

KOREAN WAR CONFERENCE:

Commemorating the 60th Anniversary

June 24-26, 2010

Victoria, Texas

Hosted by: Victoria College / University of Houston-Victoria Library

What were they thinking?!

The Korean War and the Public Opinion in Texas: 1950

Lara Newcomer

Historian, Ecological Communications Corporation

The Korean War has long been known as “the forgotten war.” Even today, a basic internet search of the major wars that Americans fought in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries shows the lack of public interest. World War II has more than 730 million sites; World War I about 700 million; the Civil War 144 million; the Gulf War 93 million; And Vietnam 54 million. The Korean War comes in last with only 24 million sites. In my recent trip to my local “Half Price Books,” store, I noticed that there were two eight-foot-high bookcases full of World War II books, and four shelves of Vietnam War volumes, yet the Korean War section took up only 1/3 of a shelf that it shared with Cold War history tomes. And amazingly enough, I checked the news on a night not long ago, and saw a headline that read, “Korean War Museum’s Future Dim.” Apparently, the Korean War National Museum is the only national war museum that is not receiving federal funds, and the museum’s administrators have had some other important issues come up that have made it impossible for them to be able to break ground for the museum in the summer of 2010 as they had hoped. All of these things make it very clear that the Korean War is largely dismissed in today’s society. But, has it always been ignored? My contention is that the Korean War is not simply forgotten today, but was also a secondary issue even as it was occurring.

Although newspaper headlines boldly proclaimed news of the war almost every day after June 25, 1950, the people of Texas did not take this to heart as much as you might expect. I examined letters to the *Dallas Morning News* and prominent Texas politicians from 1950 to assess what concerned Texans in 1950. The analysis shows that many people simply ignored the Korean War was largely in Texas as it was in the rest of the country. It certainly gave some Texans a reason to pause, but for the most part it did not have a tremendous effect on daily life.

Public opinion is sometimes a fuzzy thing, so it is important to understand exactly how I conducted this particular study. This study examined several primary sources. I analyzed Representative Sam Rayburn’s papers in Bonham. While he represented a fairly small portion of the state, he was Speaker of the House and therefore commanded respect from many people across the state and the nation. As speaker, he had to focus not only on domestic issues, but also important foreign developments. Unfortunately, his papers proved to be less valuable than some other sources. For the year 1950, I found 160 folders of letters about local issues and one folder of letters about Korea. In the Korea folder, there were only eight letters. Rayburn represented a small portion of the state and had been

in office for quite a long time. Perhaps people felt that he was more like a neighbor than a congressman, and they wrote to him about local and seemingly trivial issues. In addition, there might also be an inherent difference between what people write their representative about versus what they write their senator, for the senate plays a key role in foreign policy.

In addition to Rayburn's papers, I also investigated Lyndon Johnson's Senate papers. As the junior senator from Texas, Johnson was tremendously popular among the state's voters, if not with the "regular" conservative Democrats. I examined thirty-one boxes of archival material, including constituent letters. I found a total of 1,312 letters from 1950.

The final primary source consulted was the *Dallas Morning News* editorial page. I analyzed 3,188 letters readers wrote in 1950.

The methods of this study are certainly not foolproof. The type of people writing to their Congressmen and to newspapers definitely plays a part in analyzing these letters. These people were not-- and would not have considered themselves to be--average citizens. These were people who believed themselves to be well-informed, active citizens, and they had very definite opinions. The other problem with these letters is that there are a number of people I classify as "repeat offenders," who have letters in the newspaper several times a month and doubtless wrote their congressman regularly. Additionally, the *Dallas Morning News* obviously exercised some editorial control over just which letters were printed and which were not. So, clearly, these letters do not represent everyone in Texas. This selection of letters, however, is enough of a sampling of local public opinion to provide some general insight into what people in Texas thought before, during, and after the Korean War.

