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*VETERANS DAY IN AMERICA: THE PLACE OF THE KOREAN WAR IN
A NATIONAL DAY OF MEMORY*

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I am honored to join the Yonsei community as the Shinhan Distinguished Professor. And I am pleased to be here at this special time. Today is “Veterans Day” in the United States, an official national holiday. This holiday had its origins in the wake of World War I as the Western Allies commemorated the conclusion of that devastating war on November 11, 1918. The day was celebrated as Armistice Day in the US and Remembrance Day in the Commonwealth countries.

Such national commemorations are ways for societies to share, to remember, to mourn, and to teach. They affirm national pride and they honor individual sacrifice on behalf of a nation. In the United States Armistice Day was renamed Veterans Day in 1954, recognizing all veterans and including specifically those who had served in World War II and in the war in Korea.

Today I want to share with you some observations on the way American society has thought of war and of those who fight our wars. Specifically I will discuss the way in which Americans have remembered those who served in the brutal war on this peninsula from June 1950 to July 1953. This year marks the 60th anniversary of that war which was defining for the two political entities that are Korea.

I will not presume to use an American holiday to comment on Korean memory. But I will use the occasion to share with you some observations more broadly about the way that societies remember wars and their warriors. These are not trivial modes of cultural celebration nor are they simply exercises in academic history. The memories and the rituals and the symbols associated with war may be charged with

politics. Popular wartime histories for the victors can become a source of patriotic boasting and manipulation. And for the losers, the memories of war can be a source of pain that can lead to regret or humiliation—and, again, to manipulation.

The significance of official memory can be illustrated by the ongoing controversy over the way in which Japan remembers World War II. Especially in China and Korea memories of harsh occupation and atrocities, as well as brutalities such as “comfort women,” are very real and relevant legacies of that war. As recently as 2001 President Kim Dae-jung said of Japan, “How can we make good friends with people who try to forget and ignore the many pains they inflicted on us? How can we deal with them in the future with any degree of trust?”

My interest is not in stoking this controversy but rather to illustrate that memories and understandings of war can stir emotions long after the wars are ended.

The ways in which Adolph Hitler manipulated emotional and distorted memories of WWI was a crucial part of the Nazi political narrative. The distinguished historian George Mosse referred to the “cult of the fallen soldier” and the “Myth of the War Experience” as building blocks in Hitler’s themes of treachery and humiliation which cried for Aryan revenge.

An example from the United States was when, following the American Civil War, some southerners began to romanticize their defeat as “the lost cause.” By the 1870s and well into the 20th century—and in some quarters perhaps the 21st century—southerners developed an image filled with nostalgia and pride, and one that often greatly distorted the causes and the conduct of the war.

There are universal examples of the memory of war. From the remains of statuary in Athens and Rome to the Victorious Fatherland Liberation War Museum in Pyongyang, from the *Iliad* to the Lost Cause to Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* to Hwang Sunwon’s “Cranes,” individuals and cultures have remembered and defined war and its purposes. But finally, for the survivors, memories are of individual sacrifices that war cruelly imposes upon those who are asked to fight them. Thucydides captured

this in Pericles' Funeral Oration, a timeless reminder of the unselfish courage that war finally demands:

“ in the face of death they resolved to rely upon themselves alone.... they ran away from the word of dishonor, but on the battlefield their feet stood fast, and in an instant, at the height of their fortune, they passed away from the scene, not of their fear, but of their glory....they were worthy of Athens...”

Abraham Lincoln dedicated the cemetery at Gettysburg battlefield after the bloody Civil War battle there by reflecting on the debt of the nation—and the inadequacy of citizens ever to honor properly such sacrifice:

“We are met here on a great battlefield.... We have come to dedicate a portion of it as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live.....But in a larger sense we can not dedicate—we can not consecrate—we can not hallow this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled, here, have consecrated it far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember, what we say here, but can never forget what they did here.”

President Harry Truman's promise to “never forget their sacrifices” is engraved on the World War II Memorial in Washington. It is this commitment to “never forget” that has moved most cultures over the last century and a half to establish cemeteries for the war dead—be it at Arlington Cemetery in Virginia, the Punchbowl Cemetery in Hawaii, the Yasukuni shrine in Tokyo, the Seoul National Cemetery in Dongjak-gu, or the UN Memorial cemetery at Busan.

