1950. vol. VII: 1229.
the messy relationship between the will to spend dollars and US domestic and international politics.

_A China expert: A Lone Voice Raising Alarms_

O. Edmund Clubb, the Director of the Office of Chinese Affairs, was a China expert for the State Department. He had officially confirmed that the Chinese Communist Forces (CCF) were present in North Korea and inferred that they were acting as an independent contingent from DPRK forces since November 1.\(^7^9\) Clubb also noted that the PRC had opted for _direct_ intervention and that US/UN forces needed to reassess their military situation north of the 38\(^{th}\) Parallel. Both Truman and MacArthur previously admitted that the US did not possess the resources to combat a direct Chinese intervention and therefore agreed to halt any advance once contact was made with any elements of the CCF. Yet the UN Command and US foreign policy officials disregarded such cautions and arrangements, which could have prevented America’s involvement in a protracted war.

Clubb seemed to favor the British proposal, focusing more on the political and diplomatic avenues to gain time to understand communist aims.\(^8^0\) MacArthur and Acheson did not like his assessments and recommendations for the “temporary abandonment of an all-out offensive in favor of more wary tactics… to permit political estimates and discussions with our allies, to the end that, in our haste to win a battle, we


shall not lose the war.” Yet Clubb astutely observed that “[i]t is hard to believe that, in the event of war… we shall be able to avoid certain military defeats of serious nature for the UN side.” Most importantly, he believed that political detente with the Chinese did not equate to appeasement but rather created political avenues to contain hostilities within Korea. Unlike many of his contemporaries, he did not catch victory fever and constantly advised his superiors that the Administration’s foreign policy should maintain political support for the war. As mentioned earlier in the thesis, President Truman needed the political and military support of friendly nations; and the US needed to stay within the agreed UN framework. Clubb wisely warned: “we should not assume… that our will is the UN will… We cannot go faster than the UN, or we shall find ourselves alone.” In hindsight, Bevin and Clubb were correct in their assessments and recommendations of cautious action. Overall, these debates show how the US tried to grapple with alternative solutions in the face of Cold War politics and an outdated military strategy: what was once clear became obscure.

The Impending Chinese Intervention: Key Intelligence Reports Lost

By compiling and collecting various Army intelligence reports, I found a clear trajectory of growing Chinese presence in northern Korea (See Fig. 1 below). I read and collected the various military intelligence reports regarding aerial observation, skirmishes, and the collection of prisoners of war. The numbers show the gradual increase in US estimations that should have raised red flags for the JCS and the UN

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83 Ibid., 1090.  
84 Ibid., 1092.
Command. Yet no immediate action was taken. The reality in Korea collided with Acheson and MacArthur’s assertion that the improved conditions in Korea did not warrant a *cordon sanitaire*.

The statistics in Fig. 1 show the probability of the Chinese intervention as Bevin accurately observed it. Bevin attempted to bridge Anglo-American interests by avoiding open hostilities with China. He wrote: “It is of great importance to establish

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>CCF Numbers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10/27/1950</td>
<td>2 Divisions (Not Independent)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/28/1950</td>
<td>1 regiment*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29-Oct</td>
<td>2,000 Troops</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-Oct</td>
<td>2 regiments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31-Oct</td>
<td>2,000 Troops</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31-Oct</td>
<td>5,000 Troops</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31-Oct</td>
<td>133,000 Troops</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11/1/1950</td>
<td>2 to 3 regiments (Independent)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-Nov</td>
<td>15,000 - 20,000 Troops</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-Nov</td>
<td>2 regiments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-Nov</td>
<td>X&gt;18,000 Troops</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7-Nov</td>
<td>100,000 - 133,000 Troops</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8-Nov</td>
<td>30,000-40,000 Troops</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28-Nov</td>
<td>101,000 Troops</td>
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<tr>
<td>30-Nov</td>
<td>200,000 Troops</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*Although the size of army units vary, a regiment usually contain up to 4,5000 personnel
interests in the ultimate settlement of Korea.” He perceptively understood that the PRC would be an unavoidable power in East Asia. Rather than focusing on territorial acquisition, Bevin believed that the UN objective at this point should be to build up troop forces in case a Chinese counteroffensive indeed took place.

