

ILEAD Lecture, April 25, 2011

The Place of the Korean War in American Memory

Today I will discuss the way in which Americans thought about the brutal war on the Korean peninsula from June 1950 to July 1953, and the way those who served there fit into our national narrative. 2010 marked the 60th anniversary of the beginning of that war. As I have worked on this subject, reflecting on all of our wars from the Revolution to Iraq and Afghanistan. I have come to understand more and more the importance of the Korean War.

Last fall I lectured at Yonsei University in Seoul on American Veterans Day and I had a chance to join in a Korean Government program honoring those who had fought at the Chosin Reservoir sixty years earlier —and to join some of those Marine veterans. The Chosin Few, at the Marine Corps birthday celebration hosted by the Marine Command, Korea. All of this affirmed for me why this war needs to be remembered. What was originally a part of a chapter of my book became a chapter. I will share here some of my observations and conclusions about this war.

Late in the afternoon of July 5, 1950, a young soldier was in a foxhole in the rain near Sojong in South Korea. His unit, the 1st Battalion, 21st Infantry Regiment of the 24th Division, had just arrived there, reassigned from their occupation duty at Kumamoto in Japan. They encountered a North Korean tank. His bazooka team fired at the tank and the tank returned fire with its machine gun. The young man, Private Kenneth Shadrick, was hit and killed by these bullets. His team withdrew, taking his body with them.

Shadrick was judged then to be the first American casualty in the Korean War—a claim that has since been disputed. He was the first announced American serviceman killed in the Korean War. Marguerite Higgins was there when the team brought his body to the hut that the medics occupied. She had been a frontline correspondent in World War II and had left her Tokyo office of the *New York Herald Tribune* to go with the troops to Korea. She wrote that the dead young soldier had a look of surprise on his face. “The prospect of death had probably seemed as unreal to Private Shadrick as the entire

war still seemed to me. He was very young indeed—his fair hair and frail build made him look far less than his nineteen years.” The medic standing there said simply, “What a place to die.” The *New York Times* would note his death, “He died, as doughboys usually die, in a pelting rain in a muddy foxhole.”

Back in Skin Fork, West Virginia, Shadrick’s parents learned of their son’s death that morning at breakfast when a neighbor rushed in telling them he had heard it on the radio. Mrs. Shadrick was devastated and could not discuss the death of one of her ten children. Mr. Shadrick, who had worked in the coal mines for 37 years, later talked to reporters and was described as “sad but resigned.” His son, he said, “was the best there was. Never caused us a mite of worry.” He had accepted his son’s interest in joining the Army at age 17 and had signed the permissions for this. When asked what he thought about his young soldier’s assignment to this conflict, Mr. Shadrick’s father said simply “He was fighting against some kind of government.” When a reporter asked if he knew where Korea was, he said that it was the place where his boy had been killed.

Over the next three years, nearly 37,000 other American servicemen would die in Korea and their families would deal with the tragic shock of loss. Neighbors would join them in mourning but the country at large often failed to recognize the scale and the cost of the Korean War. It was so soon after World War II. Americans were still building military cemeteries for that war and the unknown soldier of WWII was still in a temporary grave overseas. World War II GIs were just graduating from College. Korea was so distant, and the conflict there was so complicated. And it would set a new pattern for American military engagement.

On June 25, 1950 when North Korea, under the leadership of Kim Il Sung, sent a massive force of tanks and troops across the 38th parallel into South Korea, the political leadership in the west was shaken. And within a week the United Nations and the United States had resolved to stem this aggression and to protect the South Korean government led by Syngman Rhee. It became a broader war that no one had expected, including the North Koreans and the Soviet Union which had agreed finally to the invasion of the south. President Truman would describe the war as a “police action,” a regrettable term. It was quite a police force before it was over in July 1953. Almost 1.8 million U.S.

service members would serve in Korea. Along with the 37,000 who would die there, more than 100,000 were wounded.