A good example of the way that even cemeteries remember differently can be seen at Normandy in France. This was the scene of the massive Allied landing in June of 1944 that finally led to the defeat of Nazi Germany. Following an extremely difficult battle on the coast and the bluffs the Allies established a beachhead. Tens of thousands were killed within sound of the sea.

The United States provided several cemeteries for Americans killed in these battles, with the major one being at Colleville-sur Mer, above

Omaha Beach. In this immaculate cemetery marked by white crosses and Stars of David rest 9,387 American military dead. Another 1,557 names are inscribed on the Wall of the Missing. It is a place of peace and tranquility, with reflecting pools, grand open structures of limestone and granite and marble, bound by the green grounds and the slope to the beach below. It is marked with a bronze statue, not of a warrior but of a soaring figure evoking memory of those who died too young, “The Spirit of American Youth Rising from the Waves.” Colleville-sur Mer is a solemn place of memory, one that whispers of sacrifice more than it shouts of heroism—but the sacrifices are indelibly marked by a proud and grateful nation.

Just a few miles from Colleville is the German cemetery at La Cambe. The victorious allies did not permit the Germans to construct any war memorials until 1952—and indeed at the end of WWII had ordered the destruction of all German monuments which glorified the military and German memory.

The cemetery at La Cambe is heavy, Wagnerian, melancholy. It evokes the tragedy of war—the unnecessary loss of those who, as the inscription reads, rest there in a “graveyard for soldiers not all of whom had chosen either the cause or the fight.” With its dark horizontal marker stones embedded in the ground and its funereal Celtic crosses, La Cambe remembers over 21,000 Germans, tragic figures buried with no symbol or sense of patriotism or pride. The tumulus in the center, a mass grave for identified as well as unidentified remains, is topped by a dark cross. This space hovers and does not soar.

Americans were still constructing the cemetery at Colleville when on June 25, 1950, the forces of North Korea crossed over the temporary dividing line and invaded South Korea. The United States and the United Nations saw this attack on a free people as an assault upon the world order by international communism. And so within a few days President Harry Truman authorized General Douglas MacArthur to use whatever military units were necessary in order to meet the UN goal of “restoring peace in Korea.”

The South Korean government and military were totally unprepared for the ferocity and the discipline of the North Korean attack. And the

American military units first dispatched to Korea were equally unprepared. President Truman, seeking language to confine the engagement legally and politically, in the absence of a congressional declaration of war, described it as a “police action.”

It would finally involve quite a police force: over the three years of engagement, nearly 1.8 million U.S. military would serve in Korea, 33,667 died or were missing in action (another 3249 died in the Korean theatre of operations), and 103,284 were wounded in action. Other UN forces lost 3960 in action and 11,528 wounded. And the Republic of Korea had as many as 250,000 military killed in action. South Korean civilian casualties were well over a quarter of a million—some estimates of Republic of Korea deaths from all causes are as high as 900,000. North Korean and Chinese figures, not surprisingly, are hard to come by—ROK estimates are that the Korean Peoples Army had some 300,000 killed in action and the Chinese People’s Liberation Army may have lost a half a million. By any estimate, this was a costly war—and no more so than for those who lived here on this peninsula.

American engagement was ideological and geopolitical. The U.S. joined with the United Nations to stop aggression and to cry halt to communism, understanding Kim Il-sung to be an accomplice if not a puppet of Josef Stalin and Soviet strategy. Americans in 1950 took very seriously the threat posed by Stalin and by Soviet communism.

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.

The summer of 1950, when the allies were pushed back to the Pusan Perimeter, was followed by General Douglas MacArthur’s audacious landing at Inchon in September and then his drive to the Yalu River. With the sometimes uncomfortable approval of the U.S. government and

the even more uneasy 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. They promised UN troops that they would be “home for Christmas.”

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. 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.

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. Quite inappropriately, he told the *US News and World Report* that failure to do this burdened his forces with “An enormous handicap, without precedent in military history.” 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. 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. 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.

My question on this Veterans Day is how Americans have remembered this war and the young men we sent to fight it. Have we recalled Abraham Lincoln's advice at Gettysburg to "never forget" those who have represented us in battle? The simple answer is no. If Korea is often described in the United States as the "forgotten war" then it follows that those who served in this war have been and remain the "forgotten veterans."