I would like to remind you of some background issues related to the war, communism, and President Truman. In the first place, Truman was not a popular president. Although he won the presidential race in 1948 by a very thin margin, many Texans were anti-Truman even before the war. You can see this in the high number of letters criticizing him. In 1950, prior to the outbreak of the war, 131 letters appeared that were anti-Truman. After the war began, 180 letter writers were most critical of his policies. Not only was public opinion against Truman, but many congressmen criticized him because of the many "Fair Deal" programs he was putting before congress.¹ Many Americans resisted programs like

¹ William Leuchtenberg, *In the Shadow of FDR: From Harry Truman to Ronald Reagan* (Ithaca, 1987, 9.

national health insurance and public housing because, in their minds, this type of progress was socialistic and might eventually lead to communism as it had done in the Soviet Union and China. Yet, in the end, congress passed most of his "Fair Deal" legislation.²

Another issue that caused Truman some minor problems was his criticism of the Marines. In a letter to a congressman on August 29, 1950, Truman said that the Marines had a "propaganda machine that is almost equal to Stalin's."³ In the same letter, he remarked that the Marines were not a separate branch of the service. Rather, he said that the Marines were simply the Navy's police force.⁴ In the aftermath of this, readers sent numerous letters to the *Dallas Morning News* about Truman's remarks. One writer said: "The President of the United States should have enough intelligence to think twice before he makes such rash and uncalled for statements. It seems that Mr. Truman can't open his mouth on his own and not put his foot in it."⁵ Remarkably, people were so focused on Truman's comments that they did not even seem to notice that United Nations forces had pushed forward to cross the 38th parallel into North Korea.

On November 1, 1950, an assassin tried to murder Truman. The cause was unrelated to the war. Yet, the attempt did, however, reflect the general dissatisfaction with the president. A few days later, the off-year elections took place: The voters dramatically reduced the Democratic advantages in both the house and the senate. The Republican victories were tangible confirmations that the people were not supportive of Truman or his administration. At almost the same time, in Korea, the Chinese Army crossed the border of North Korea at the Yalu River and began to drive south. This is significant because the administration did not anticipate that the Chinese Communists would attack. Some people began asking for Truman's resignation.

In addition to domestic issues, a couple of international events shook public confidence as well. The Soviet Union developed the atomic bomb in August of 1949, years before experts thought it possible. Then, the failure of Chiang Kai Shek and the nationalist government in China caused that country to fall to communist leader Mao Tse-tung in October of 1949. These two events triggered fear of a communist-

² James Patterson, *Grand Expectations* (New York, 1996), 182.

³ "Truman Apologizes to Marine Corps," *Dallas Morning News*, 7 September 1950, sec. 1, p. 1.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Letters to the Editor, *Dallas Morning News*, September 13, 1950.

dominated world which led to hyper-patriotism and a conspiratorial fear among the public and a well known nationwide “red scare.”

Another problem with foreign issues was the administration’s fear of appeasing the Soviet Union. Considering the result of both Britain and France’s policy of conciliation toward the Nazis in the 1930s, this fear of appeasement was behind many Cold War decisions.

The United States’ decision to protect South Korea was another step in the policy of containment. With that policy, now applied to Asia, the American government committed itself to keep the world safe for democracy and to continue to protect the “free world.”⁶

Initially, Americans supported the Korean War and encouraged the United States government to take a strong stand against communism. The Colorado City Junior Chamber of Commerce telegraphed LBJ, saying that it supported Truman’s policy of firmness with the communists in Korea.⁷ This is worth noting because Americans supported the war even though the fighting did not go well for the United States in the first few weeks. MacArthur’s troops coming from Japan were not only poorly trained and equipped; they had also been trained as an occupation force rather than as an invasion force.