The war was, at its core, a result of the tensions between east and west that had followed World War II. American fear of Josef Stalin's aggressive ambitions had been enhanced by the news that the Soviet Union had exploded an atomic bomb. America's proprietary post-war security blanket was now shared. And the victory of Mao Tse-tung's communists in China confirmed for many the global reach of communism. American domestic politics played into this stew of strategic concerns with increasing Republican criticism of the Truman administration for "losing" China and for a far-too-tolerant approach to the Communist threat. Wisconsin Senator Joseph McCarthy had launched his campaign against communists in the American government in February 1950.

In addition to this context, there was a profound understanding of history that the policy makers of this generation shared. President Harry Truman articulated it well when he said that World War II might have been averted if western European and American leadership had stood up to Germany, Italy, and Japan in the 1930s. "If history has taught us anything, it is that aggression anywhere in the world is a threat to peace everywhere in the world." One of his major Republican critics, Senator William Knowland of California, shared the same view of history and he argued that "Korea stands today in the same position as did Manchuria, Ethiopia, Austria, and Czechoslovakia at an earlier date. In each of those instances a firm stand by the law-abiding nations of the world might have saved the peace." And Democratic senator Abraham Ribicoff of Connecticut asked, "What difference is there in the actions of northern Koreans today and the actions which led to the Second World War?" He quipped, "Talk about parallels!"

In those years there was a remarkable sense of history and of mission, of foreboding, and of self-assurance. In early July of 1950, American confidence—indeed, over-confidence if not outright arrogance—was high. The military historian S. L. A. Marshall wrote in July 1950 that in the U.S. there was "an air of excessive expectation based upon estimates which were inspired by wishful optimism." A young American soldier dispatched to Korea in those first weeks wrote, "Everyone thought the enemy would turn around and go back when they found out who was

fighting.” The first six months of the Korean War provided a roller coaster of emotions for the U.S. public several thousand miles away.

In the summer of 1950, the allies were pushed back to the Pusan Perimeter and the North Koreans took the city of Seoul. This was followed by General Douglas MacArthur’s audacious landing at Inchon in September, retaking Seoul, and then his drive to the Yalu River at the China-North Korean border. With the sometimes uncomfortable approval of the U.S. government and the even more uneasy agreement of UN participants, the war had shifted markedly by fall.

General MacArthur and his command in Tokyo basically ignored threats that the Chinese would enter the war if we approached the Yalu River border with Manchuria. Even more troubling, they dismissed the capacity of the Chinese to be of any real military consequence if they did enter the war. “Chinese laundrymen,” they sniffed, were no match for our boys. They promised UN troops that they would be “home for Christmas.”

Tragically, the only men who would get home for Christmas in 1950 came in hospital transports or in coffins. When the Chinese entered the fight in force in late November 1950, the war took on an altogether different face.

UN forces were overwhelmed by sheer numbers and several days of bitter fighting up in the cold and snow led to a difficult withdrawal, with the 8th U.S. Army and the ROK II Corps decimated along the Chongchon River on the western side of the mountains. The U.S. Army 2nd Infantry Division took terrible casualties near Yangpyon where they had three thousand killed or wounded in a few hours. As General Paik Sun Yup wrote of their trial on the road to Sunchon: “The God of Death himself hovered with heavy, beating wings over that road.”

To the east, the First Marine Division and two Army battalions of the US Seventh Infantry Division were surrounded and forced to fight their way out of the area around the Jang-jin (Chosin) Reservoir. The Chinese outnumbered the Marines by at least 5:1 and they had managed to move onto the high ground on the ridges. Marguerite Higgins was with the Marines at Hagaru-ri and she reported that they heard Peking Radio announce that “The annihilation of the United States 1st Marine Division is

only a matter of time.” She called it a Korean Valley Forge as the temperature dropped well below zero and snow and ice blocked every road.

The Marines fought their way out. They suffered remarkably heavy casualties as they finally withdrew to the Port of Hungnam from which they and upwards of 90,000 civilians were evacuated. Within weeks the UN forces were again fighting along the Han. These so-called laundrymen were tough soldiers.