David Halberstam described it this way: "Korea would not prove a great national war of unifying singular purpose, as World War II had been, nor would it, like Vietnam a generation later, divide and thus haunt the nation. It was simply a puzzling, gray, very distant conflict, a war that went on and on and on, seemingly without hope or resolution, about which most Americans, save the men who fought there and their immediate families, preferred to know as little as possible."

A veteran remembers a Marine band greeting the troops when they disembarked in San Francisco but he later observed, "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." Most of the veterans quietly went back to their civilian lives—but their memories would not allow them to forget this war.

One Marine veteran of the Chosin Reservoir campaign returned home on leave and was told he really was not eligible to enter the local Veterans of Foreign Wars club since he was not the veteran of a recognized war. There was no victory parade for the Korean War veterans—at least there was not for 40 years.

In 1991 New York City hosted a parade for Korean War veterans. Nine thousand veterans marched and an estimated 250,000 watched—just months after millions had turned out for the parade for returning Gulf War veterans. And 40 years after millions had feted General MacArthur, who had been relieved of his command. One of the 1991 participants noted simply, “We’re finally being recognized. This was long overdue.” Another 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.”

It was only in 1998 that the Congress of the United States designated the Korean deployment as a “War”—it had earlier evolved from “police action” to “conflict.” But for the 50th anniversary of its beginning, what had always been a war now officially became one.

In Korea, of course, the war has been a powerful part of the memory of the people. The North Korean government taunts the U.S. for seeming to ignore this history. The message from the North Korean Travel Bureau about the Victorious Fatherland Liberation Museum, advises,

“In the West the Korean War is sometimes referred to as the ‘Forgotten War’ as it is one of the major armed conflicts of the 20th century but gets much less attention than other wars. In North Korea it is referred to as the ‘Victorious Fatherland Liberation War’ and seen as a great national accomplishment against ‘US aggressors.’”

The museum in Pyongyang recalls the heroism of the North Koreans resisting the “invaders” and displays military hardware, including substantial war trophies. Here in South Korea the War Memorial symbolizes the themes of heroism and of reconciliation. The June 25th Tower signals military strength and the promise of peace. And if this was too abstract, the statuary near it, “The Statues Defending the Nation,” and the “Statue of Brothers” make the theme clear. Older messages reminding of North Korean brutality and atrocity and the general horror of war have little place in this Memorial. But memories fade even in South Korea. General Paik Sun Yup, a genuine hero of the War, wrote his memoirs in 1992 and said he was “saddened to consider

that so many of my countrymen know so very little about the Korean War or about the role their army played in defense of their homeland.”

The Republic of Korea has remembered and thanked the Americans who sacrificed here in the war. This government has done far better than the U.S. government has done. South Korea erected the McArthur statue at Inchon in 1957; in 1975 the government established a memorial at the Ministry of Defense at Paju; and the Republic of Korea made certain to establish a U.S. memorial at the UN Memorial Cemetery at Pusan, even though there are few Americans resting there.

One scholar has noted that there are in the United States far fewer memorials to the Korean War than to any of the other 20th century wars—and, I would add, far fewer than those for the Civil War and the American Revolution, and likely for the Spanish-American War. The Congress authorized a Korean War Memorial in 1986 and it was dedicated in 1995, 42 years after the truce—and 13 years after the Vietnam Veterans Memorial was dedicated.

The Korean War Veterans Memorial is situated in an honored place on the National Mall in Washington, located in an area bounded by the Lincoln Memorial, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, and the World War II Memorial. The WWII Memorial is traditional and magisterial. It has a theme engraved in marble: “Americans came to Liberate, not to conquer, to restore freedom and to end tyranny.” One could argue that this theme was consistent with public understanding of all wars since World War II. On the wall with 4,000 gold stars symbolizing the over 400,000 Americans killed in the war, it reads “Here we mark the price of Freedom.” The Korean War Veterans Memorial makes the same point: “Freedom is not Free.”

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial designed by Maya Lin is simple—and painful. Here on a polished black granite wall 75 meters long are engraved the names of the (now) 58,267 who died as a result of the Vietnam War. There was substantial controversy at the time the wall was constructed about the absence of any traditional acknowledgement of heroism. The “Three Soldiers” statue was added in response to this and then later the Vietnam Women’s Memorial joined these monuments.

The Korean War Veterans Memorial fits in this triangle of memory on the Mall. The long delay in this recognition can partially be explained by the fact that veterans of that war did not organize or seek public acknowledgement. The Korean War Veterans Association was not founded until 1982. When I asked one of the early organizers why this had been so long delayed, the answer was that the veterans had been part of the “forgotten” war so they also tried to forget. The group that first met to associate with others was primarily moved by what one called “nostalgia”—a desire to see some friends from a faraway war.