While British caution did raise eyebrows in Washington, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) seemed to be the only American intelligence organization that seriously considered Chinese regional interests. The CIA drew similar conclusions in its assessment of a Chinese intervention. Walter B. Smith, Director of the Central Intelligence Agency, informed the President on November 1, 1950 of troop estimates, predictions of Chinese regional motives, and possible political objectives. The significance of Smith’s memo to Truman is that it concurred with conclusions by Director Clubb and Bevin. Smith assessed that China’s main motivation was to establish a limited *cordon sanitaire* below the Yalu River because it genuinely feared an invasion by UN forces. The CIA report was supported by another draft memo written by Mr. John P. Davies of the Policy Planning Staff. This top-secret document considered all possible scenarios concerning an intervention but underscored the fact that the US did not have the resources or the political capital to combat the Chinese indefinitely. Because the US was the “moving spirit in the UN,” Beijing would rebuff Truman’s assurances. Davies acutely stated that Beijing’s antipathy towards the US was not necessarily out of

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political ideology but rather stemmed from its experience during the Chinese Civil War (1945-1949) and then the current issues with Formosa. 87

In its official memorandum dated on November 8, the CIA provided an official estimate of CCF forces in Korea from data supplied by the State Department, the Army, the Navy, and the Air Force. It concluded that roughly 30,000-40,000 CCF were in North Korea while another 700,000 were based in Manchuria. The CIA believed that China was fully capable of halting the UN advance and marching over to Korea. 88

Essentially, the PRC was perfectly willing to spend money and lives to obtain realistic, limited objectives as its military retained “full freedom of action with respect to Korea.” 89 Beijing was unified politically and militarily and, unlike their American counterparts, had wholeheartedly accepted the risk of becoming involved in an expanded conventional war. The Chinese possessed the will to sacrifice the lives of its soldiers to protect their nation’s sovereignty at any cost.

*Absolute Victory: an American Penchant*

Despite their wariness towards the Chinese intervention, the JCS allowed MacArthur to continue his advance because everyone was hopeful that the USAF would successfully interdict Chinese supply lines. On November 6, 1950, the JCS agreed with a strategic bombing campaign of the Yalu bridges in order to isolate the battlefield in North

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Korea. US interests in Korea then started to contradict each other. Originally, NSC 81/1 dated in September 1950 provided explicit instructions that MacArthur “should undertake no ground operations north of the 38th parallel in the event of the occupation of North Korea by… Chinese Communist forces.”

MacArthur’s objectives were also altered to destroy the remnants of the NKPA and conquer all North Korean territory for the ROK. MacArthur sent another secret update to the JCS the next day (November 7) to explain his intentions for the UN military. He admitted that independent, organized Chinese military contingents were fighting back the UN advance, but he argued that UN forces should resume its advance because “[o]nly through such an offensive effort can any accurate measure be taken of enemy strength.” Finally, MacArthur tried to minimize the danger of direct Chinese intervention by stating that “bombing of [enemy] targets [was] the only resource left to me to prevent a potential buildup of enemy strength.” Air power was the key component to MacArthur’s confidence in preventing Chinese interference in Korea.

For historians, a central question remains: why did American leaders believe it was necessary to use a strained military force for territorial acquisition while risking a war with China? Why did they downplay the British proposal, battlefield intelligence, the internal warnings such as Clubb’s, and the CIA assessments? The most plausible answer stems from US military doctrine of absolute victory. MacArthur eloquently expressed this doctrine: he believed that retreat or anything short of total victory was

encouraging communist aggression, which would be “the greatest defeat of the free world
in recent times... bankrupt our... influence in Asia,” and therefore he recommended that
“we press on to complete victory.”93 To leaders like Acheson and MacArthur, terms such
as “withdrawal” and “demilitarize” went against the doctrine of advance, maneuver, and
firepower, which were the foundations of the American style of warfare. The historian
Russell F. Weigley provides insight into MacArthur’s obsession with offensive action
and absolute victory. Weigley argues that the American military and political
establishment possesses a rudimentary understanding of what constituted as a Civil War-era victory. He believes that US military strategy hinged on the single goal of “the
complete overthrow of the enemy, the destruction of his military power, [as] the object of
war.”94 The military experience developed during the Second World War was ill fitting
for Cold War views toward military conflict because limited war was inconsistent with
the goal of unconditional surrender.95