General MacArthur, whose miscalculations about Chinese intent had enabled the entrapment, now began insisting publicly that he wished to take the war against the Chinese into China. When the General continued his public statements, President Truman removed him from command in the spring.

News accounts from Korea to the U.S. were always spotty and the initial American confidence was replaced by a sense of confusion which was followed by concern; the elation of early autumn yielded by the end of the year to puzzled pessimism. In the first days of the war, only 20% of Americans thought our engagement in this war was a mistake. By January of 1951 49% believed it was a mistake.

By the summer of 1951 fighting had stabilized—not that losses had lessened significantly—along the 38th Parallel and the two sides agreed to commence truce talks. This brought the war into a new phase, one in which American public support would prove to be harder to sustain. For the last half of the war, the negotiations were hung up on the question of whether communist prisoners held by the United Nations would be forced to return to China or North Korea. A laudable principle; a hard line over which to fight a difficult war.

The strategic objectives, murky enough at the outset, became less clear. Places such as “Pork Chop” Hill and “Heartbreak” Ridge became symbols for bravery, resolve, and heavy losses on all sides. And the outcome of these operations probably had little impact on the truce.

In January 1951, Time Magazine named “G.I. Joe” as its “Man of the Year” for 1950. Time introduced its honoree in this ambivalent way: “As the year ended, 1950’s man seemed to be an American in the bitterly unwelcome role of the fighting-man. It was not a role the American had sought, either as an individual or

as a nation. The U.S. fighting-man was not civilization's crusader, but destiny's draftee."

By the first anniversary of the beginning of the war, many of those on the ground in Korea moved their focus from military pursuit of victory and of geographical objectives to survival. One young officer recalled, "For the GI's the general idea was to stay alive. The army wasn't going anywhere, and everyone knew it. There would be no big push to end the war. The name of the game was to hang in there and survive until something happens at the peace talks in Panmunjom. To get killed was to be wasted, and no one wants to be wasted." Another remembered, "It wasn't like World War II; you knew there was no big push coming, no fighting until the enemy surrendered. This was a war that was going nowhere." In his book on the Korean War, David Halberstam described the sentiment on the front simply: no one wanted to "die for a tie."

But this stalemated phase was not a time of peace. One mother whose son was killed wrote a scathing note to President Truman: "It is murder to send boys to fight with their hands tied by your 'limited police action,'" she said. She asked the President: "Have you forgotten how America fights?" Young men continued to die—in large numbers. The established lines evoked the tragedy of trench warfare in World War I.

Adrian Lewis, Army officer and historian, wrote, "The Korean War was an infantry war. All the advances in technologies, airpower, nuclear power, naval power, missiles, and other machines of war contributed, but they were not decisive, nor did they have the potential to be. Short of extermination warfare, they could not deter or stop the advance of the North Korean People's Army (NKPA). It took soldiers and marines, infantrymen, fighting a primitive war in the heat, stench, rain, mud, and frigid conditions of the Korean peninsula with individual weapons," to stop the Chinese and North Koreans.

Bill Mauldin, the famous World War II commentator and cartoonist, described his observations of the combat soldier in Korea in 1952: "He fights a battle in which his best friends get killed and if an account of the action gets printed at all in his home town paper, it appears on page 17 under a Lux ad.

“There won’t be a victory parade for his return because he’ll come home quietly and alone, on rotation, and there’s no victory in the old-fashioned sense, anyway, because this isn’t that kind of war. It’s a slow, grinding, lonely, bitched-up war.”

James Michener wrote in the *Saturday Evening Post* in May 1952 that he held the troops in Korea to be greater heroes even than WWII. “The soldier on Guadalcanal could feel that his entire nation was behind him, dedicated to the job to which he was dedicated. Civilian and soldier alike bore the burden.” While in Korea the men “seem to fight in a vacuum, as if America didn’t care a damn.”