The Korean War Memorial Advisory Board was composed of veterans of that war, veterans still moved by powerful emotions but a few years removed from the immediate and raw pain of their war. Under their influence, the Korean War Veterans 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 are caught in the cautious, alert motions of patrol, representing the range of those who served in Korea. They are reflected on a black wall that has images taken from photos that display the range of military service in Korea. A reflecting pool with a wall and an imposing flag establish the point for the wall and the patrol. It is not a memorial only to those who died but to all who served there.

It was the hope of the Korean War Memorial Advisory Board that with this permanent memorial, Korea would be “No more the forgotten War.” A prime mover in this effort, Col William Weber, said that the “Memorial does not attempt to glorify war.” The inscription at the Memorial describes the sentiment:

*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*

I visited the Memorial recently on an early morning at the end of September. It was very quiet and peaceful. There were three stands of flowers at the far point of the figures. All were from Korean

organizations, remembering and thanking. At the wall behind the flag and the Pool of Remembrance, there were a few other flower stands, one from the Korean War Veterans Association and one marked simply, "Beloved Dad." There was no one at the Memorial until just before I left, when a tour group arrived on a bus. They were quiet, even reverential. I went over to one young woman who was with this group to ask her where they were from. She said they were from a place outside of Shanghai, China.

When the Memorial was dedicated, one veteran said: "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."

This week some veterans of the First Marine Division who fought at the Chosin Reservoir 60 years ago are in Seoul to gather and to remember. The South Korea government has worked hard to arrange and to enable this reunion and it is a privilege for me to be on this peninsula with them. When I joined the Marines in 1957 they were already part of Marine Corps legend.

Dispatched to far North Korea in October and November of 1950, they found themselves in the mountainous area around the Changjin reservoir, surrounded by 60,000 Chinese who had crossed the Yalu River. Sixty years ago, on the night of November 9th/10th, the latter marking the Marine Corps birthday, the mountains around the reservoir received the first snow of the season. Overnight the temperature dropped 40 degrees in a few hours, and a harsh wind from the north made it worse.

Over the next several weeks these Marines engaged in some of the heaviest fighting in the storied history of the Corps. The young Korean, Yi Jong Yun joined the Marines at Pusan and served throughout the campaign as their interpreter and liaison. He wrote:

“Chosin was the coldest place in Korea, the only place where no rice grows because of the weather. Hagaru was on a plateau, with the Chinese watching us during daytime, to attack at night. Hagaru was like an island in a Chinese sea, and we were like fishes in a fishbowl. All the Korean civilians I met wondered how the Marines would escape the trap. They thought this was impossible.”

When Peking Radio announced that “The annihilation of the First Marine Division is only a matter of time,” correspondent Marguerite Higgins was at Hagaru-ri with the Marines. She would call the fight through snow and cold out of Yudam-ni “the Korean Valley Forge.” The Commanding General of the First Marine Division, General Oliver P. Smith noted simply of this fight, “War leaves no soft options.”

Some 15,000 Marines had gone into the Chosin mountains. When they were evacuated at Hungnam in mid December, they reported 718 killed, 3502 wounded, and 192 missing in action. There were another 7313 casualties—mostly frostbite. It was estimated that they killed 25,000 Chinese and had wounded another 12,500.

The Chosin Reservoir was but one of many, many places where young Americans fought bravely and died cruelly. Korean War veterans insist that theirs was a “forgotten victory”—they halted the North Korean takeover and they take pride today in the strength of South Korea. We can debate the terms of “victory,” but those who served here deserve better than to be in their country the forgotten veterans of a forgotten war.

A year ago on Veterans Day I was a speaker at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington. I observed that those of us who personally knew and remember the individuals whose names are on the wall are fewer every year, and that memories fade—therefore we must make certain that those names never become simply letters on granite but are always remembered as vital people with unfulfilled dreams who made the ultimate sacrifice.

One Marine veteran of the Chosin campaign, who never discussed his experience and often woke up screaming from nightmares of

remembrance, described visiting the Korean War Veterans Memorial in 1996: “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.”

In so many ways, so had his country shut out these events. Now, sixty years later, it is time to place hands on those who served and to say thanks—and that we too remember.