When it was clear that MacArthur intended to cross the 38th Parallel, the
relationship between politics and the will to spend dollars took center stage. The will to
invest in military technology rather than lives allowed President Truman not only to keep
a regional war popular with his constituents but also to solidify US prestige and influence
as the biggest contributor to UN efforts. Ironically, Truman became a victim of his own
success in many ways: the American public, enamored by the string of UN victories in
September and October, expected US forces to achieve a quick and absolute victory; his

93 MacArthur to JCS, “The Commander in Chief, Far East (MacArthur) to the Joint Chiefs of Staff,” in U.S.
94 Weigley, The American Way of War, xxi
95 Ibid., 415.
officials aligned themselves with MacArthur on the faith in air power while ignoring other viable policy options recommended; and key intelligence reports on the impending Chinese intervention were brushed away. Internationally, many European allies, especially the British, disagreed and questioned the decisions made by the American leadership. As the diplomatic complexities rose, the US lost sight of its original priority—avoiding a protracted war—and, naturally and understandably, clung to what was familiar and comfortable: its belief in modern technology and the Cold War accusation of appeasement against its detractors.
Politics and Technology

The interrelations between politics and military technology began to play a prominent role when the Chinese, after months of silent observation, finally sprung their trap on the UN troops. On the first days of November 1950, a force of 20-30,000 Chinese soldiers mauled the US Eighth cavalry and the 15th ROK regiments that recently captured Unsan, a small town in Northeast Korea. Fighter-bombers of the USAF supported the initial defense of Unsan but darkness soon neutralized this technological advantage. With air support unable to provide relief and only a single main road coming out of the town, retreating American forces were soon cut off by roadblocks set up by infiltrating Chinese troops. Heavy reliance on motor transport proved to be a blessing and a curse for the soldiers of the Eighth cavalry. The Chinese troops in surrounding hillside would halt the lead vehicle, which then stalled all the ones behind it. Without alternative routes, American transports and heavy equipment were easily eliminated. Many scholars regard the Battle of Unsan as the worst defeat of US forces in Korea. According to historian David Halberstam, this elite American regiment lost half of its authorized strength and its spokesperson described the battle as ‘‘a massacre… like the one that hit Custer at the Little Big Horn.’’

The map below describes the sequence of events during the Battle of Unsan. The dotted lines coming out of Unsan are roads in the mountainous terrain. The CCF infiltrated US lines and quickly surrounded the 8th Cavalry, cutting the avenues of escape by setting up road blocks. The sudden defeat was a rude awakening to American troops on the ground.

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Many of the senior commanders of the Eighth Army interpreted the battle as a Chinese warning to stay away from the border. Yet MacArthur regarded Unsan as a minor setback as he did a week earlier in October when a similar Chinese force demolished a couple of ROK regiments.\footnote{Appleman, 	extit{South to the Naktong}. (Washington, 1961), 673.} The General’s view reflected a deeper problem within the American military command structure and his relationship with the decision makers in Washington. The JCS had to balance politics and military interests, but his view was solely based on a military perspective. The JCS was responsible for controlling and
dictating policy matters regarding the Korean War to General MacArthur and his forces on the ground. But when there was no subsequent Chinese offensive after November 2, MacArthur wished to resume his offensive towards the Yalu and “withdraw the Eighth Army to Japan by Christmas.” Around November 6, 1950, the PVA that defeated the US and ROK regiments at Unsan disappeared. Convinced that the sudden attack was all the Chinese could muster, MacArthur ordered his forces to continue the advance while the USAF and its allies bombed roads and bridges along the Yalu River to isolate the battlefield. But then he would leave himself the only possible military option: to enter Manchuria if the Chinese survived the US air campaign and forcefully responded to his northward advance. America and its allies were not prepared to sacrifice the military and political capital necessary for an expanded war in Northeast China. Politically, the US was already being labeled as the aggressor by the Chinese while at the same time it was alienating its own allies.