Finally on July 27, 1953 the parties signed an armistice agreement at Panmunjom. The fighting ended although there has not yet been a full peace treaty and the division between North and South continues along the 38th parallel.

As *Life Magazine* described the truce, “Since there was no real victory, there was no occasion for celebration—no whistles, no cheering, no dancing in the streets....the war itself will be long remembered for its cruelty, horror, pity, frustration and desperate bravery.”

The prediction was not sustained; no part of the war was long remembered. It remained on the periphery of the national narrative.

For many years there were no memorials for the Korean War and those who had fought it. Military units sometimes added “Korea” to its existing memorials and communities did the same. The United States combined a Korean memorial with the World War II Memorial at the Punchbowl National Cemetery in Hawaii.

A veteran who had lost a leg in Korea remembered when he left the hospital in the U.S.: “Off the base, it was if there was no war taking place. While very few civilians were consciously rude or offensive, it became quickly evident the man on the street just didn’t care. The war wasn’t popular and no one wanted to hear anything about it.”

David Halberstam wrote of the Korean War veterans, “This vast disconnect between those who fought and the people at home, the sense that no matter the bravery they showed, or the validity of their cause, the soldiers of Korea had been granted a kind of second-class status compared to that of the men who had fought in previous wars, led to a great deal of quiet—and enduring—bitterness.”

In my reading and research and conversations with these veterans, I encountered less bitterness and more resignation. These veterans moved back to their lives and seemed to have little interest in organizing and in reminding people of their services.

A veteran of the Chosin Reservoir campaign remembered a Marine band greeting them in San Francisco, but he wrote “The Korean War is called the Forgotten War because no one cared about it except the boys or men fighting there. Then we say we won the battle, but lost the war. When we got home, there was no big blowout. Everyone kept quiet. None of the veterans complained. People never knew where Korea was on the map.” Another veteran of the Chosin remembered that when he returned on leave to his home in upstate New York, he was refused entrance to the VFW club because he was not a veteran of a “war.”

Only in 1991 did the Korean veterans receive their parade in New York City. There were 9,000 of them who marched and an estimated quarter of a million who watched along the parade route. This was a few months after some millions of people had turned out for a parade for Gulf War, “Operation Desert Storm,” veterans. And forty years after General MacArthur had received a massive ticker-tape welcome. As one Queens letter carrier who had served in Korea said to a reporter, “We’re finally being recognized. This was long overdue.” A Long Island insurance investigator who was a Korean War veteran said, “I guess it was an unpopular war. It wasn’t considered a war, just a police action. But to the fellows who were there, it was a war, and we’re here not for us but for the guys we left in Korea.”

In 1982 a Korean War Veterans Association was organized. When I asked one of the early leaders why they had waited so long, he quipped that the veterans had been part of a “forgotten” war so they also tried to forget. When they did organize it was to provide an occasion for a reunion with friends from a faraway war. In October 1986 Congress authorized planning for a Korean War Veterans Memorial to be constructed on the National Mall, across the reflecting pool from the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, which had been dedicated in 1982. The Korean War Veterans Memorial was dedicated in 1995. The committee that planned it was composed of veterans of the war and they chose not to include here the names of the dead as the Vietnam Memorial did.

The Korean War memorial is about a sharing of experience. Nineteen figures, seven feet tall, imposing but not monumental, human rather than statuesque, move across a field. They bear the cautious expressions of men in combat.

One of the leaders in this project, retired Army Colonel William Weber who lost a leg and part of an arm in Korea, said, “It’s not a memorial of grief. It’s a memorial of pride.” Weber believes citizens in the United States have always been sheltered from the real nature of war. “Gruesome photographs are censored; everybody dies a heroic death. Well they don’t all die a heroic death, but their deaths can be worth something, as this memorial makes clear.” The inscription at the Memorial reads:

*Our Nation Honors
Her Uniformed Sons and Daughters
Who Answered Their Country’s Call
To Defend A Country They Did Not Know
And a People They Had Never Met*

One veteran remarked that, “A lot is said about the Vietnam Memorial and how it has helped the nation heal wounds. Well, many Korean War vets have healing to do, too. This will help. This will let some of the feelings out—not just feelings of fear in combat long repressed, or resentment at a lack of recognition, but also great feelings of pride in what they’d done.”