Considering all the above background information, I divided the data from these letters into several categories and then put the information into a spreadsheet program for easier analysis. The categories were: National politics; state politics; local politics; world politics; economy/taxes/industry; the United Nations; opinions about newspaper and columnists; local issues; the military/Korea; labor unions; prohibition; anti-communism; Truman, Acheson and the State Department; corrupt government; Civil Rights; China and Formosa; the atomic bomb; religion; and a crackpot file.⁸

Some of these topic titles benefit from explanation. The pre-war prohibition issue was related to the Langer Bill, which was legislation that would ban liquor advertising. Church groups seemingly mass-produced letters on this topic. Most of the wartime letters about prohibition related to military policy that troops in combat zones received free beer, cigarettes, soft drinks, and candy. Apparently some people

⁶ President Woodrow Wilson’s War Message. World War I Document Archives, Brigham-Young University Library. <http://www.lib.byu.edu/~rdh/wwi/1917/wilswarm.html>.

⁷ Lyndon B. Johnson, Senate Papers, Box 231, Korea, Archives, Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library, University of Texas at Austin.

⁸ One of my personal favorites from the crackpot file is a gentleman who wrote LBJ that the Soviets planned to send flying saucers to invade the United States.

had a problem with the government handing out free beer to the soldiers. Mrs. William B. Shotts of Dallas wrote:

Beer is something that tavern owners sell but seldom drink.
As for our fighting boys in far off Korea, the majority of them are young.
They resent their age and would try to appear big he-men by swigging anything
labeled beer for the false bravado it instills in them. If a secret pool were taken
There is no doubt in my mind that their choice would be a cold glass of milk.⁹

The category of economy/taxes/industry includes wartime industry, government spending, healthcare and whether or not it should be socialized; social security and old age pensions; and farm surpluses and government subsidies. This field can then also be said to include factors related to the Korean War. The topic of China and Formosa includes letters about China being recognized in the United Nations; the desire to use Nationalist Chinese troops from Formosa to aid American troops in Korea; and the desire for the United States government to urge the UN to conduct free elections in Communist China. The Civil Rights category includes letters about military segregation, the Fair Employment Practice Committee, and local issues of housing for minorities. The atomic bomb category includes both those in favor of and those opposed to the use of this weapon. The topic of religion encompasses local church issues; denominational issues; praise for particular preachers; and the contention that prayer and the Bible are the only answers to the world's problems. Other topics that could be included in the category of the Korean War are anti-Truman letters; letters about corrupt government; anti-communism; and letters about the State Department and Dean Acheson. State politics, local politics, and local issues are the only topics that have no relation at all to public opinion about Korea. Every other category has at least some minor parallels.

⁹ Letters to the Editor, *Dallas Morning News*, September 25, 1950.

I compiled the data to learn how many letters in each category were written both before and after the war began.

Table 12. Letters Written in 1950, organized by topic and number of letters

<u>Pre-War</u>		<u>Wartime</u>	
1. Economy/Taxes	395	1. Korea	397
2. Local Issues	254	2. Economy/Taxes	380
3. Prohibition	254	3. Local Issues	255
4. Newspaper	162	4. Truman	208
5. National Politics	143	5. National Politics	187
6. Truman	141	6. Newspaper	187
7. State Politics	111	7. State Politics	154
8. Civil Rights	96	8. Anti-Communism	127
9. Anti-Communism	75	9. Acheson	110
10. Local Politics	73	10. Labor Unions	109
11. Religion	63	11. Corrupt Government	107
12. Crackpots	60	12. Local Politics	76
13. Labor Unions	50	13. World Politics	65
14. Corrupt Government	50	14. Civil Rights	60
15. World Politics	41	15. Atomic bomb	59
16. Acheson	33	16. Religion	59
17. China/Formosa	32	17. United Nations	55
18. Atomic Bomb	26	18. Prohibition	37
19. Military	21	19. China/Formosa	36
20. United Nations	9	20. Crackpots	28

You can assume that people will write about what is in the news. Therefore, it is necessary to examine the headlines of the newspaper. From June 26 to December 31, 1950, only eleven major headlines in the *Dallas Morning News* were not about Korea. Even on the days that the top headline was not about Korea, some kind of headline about the war had a place above the fold. In relation to topics about the Korean conflict, people were most concerned about lack of preparedness and the draft. They were generally dissatisfied about how reporters covered the war; about how the rest of America was reacting; and about the government's reaction to the war.