The Limitations of Air Power

The US justified UN action against communist aggression by citing morality and democratic principles. American technological strength steered the war aims of this multinational army at whim. When the Korean War reached a crucial point, the JCS indulged MacArthur’s confidence on air power and allowed the General to continue his risky advance toward the Manchurian border. Although reliance on air power was not wholly shared by his colleagues, MacArthur’s overall sentiments trickled down to the lower ranks in the US Army, which led to careless military action on the ground and an obsession for offensive maneuvers to achieve victory.

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MacArthur’s forces had enormous trouble gauging the exact size of the PVA operating in Korea. The harsh winter weather and Korea’s mountainous terrain greatly hindered aerial observation of already deceptive PVA forces with camouflage and discipline. Lacking the proper equipment for photo analysis, US intelligence had no choice but to turn to the interrogation reports of captured Chinese prisoners. Newspapers as well as secret US government documents cited complaints of bad weather and rough terrain being the main causes of not knowing where the PVA were. The American Ambassador to Korea, John Muccio, highlighted the limitations of air power as he reported to Secretary Acheson that “aerial reconnaissance last night [was] hampered by poor weather”\textsuperscript{100} and that “[p]oor visibility hindered air operations… including reconnaissance.”\textsuperscript{101} MacArthur complained about the terrain in his message to the JCS by saying that the Korean terrain and the international boundary were major factors in “[diminishing] the effectiveness of our air support in channelizing and interrupting the enemy supply system; [they serve] to aid the enemy in his dispersion tactics.”\textsuperscript{102}

Weeks after the Battle of Unsan, UN forces launched their “Home-by-Christmas Offensive,” MacArthur’s one last push before complete victory. However, the PVA immediately attacked and decimated ROK units, which split the UN front in half and forced a total retreat. MacArthur stumbled into another Chinese attack followed by a


major counteroffensive because US technological advantage encouraged him to adopt an offensive strategy when actually a more nuanced approach was needed. *Territorial acquisition* was the phrase MacArthur and his command often used to justify the UN offensive in October, which also reflected the American public’s quantified interpretation of military progress. Although there were surviving remnants of the NKPA and the North Korean political leadership, it was unclear how occupying territory up to the Sino-Korean border would fulfill immediate US interests in keeping the war as a localized conflict. As Clausewitz famously said, “[d]estruction of the enemy’s force is only a means to an end, a secondary matter… as a rule a hill or a bridge is captured only so that even more damage can be inflicted on the enemy.”103 Therefore, it is not surprising that China would be apprehensive if a foreign military force encroached on its territory. Nonetheless, the JCS gave MacArthur permission to engage enemy forces north of the 38th Parallel and to halt only when he believed that he could not win against the Chinese military. And Acheson blamed the civilian sector for distorting the General’s interpretation of the military directive.104 He argued that “we [the JCS] are not interested in ‘real estate’ but in an army.”105 The Secretary of State was inconsistent with his statement: on the one hand, he argued that the US military was not interested in territorial acquisition; on the other, Acheson dismissed the British proposal to withdraw to a more

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103 Clausewitz, *On War*, 96.
defendable line and solidify UN gains since uniting Korea did not require “the military occupation of all of Korea to its northernmost boundaries.”

_Messy Politics: Hard Reality Colliding with High Expectations_

President Truman had to deal with domestic criticism and efforts of “vilification and character assassination” from his Republican opponents while contending with MacArthur’s pressure for the green light to resume his November offensive. In the United States, Truman used the success of the Korean War for his advantage while being aware that the American public was extremely sensitive to any more sacrifice in blood and money. When easy victory could not be achieved, the main priority was “to get out of Korea as fast as possible” since the American public was disconnected from the war. Civilians cared about televisions and refrigerators, not the Chinese or democracy in Korea. The President also had to contend with the charisma of MacArthur, an almost legendary figure who won the Pacific Theatre during World War II, successfully reconstructed post-war Japan, and was the first symbol of the Cold War warrior in this new conflict. The Truman Administration would be exposing itself to political attacks from the right if it overtly disagreed with MacArthur.