I visited the memorial last fall early on a late September morning. No one was there. There were three stands of flowers at the far point of the figures. All were from Korean organizations, remembering and thanking. At the far wall behind an American flag were some flower arrangements from Korean War Veterans groups and one marked simply, “Beloved Dad.” As I prepared to leave, a tour group on a bus arrived. The group was Asian and I approached a tour leader and asked where they were from. She said they were from a place near Shanghai, China, and were very interested in the Korean War.

In 1998, in preparation for the 50th anniversary of the beginning of this major American military action, the United States Congress designated the Korean engagement as a “War.” It had evolved from “police action” to “Korean Conflict,” but now it would finally be called what those who had been there always knew that it was.

One Marine veteran of the Chosin Reservoir was persuaded to go visit the Memorial in 1996. His wife said he never talked about the war but he would often waken

at night screaming. He spoke of standing at the Memorial some 45 years after the epic battle:

“As I stood by one of the statues for my wife to take a picture of me, I placed my hand on the shoulder of the statue and looked into its face and I saw the expression that I saw 45 years ago on the faces of fellow comrades. Tears came into my eyes, and my hand and arm began to tremble; for a few seconds I was back in Korea on the front line, a scared young man 21 years old, letting myself remember for the first time since the war what it was all about. I had shut out of my life most of the events that occurred during my war days.”

There is much history in the Korean War. It is necessary to learn this history in order to learn from it. In many ways the Korean War has been shut out of our nation’s narrative, and this has resulted in forgetting the veterans and in forgetting their war. The former act of forgetfulness is insensitive and inappropriate; forgetting about the war and the nature of the war is negligence.

I have been struck at how little the Korean War is a part of national policy or even scholarly discussions about the United States in the post-WWII world. There is a line that follows from Korea to Vietnam to Afghanistan to Iraq that needs to be filled in and underlined. I do not include the first Gulf War, Operation Desert Storm, in this thread because it was not a sustained war: it was a war with clear objectives, neatly accomplished, followed by a demobilization. It more closely fit a classic model of war as policy in this regard.

Korea was the first of four *sustained, multi-year* wars that responded to presumed or implicit threats against the United States. In Korea and Vietnam the presumed threat was ideological; in Iraq the threat was less ideology and more of an aggressive dictator who needed to be stopped as a presumed threat. Arguably the decision to send U.S. forces into Afghanistan was in response to a direct action, the Al Qaeda terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. The war that has followed, however, has been less explicitly justified as the need to respond to 9/11. It has rested more broadly upon presumed threats to the west.

Since Korea the United States has engaged in Asian land wars ranging from east Asia to west Asia. Again, only in the case of the Gulf War of 1991 were the military

objectives clear and only in that case did withdrawal follow the meeting of these objectives. Since Korea the United States has engaged in Asian land wars without territorial objectives. There have been no territories to take and to hold. This is what armies do best. In addition to non-military objectives, beginning with Korea the wars have all been marked by political constraints on the use of military force.

Adrian Lewis summarized it this way:

During the Korean War a significant but unnoticed transition in the American way of war took place. In 1951 as the war became a stalemate, the American citizen-soldier Army stopped employing offensive strategy. *The citizen-soldier Army of the United States would never again fight a major war with offensive strategy and doctrine.*

Since Korea, all of our extended military engagements have been marked by imprecise and changing objectives. In Korea at first the UN determined to stop North Korean aggression of the South; then in September 1950, caught up in the forward momentum of MacArthur's command, the international force determined to defeat North Korea and unify the peninsula; then in the spring of 1951 there was a recognition that victory would require a higher price and a greater risk than anyone from the west at least was prepared to pay; so we entered into negotiations which ended up dividing the warring parties over matters such as prisoner repatriation that had no relationship to the original objectives of the war.