In 1950, Texans overwhelmingly supported the war. Many even favored the use of the atomic bomb to end the war quickly and to save American lives. A constituent wrote Senator Johnson, saying: "[I

am] in favor of atomic weapons in order to save American lives regardless of location.”¹⁰ The attitude of not negotiating with Communists was part of the general feeling about communism that permeated the United States at this time. In fact, the Korean War actually increased anti-communist hysteria in America as Wisconsin Senator Joseph McCarthy took up the cry. In addition, many Texans were anti-Democrat (or “regular” Democrats statewide) and blamed national Democrats for the war. In one example, Lonnie Roberts of Denison wrote, “three Democratic Presidents, elected by the people, and three ocean-hopping wars. One of the end products of our mass educational system, apparently, is not judgment.”¹¹

In the chart below, I list, by month, the number of letters about Korea that were printed in the *Dallas Morning News* or were received by Senator Johnson’s office once the war began.

Table 25. Number of Letters readers wrote about Korea, organized by Month

June	20
July	121
August	75
September	99
October	17
November	40
December	62

Obviously, twenty letters in June appear not to be alarming. However, North Korea did not send ground troops into South Korea until June 25. So, readers wrote their letters did so in a matter of five days. The high number of letters in July is not surprising. The war had just begun and America had committed ground troops on June 30. A number of spectacular military operations in July prompted letters, including the slaughter of Task Force Smith at the Battle of Osan on July 5, 1950, which amounted to a major defeat even as reinforcements were on the way. The small task force did delay the North Koreans for several hours, however.¹² At roughly the same time, Senator McCarthy asserted that the United States State Department had sabotaged the American plan in Korea. People seemed to accept this because it had been part of McCarthy’s previous explanation for the fall of China. This led to a

¹⁰ Lyndon Johnson, Senate Papers, Box 231, Korea.

¹¹ Letters to the Editor, *Dallas Morning News*, 16 July 1950.

¹² Task Force Smith was the first U.S. Army ground unit to enter combat in Korea. Out of 406 men, 120 were killed and 36 were captured. An extended discussion of Task Force Smith can be found in: Clay Blair, *The Forgotten War: America in Korea 1950-1953* (New York: Times Books, 1987), 94-106.

great number of letters criticizing the government, generally, and State Department, specifically.¹³ Helen Sue Gaines wrote the *Dallas Morning News* that the State Department needed a house cleaning.¹⁴ Almost simultaneously, T. L. Hawkins sent a telegram to LBJ posing a question: "Must a left wing State Department dictate more appeasement."¹⁵

The headlines of the *Dallas Morning News*, seems somewhat "rosy," especially at the beginning of the war. In reporting the initial fight of Task Force Smith, the new writer said, "an American advance element was cut off but there were indications most of its men had been able to pull back to new lines."¹⁶ On July 8, after the task force was overrun, the only reporting about the event on the front page said "it was a morale shaker."¹⁷ In actuality, Task Force Smith lost more than one third of its men in a horrific three-day battle. The American press, as usual, did their best to spin the news from the front lines in the most positive light possible thereby, in a sense, falsifying news to help national morale.

In late July congress began consideration of defense appropriations bills that would quadruple the defense budget. This seemed to prompt letters about government spending and economic issues in general. Several readers asked the *Dallas Morning News* how the government was handling the agricultural surpluses others were concerned that the government would institute wage and price controls as it had in World War II.¹⁸

Beginning in late August, reporters noted that the United Nations forces had had some setbacks. The drop in the number of letters in August is not easily explained except that there were no particularly overwhelming military defeats or victories. The number of letters rose a bit in September. The increase was probably due to letters about Truman's aforementioned criticism of the Marine Corps. The other factor that could have contributed to the increasing number was that the United Nations forces were able to take control of the South Korean capital of Seoul. Apparently, Texans believed that things were going well in Korea.