International politics is, above all else, about power. The US possessed economic and military power in the post-war world: with its technological and industrial strength,
Truman projected American influence not only across the Pacific and into East Asia but also on its own European allies. Upon discovering that Secretary Bevin instructed the UK representative to the UN, Sir Gladwyn Jebb, to present the proposal of a *cordon sanitaire*, Secretary Acheson sent a top-secret telegram on November 21 to the British Embassy, stating that “[w]e [US] have at present no basis for agreement with UK as to nature of any demilitarized zone.” In short, Acheson gave a flat-out ‘no’ to the alternative proposal, which shows the divergence of their policies and the US way of dealing with politics and diplomacy.

Nine days later on November 30, the US Representative to the UN, Warren R. Austin, reported to Acheson about what transpired at the UN meeting. His main concern was Jebb’s reaction and comments to the changing situation in Korea. According to Austin, the UK representative believed that the UN Charter was not a suitable instrument to handle war against major powers and that regardless of who recognized the PRC, the UN was not capable of fighting in a long protracted war against the Chinese military. Jebb referred to the original UN mission of reestablishing the status quo in Korea. The UK government was obviously worried that any more commitments to East Asia would lower the defenses in Western Europe against potential Soviet aggression. Austin relayed Jebb’s disapproval of American foreign policy when he wrote that other European nations and the “UK [share] a tremendous apprehension that US was committing western [sic] Europe to conduct war in the Far East… under the most difficult possible strategic

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110  Protecting and preserving South Korean sovereignty.
conditions." Without an immediate military threat to bind the interests of various nations, the US needed to be more sensitive to the opinions of the contributing countries and the moral legitimacy of the UN forces.

By the early months of the Korean War, the days of unquestioned international cooperation that shaped during World War II were over as Cold War politics strained fragile relations between US and democratic European countries. Cold War tensions were brewing amongst the UN forces, especially between the UK and the US. Acheson and MacArthur brushed away British concerns over overextending military resources and antagonizing the Chinese. They pressured their allies to go along with the American agenda. However, political solidarity was threatened when it was officially confirmed that UN forces faced an enemy totaling 200,000. By early December, it was clear that the US lost its gamble after MacArthur reported that “the Chinese Communists continue the buildup of their forces in North Korea despite all interdiction of our Air Command.” The New York Times issued MacArthur’s public statement that the US “[faces] an entirely new war.” With orders for a full retreat, soldiers reacted differently to the turn of events. When asked why he was fighting in Korea, Marine Corporal Frank Bifulk responded: “I’m fighting for one thing – me! Truman really slapped us in the face. He called Korea a police action. Here we were fighting

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and dying and our president says that. Some thanks.”114 By contrast, Private First Class Leonard Korgie was in disbelief as he wondered that “[w]e couldn’t have missed the Chinese by much… How come MacArthur did not know China was coming into it [the war]? Where had our Air Force been?115 These two soldiers effectively summed up what many of their disillusioned comrades felt toward both military and civilian leaders. Their disillusionment was another sign of how the JCS had drastically strayed from its previous priority of limited war.

The map below shows how far the UN retreated south to the 38th Parallel.116 With the Chinese armies unrelenting in their attacks, many UN allies complained that American leaders were alienating the very countries crucial to their success in Korea. Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs, Rusk, wrote a secret memorandum of the November 30 conversation between the European participants, which captured their reactions.117 Countering MacArthur’s position, Rusk admitted that the Chinese offensive had been carefully planned and “was not a result of or in response to the recent UN offensive. UN forces had been out of contact with the enemy for ten days or two weeks.”118 Rusk cited Chinese protests and threats of war as the main reason why aerial reconnaissance could not find the main concentration of Chinese forces.119 He advocated

115 Knox. The Korean War, 438.
117 The participants contained the representatives from UK and all of its commonwealth, Norway, France, Belgium, Turkey, and the Netherlands.
for a multilateral approach to deal with the offensive, which was in stark contrast to Acheson’s tone to Foreign Secretary Bevin of the UK a couple weeks before.