Each extended war following Korea has witnessed a fundamental shift in public enthusiasm and support for the engagement. Each war was marked by early support and each war saw a decline in this support. They have been defensive and costly wars of attrition, not exactly the sort of activity to win political support—or military enthusiasm.

The Korean War did ask for sacrifice on the home front in the form of taxes and a draft. There was a draft in Vietnam but basically all of the subsequent wars including Vietnam have been wars in which there have been no demands on the home front. In July 1950 President Truman proposed major new taxes to cover the increased cost of the war. He sought some \$10.5 billion in revenue from income and excise taxes as well as a renewed “war profits” tax. There was little disagreement over the principle of taxes so that the country could pay for the war. Republican leaders such as Senator Taft and

Congressman Richard Nixon, then running for a U.S. Senate seat from California, endorsed the idea. Congress would approve war taxes on three different occasions to cover the cost of the war.

Secretary of the Treasury John Snyder told the Congress that some excess profits tax was essential: “You passed a bill up here to draft boys of 18, to send them to war. I think it is just as important we draft some of the profits to help pay for the expenditures.” Congress approved an excess profits tax and an additional surtax on corporations.

There was a significant aversion to debt on the part of President Truman as well as Democratic and Republican congressional leaders. House Speaker Sam Rayburn said “I think the boys in Korea would appreciate it more if we in this country were to pay our own way instead of leaving it for them to pay when they get back.” The war was largely paid for by the time it ended.

When the Korean war had begun, the authorization for selective service was just expiring. Congress quickly passed legislation extending it. In July 1950 the President issued a call-up of reserve units and 180,000 would be mobilized in the first three months of the war. These units proved not to be well trained—and they also included a number of WWII veterans who were not happy to be called up for another war. By the end of 1950 the administration was demobilizing the reserve units. The draft and voluntary enlistments would sustain the force. In 1951 32% of new enlisted men were draftees; by 1953 this figure was nearly 59%.

One of the modifications in the Korean War draft from that of WW II was explicitly to permit student deferments. It was not a blanket exemption but local selective service boards were provided more flexibility to defer students. They tended to exercise this choice. In November 1951 General Hershey reported that out of 1,259,000 college males who would otherwise be draft eligible, 891,000 had received deferments. Class standing and grades were part of the consideration for eligibility for this.

In the early 1940s about one third of the enlisted men had been volunteers; this percentage declined as the war went on. In Korea about one half of the enlisted men volunteered. A consequence of greater student deferments and of more reliance on enlistments was that, unlike World War II, there was a socioeconomic casualty gap in the

Korean War. Casualties tended to be disproportionately from lower socioeconomic areas. This gap would increase in the subsequent wars.

There seems little doubt that the Korean casualty gap was intensified by the fact that Korea, even more than WWII, was an infantry war. There were not the heavy casualties among airmen and sailors that had marked the Second World War. Certainly these latter forces had been disproportionately from higher socioeconomic groups.

Each war in American history had support at the outset, although there has been also major opposition to each, excepting the two world wars. The nature of the wars, beginning with Korea, has meant that understanding of the mission and support for the troops depended upon some fickle premises and soft assumptions.

That is why the Korean War experience is a history from which we could learn much. But it has been the missing chapter, the absent lesson. It is hard to learn much from that which we ignore and forget.

Even as he supported the Diem regime in Saigon, President Eisenhower resisted direct American military involvement in Vietnam; his successors would not, and they remembered only a simple lesson from Korea: if you stand up to aggressors, you can stop them. Some voices, General Matthew Ridgway, George Ball, Hubert Humphrey, warned about more complicated lessons of Korea. Few listened.

As Richard Nixon remarked, Vietnam was Korea with jungles. The differences between the two places, the two wars, was more than topographic. It is too bad that people who send our young to war did not study the Korean experience more carefully in the 1960s—and it is too bad that they still haven't done that.