¹³ Burton I. Kaufman. *The Korean War: Challenges in Crisis, Credibility, and Command* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), 50.

¹⁴ Letters to the Editor, *Dallas Morning News*, 26 June 1950.

¹⁵ Lyndon Johnson, Senate Papers, Box 231, Korea.

¹⁶ "Red Drive Smashes South Korean Line," *Dallas Morning News*, 6 July 1950, sec. 1, p. 1.

¹⁷ "Enemy Repels Americans' Advance: Losses Suffered in Countermove," *Dallas Morning News*, 8 July 1950, sec. 1, p. 1.

¹⁸ Letters to the Editor, *Dallas Morning News*, August 26, October 11, October 23, 1950.

There is an anomaly in examining the decrease of letters in October. A number of important events occurred during the month, but people wrote very few letters about Korea. United Nations forces pushed north of the 38th parallel, so possibly the public thought that the course of the war was moving along in the right direction. The Communist Chinese Army crossed the border into North Korea at the Yalu River in mid-October. This particular event would seem to be significant to Americans because it meant that Communist China entered the war. Judging from the letters, however, it was not an item of major concern for the general public in Texas.

There are several possible reasons for the decrease of letters in October. *Dallas Morning News* headlines painted a rosy picture in October. Everything reported suggested that UN forces were winning. There was even talk of peace. On October 28 there was a small headline about Chinese troops moving into Korea. It was not until October 31, however, that the newspaper featured a large headline about Chinese troops crossing south into Korea. Another possible reason for the decline in letters was that the first week of October is National Newspaper Week, and the *Dallas Morning News* was soliciting letters about what the paper meant to readers, about suggestions for improvement, and about what people liked about the paper. So, even if they had letters about the war, they might not have printed them to save room for letters about newspaper appreciation. In October, many of the letter-writers focused on local issues that were also in the headlines at the time such as the Texas State Fair, Sunday Blue Laws, and a transit fare increase. The letters that came in October focused mostly about whether soldiers in Korea should get free beer. Unfortunately, LBJ's letters dropped off dramatically in October, too. There is no clear explanation for that, however.

November and December saw slight increases in the number of letters. December saw the battle at the Chosin Reservoir.¹⁹ In mid-month Truman called for complete mobilization of American troops. The administration's goals for Korea were not clear, and that fact impacted public opinion. Further, it was difficult to explain why United Nations troops continued to lose ground. Even with a slight increase in the number of letters, it is clear from the tone of those letters that the American people were already losing interest in the war. In December only 48 out of 308 letters were about the war.

¹⁹ In this battle Korean and Chinese forces overwhelmed UN troops, forcing those troops into a bloody fighting retreat. The U.S. 8th Army alone suffered almost 10,000 casualties. Blair, 505-521.

All of this data is nice, but what is the point without analysis. Was the Korean War truly ignored even as it occurred? Judging from this data, and for a number of other reasons, the answer is yes. When the Korean War started, it had been less than five years since the end of World War II. Americans “were not emotionally ready to invest themselves in another war.”²⁰ A veteran of the Korean War who has written a book about Korean War films notes that these films did not explain why America fought and the characters in these films “tended to have but one goal in mind: get it over with and go home.”²¹ Soldiers often had difficulty finding a brotherhood within their units because they were shuffled around repeatedly. In addition, most United States soldiers, like American civilians, did not know why they were fighting. They were also resentful of being identified as United Nations soldiers, rather than American soldiers. Although Americans were afraid of the spread of communism, even that was not enough of a unifying cause to give Americans a reason to rally in support of the war.²²