Map 4

In response, a handful of UN members were skeptical of US assessments of the current situation. The Australian ambassador, Norman J.O. Makin, wondered why there was a disparity between the discovery of large Chinese forces in North Korea and MacArthur’s
report that the UN offensive was to be the final phase of the fighting. The Dutch representative, J.G. de Beus, questioned why the UN Commander was caught off guard since intelligence channels warned that Beijing was massing “about 160,000 Chinese Reds soldiers [sic] in Korea ready to go” several weeks in advance.\(^\text{120}\)

Besides overestimating the effectiveness of air power, the JCS and UN Command plainly refused to heed the warning signs of Chinese presence in Korea. They believed that even if US forces faced a substantial enemy, American technological and cultural superiority would suffice to stop any meaningful intervention. Their refusal was partly due to their ignorance of geopolitical realities concerning China and Korea. Acheson refused to heed the advice given by China experts such as Director Clubb of the State Department. Within the military sphere, racial stereotypes toward Asians were rampant. MacArthur went beyond the common slurs such as ‘chink’ and ‘gook’; ‘chinaman’ and ‘laundryman’ as he claimed he understood the “‘mind of the Oriental,’” and believed that “the Asiatic respected powerful men who were strong and unshakable in their vision,” which conveniently justified overt US military action.\(^\text{121}\) In contrast, the British displayed their sensitivity to the geopolitical situation of Sino-Korean history dating back to their days of colonial imperialism. British Ambassador to the US, Sir Oliver Franks, mentioned to Acheson that “the entire history of this part of the world indicates a concern over Korea as an entrance to Manchuria… the Russians, the Japanese, and the British had all had this concept.”\(^\text{122}\) American leaders had just hoped that the Chinese would not react during MacArthur’s November advance.

\(^{120}\) Ibid., 1265.
\(^{122}\) Memorandum by Mr. Lucius D. Battle, Special Assistant to the Secretary of State, “Meeting at the Secretary’s Office,” in U.S. Department of State, FRUS, 1950. vol. VII: 1202,
**Battling to Hold Coalition Together**

The US had never led other nations on a ‘police action’ in a foreign country prior to Korea; and now it was facing trouble when it equated its national policy with that of an international organization. In a JCS meeting at the Pentagon on December 3, 1950, Rusk warned that “[u]nless we maintain the integrity of the UN, there is a question if we can maintain the integrity of our foreign policy.”\(^{123}\) However, Secretary of Commerce, Harriman, reminded everyone that the “UN must consider our [American] moral position and American opinion. Our policy must be based on holding the US and the British Commonwealth in line. The European attitude depends upon us and our attitude and what we are ready to do.”\(^{124}\)

In another meeting on December 3, members of the JCS were distraught when Acheson reported that “[t]he present tendency among other countries is to criticize us rather than the Chinese Communists” after attempting to impose an American style of conducting war and politics on an international organization.\(^{125}\) According to historian Bevin Alexander, both MacArthur and Truman were influenced by the public’s “traditional one-dimensional desire for total victory.”\(^{126}\) As a result, the Truman Administration unknowingly cornered itself into making extreme decisions laced with Cold War anxiety. Wary of the Soviet Union, Truman rejected the *cordon sanitaire* proposal because an offensive halt may be perceived as military weakness. While a


\(^{124}\) Ibid., 1325.

\(^{125}\) Ibid., 1327-28.

\(^{126}\) Alexander, *Korea*, 233.
ceasefire with the Chinese was militarily beneficial, the JCS was not willing to pay the political price of humiliation. The political pendulum in Washington swung from confidence in MacArthur’s drive to the Yalu to panicking talks of possible troop evacuation and a reemphasis on a Eurocentric policy. Under Secretary Robert Lovett noted that “Korea is not a decisive area for us… Western Europe was our prime concern and we would rather see that result [in the loss of Korea and Japan] than lose in Western Europe. It was best to hold in Korea for political motives.”

When the PVA neutralized the UN’s air power during the remaining months of 1950, it limited US foreign policy to being one that oscillated between extremes. America’s firm principles were often lauded, but its major weakness was its uncompromising politics, which narrowed the options of US foreign policy. For example, Admiral Sherman succinctly stated that “the only sound basis for dealing the Chinese Communists would say that unless you stop you are at war with the United States… If any one [sic] can kill that many Americans and not be at war, we are defeated.” This style of diplomacy can even be seen in America’s Great Seal as the American eagle holds arrows on the right and an olive branch on the left. Washington’s you’re-either-with-us-or-against-us approach did more to sow seeds of discord amongst allies rather than to pressure China to relent on their threat to intervene. According to notes taken during a secret JCS meeting, Secretary Acheson opened the discussion by informing that UN members were “complaining that the United States’ leadership has

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failed” and the dire situation is “the fault of General MacArthur’s action.” Most European nations felt bullied and bitter towards the US because Acheson dismissed allied concerns and the British proposal of a demilitarized zone when Chinese troops made contact with UN forces back in October.