To give a larger context to this study it is necessary to compare Texans’ opinions compared to national opinions. I examined several national polls. The National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago (NORC) and American Institute of Public Opinion (AIPO) both conducted nationwide polls throughout the Korean War. In August of 1950, the American public overwhelmingly believed that the United States had made the right decision to go into Korea.²³ By December, however, the public was almost evenly split as to whether the United States had made a mistake by getting involved. An interesting distinction, however, is that when pollsters added the words “protect from communist invasion” to the question about the Korean War, public opinion ran almost 15 percent higher in favor of American involvement than when that phrase was left out. That indicated that the American public was not as concerned about Korea as they were about containing the threat of communism, and that was a complete contradiction, for the U.S. was “containing communism” in Korea. The public apparently did not understand that fact. The general sentiment expressed in the national polls corresponds with the letters that were being written in Texas. Therefore, it would be safe to say that public opinion in Texas, in many ways, corresponded to that of the national public.

²⁰ Paul M. Edwards, *A Guide to Films on the Korean War* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1997), 23-4.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

²² *Ibid.*, 23.

²³ *Ibid.*; Hazel Erskine, “The Polls: Is War a Mistake?” *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, vol. 34 (1) (Spring, 1970): 138.

To look a little more closely, letters to Senator Johnson did increase after the war began, but the war did not seem to weigh too heavily on people's minds. On the general list of topics, there is not much numeric difference between letters about Korea (397 letters) and the economy (380 letters) after the war began. If letters about Korea are taken by themselves, they only account for 15 percent of the letters. If the topic of Korea is expanded to include topics on anti-communism, Truman, and corrupt government, the total number of letters then only amounts to 35 percent of all the letters. State and local issues, however, account for twenty-five percent of the total number of letters. That makes only a 10 percent difference between letters dealing with local and state issues and letters about the war. This indicates that Texans were not overly concerned about the war in Korea.

There are a couple of clear reasons why the Korean War was not as important to Texans as some other wars might have been. First, the number of men the government drafted was much smaller compared to the number of those drafted during World War II. In the latter war, the government drafted more than ten million men; whereas, it drafted only 1.5 million during the Korean War.²⁴ Consequently, the draft during the Korean conflict did not affect as many households as the draft in World War II. Nationally, those who wrote were concerned about the draft, especially about drafting young eighteen-year-olds, a policy most opposed.

Texans also wrote about the draft pointing out that the men drafted were prisoners or were striking workers rather than average citizens. S. A. Beard of Dallas said that "the government should put an end to strikes. Why seize the railroads when men strike and quit work? Draft the strikers and give them a free trip to Korea. **THAT** would put an end to strikes."²⁵ For the most part, however, conscription did not involve the majority of Americans, including Texans.

The second, and more important, reason that the public could ignore the Korean War was that it had less economical impact than World War II. The latter war cost \$15,655 per capita while Korea only cost \$1,739.²⁶ Further, other economic factors made the Korean War easier for Texans to ignore. The American people remembered the wartime shortages during World War II, so when the Korean War broke out, it started a wave of forward buying, but shortages that people anticipated never appeared. As a

²⁴ Kathy Gill. "Military Conscription, Recruiting, and the Draft." <http://uspolitics.about.com/od/electionissues/a/draft.htm>.

²⁵ Letters to the Editor, *DallasMorning News*, August 26, 1950.

²⁶ Al Nofi. "Statistical Summary: America's Major Wars." <http://www.cwc.lsu.edu/other/stats/warcost.htm>.

result, people began saving their money, as they had not been able to do during the previous war. Ultimately, the Korean war did not hit Americans, including Texans, in the pocketbook and, therefore was much easier to dismiss.

It is not fair to say that Texans did not care about the war. The Korean War was an issue of some concern at the time. That is evidenced by the increase in letters sent to Senator Johnson in the six months after the war started. The war itself, however, was not the primary concern of Texans or other Americans. People were more concerned about fighting communism at home; what the war would do to the economy; and getting the Democrats out of power.

So, the Korean War is not simply forgotten in today's society; rather, people largely dismissed it at the time it was occurring. And that is why we're all here--to give this war and the brave people who fought it the recognition they deserve to make sure that they are never forgotten.