The US’s domestic and international politics, which were often contradictory, hamstrung its military from wielding enormous technological power. With Soviet presence in Eastern and Central Europe, Washington was determined to continue its ‘Europe First’ policy. As a result, it had very limited political capital to support a prolonged, inconclusive military action in East Asia. But then precisely because of the promise and supremacy of military technology, the Truman Administration inevitably lulled itself into complacencies: inconsistent political and diplomatic priorities, cultural and geopolitical ignorance, and unwillingness to bring in its allies. After air power failed to prevent the Chinese intervention, most US policymakers slowly came to realize that there were limits to using military power as a rational and effective instrument of foreign policy. In the wake of MacArthur’s appeal to possibly expand the war into Manchuria, President Truman could not simply replicate Teddy Roosevelt’s Big Stick Diplomacy to persuade China to withdraw from the Korean border, as it was completely willing to risk a general war. Ultimately, politics, war included, was an inconclusive human affair both aided and hampered by technology, as far as handling regional conflicts was concerned.

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Conclusion

This thesis has analyzed the strategy and politics of the US air campaign during a three-month period of the Korean War. I have focused on three factors: will, politics, and technology; these intertwined issues are indispensable to analyze the event. This thesis did not insist upon the duality of one issue versus another for understanding the event and finding the answers to why the US’s superior military technology could not win against the Chinese’s intervention. Using three paired factors—will/technology, will/politics, and politics/technology—with two attributes of each factor, this thesis attempted to illuminate the causes and lessons in military strategy between then and now.

Cultural misperception and economic strength influenced how the US made its choice to spend either money or lives in order to achieve its political and military objectives. The United States and China played to their strengths but China was acutely aware of the asymmetry—its own limitations and its opponent’s capabilities. During the Korean War, the US faced a rude awakening that technological advantages alone were not sufficient in furthering its gains. In essence, the contest between military technology and the will to spend lives remained unresolved.

Why this was the case is partially due to human frailties: MacArthur and other officials had an unquestioning faith in air power and refused to face the new reality by ignoring key intelligence reports (non-technology) and other policy options. Another reason why technology was hamstrung is that President Truman struggled to balance multiple conflicting interests at home and abroad, as he strove to manage the first “hot war” of the Cold War only five years after fighting in the Second World War. In the US, he had to meet the public expectations: not spilling blood and not being “soft on
communism”; internationally, he was pulled in different directions: maintaining a Eurocentric foreign policy, holding UN countries together, and “having to be there” for the strategic importance of East Asia.

The Vietnam War eclipses the Korean War: the limitations of US military technology are usually associated in the context of the former. But this thesis argues that the Korean War is the first regional conflict which exemplifies the challenges that the US faces when it involves itself in subsequent far-off conflicts. The Korean War, microscopically the air campaign discussed here, has all the comparable elements that we hear in our own time—e.g., “shock and awe,” “combat drones,” and “coalition of the willing.” The threads that run through all the discussions in this thesis are: that there are no easy wars; and that those who have an unbridled faith in military technology indulge in pipe dreams. The history of the air campaign, by giving context and examples, revealed a very different account: the Korean War severely tested the faith in low-cost and decisive war engagements via military technology; it was an asymmetrical war between a well-armed military on one side and low-level yet determined opponent on the other; decision makers turned a blind eye, in part, to reduce complexities and to protect prestige; military action was considered and evaluated based on the critical factor of public opinion.

This thesis still leaves bigger puzzles unanswered: Why do political and military leaders seem not to have learned a multitude of lessons from the Korean War? Why do they continue to fight the wrong kinds of battles when military goals are ultimately political? An answer could be our own bias: We pick and choose whatever lessons to suit our own ideological agendas and political preferences.
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