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Five Men – One War:

Foreign Policy and the Korean Conflict

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It was a hot summer for some, especially in the South; for others, it was a balmy June. Young men still in their teenage years were graduating from high school, heading for jobs, college, and/or marriage. The war their fathers, older brothers, and uncles had fought—The Big One, World War II—was fading into the past along with junior high photos, Red Ryder comics, and Big Jon and Sparky radio shows. In the years since the United States had dropped the bomb on Hiroshima and ended the fighting; Russia had taken over Poland; free world pilots had broken the Berlin blockade; Mao Tse-tung had conquered China; and the Marshal Plan had saved Europe. The United States was now in a “Cold War” against Communists, and Congress had given Greece and Turkey money to fight them.

But no one was saving ration coupons; factories were producing domestic goods; aircraft manufacturers were building passenger planes; and news reels were focusing on Hollywood. Occasionally a newspaper would headline something about the Truman Doctrine, and ever since February of 1950, some papers would focus on Senator Joseph McCarthy of Minnesota, who had been accusing the government of harboring Marxists. As well, reporters covered Josef Stalin who had detonated his own atomic bomb just a year earlier, thanks to spies like Ethel and Julius Rosenberg. Also newsworthy was events surrounding the State Department’s Alger Hiss who was going to jail for lying under oath.

But the whole point of the Cold War was that it was, indeed, COLD: no military maneuvers, no armaments, and no new troop deployments. Now that the Soviet Union had its own atomic power, America and Russia were at a stand-off—neither could attack the other for fear of nuclear annihilation. So the world was in a tense kind of peace that late June day, until word came in that North Korea had invaded South Korea. Within weeks, American boys were scrambling and dying in places like Yongsan and in sites along the Naktong River. The American government and the United Nations had plunged into an unimaginably bloody war. What happened? The answer lay in the personalities, powers, and policies of five men: Josef Stalin, Kim Il Sung, Mao Tse-tung, Syngman Rhee, and Harry S. Truman.

By 1950 Josef Stalin, originally christened Josef Dzhugashvili [ju-gash-vyel-yi] had become the human embodiment of Russia itself. Shrewd and ruthless, byzantinely manipulative and acutely paranoid, he had propelled himself to the top of Soviet power and maintained supremacy even after the disastrous German invasion of 1941. Pulling himself and his people together, he used industrial production, compliant

generals, massive manpower, and the deadly Russian weather to stop Hitler's Wehrmacht and to slowly push it backwards. By 1945 he had become the most effective civilian leader of the Allied powers—and the folk hero of Russia's "Great Patriotic War." By 1950 he was unchallenged dictator of the Soviet Union and its shatterbelt nations, six adjacent countries protecting the USSR from Western aggression. Supremely dominant in his homeland and in his European satellites, he was not averse to spreading his brand of Soviet-controlled Communism throughout Asia, so long as it was protégés like Kim Il Sung of North Korea who took the risk.ⁱ

Born Kim Song Ju in Japan's subjugated Korea in 1912, Kim shared a hatred of his Japanese occupiers as intense as Stalin's abhorrence of Westerners. Taken to Manchuria as a youth, he returned to his native land only to become one of its most fiercely fighting rebels, assuming the name of a local hero and commanding a group of more than three hundred anti-Nipponese partisans. By 1940, he was the most hunted guerrilla on the peninsula, and in 1942 he joined the Soviet Union's Special Sniper Brigade. Convinced that only Communist help would win his country independence, Kim embraced Russian arms, equipment, supplies, tactics, and philosophy. In return, he became puppet ruler of the region in 1948. Uninspiring to his own people, Kim was Stalin's fair-haired boy and rapidly turned his Democratic People's Republic of Korea into the same kind of fear-ridden, draconian society as the USSR. Only one thing ruined Kim's world view by 1950, and that was the government on the southern part of the peninsula. Convinced that the people of the Republic of Korea hated their leader as much as he, he used every method within his means to convince Stalin that a simple invasion from the north would arouse every South Korean to his banner. With Soviet-built fighter jets and Soviet-trained troops, he could unite his country once again, to the exclusion of the West, Japan, and his long-time nemesis, China.ⁱⁱ

Oft-times a conqueror of Korea, China still considered the tiny land mass within its sphere of influence, although its leader, Mao Tse-tung, faced more immediate problems. Consolidating internal power after taking over the mainland in 1949, Mao was in the midst of rural pacification as well as plans to attack Taiwan; both demanded his meticulous attention.ⁱⁱⁱ Yet he also had to navigate the dangerous shoals of Stalin's enmity. Already refusing to relieve pressure on Russian armies in Asia during World War II, Mao further galled the Soviet dictator by his brilliant expulsion of Nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek. Leading an army of peasants, not the urban fighters espoused by Stalin, Mao made himself a legitimate hero in his people's eyes—a feat accomplished only by one other contemporary Communist leader, Tito of Yugoslavia.

Both employed Soviet arms and equipment in their takeovers, but unlike figurehead rulers like Kim Il Sung, neither was dependent upon Stalin to stay in power. Moreover, in spite of signing the Soviet-Sino Treaty in February, Mao distrusted his counterpart and was particularly resentful of secret buffer zones the Russians were occupying between China and the USSR.^{iv}

However, Stalin had things the Chinese revolutionary wanted: money, arms, munitions, tanks, planes, and the atomic bomb. Plus, Soviet weaponry was still better produced and more abundant than Chinese. Mao needed Stalin's support for the short term, especially now that America was supporting Syngman Rhee of South Korea.^v

If Mao Tse-tung regarded Kim Il Sung as a Soviet puppet, he considered Syngman Rhee even worse: a tool of American imperialists. Student favorite of Princeton President Woodrow Wilson during his college years, even earlier an advisor to Theodore Roosevelt, Syngman Rhee had spent most of his life in the United States, using his Ph. D. in political science to wedge himself into influential foreign policy circles. Those included, for a great while, the Chinese Nationalists in Washington, and it was Chiang Kai-shek, in 1948, who recommended Rhee become president of the new Republic of Korea. Arriving at the Seoul airport in General Douglas MacArthur's plane, Rhee systematically began recreating the country into *his* kind of democracy, one where "no one else was allowed to challenge his will." Oldest among the five leaders that June of 1950, he was probably the least popular, not just among his own people but among United States advisors as well. But his was the government Westerners had set up in South Korea, and it would be his nation that Truman would have to succor, whether he wanted to or not.^{vi}

But supporting a tin-pot dictator like Rhee had not been high on Harry Truman's list when he assumed the Presidency in 1945 upon Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR). A small-town boy from Independence, Missouri, the Vice-President had gained enough fame as chairman of the Senate Committee on Defense Spending to put him on FDR's ticket in the 1944 election. But he was as unlike the patrician, privately-educated New Yorker as Stalin was to Winston Churchill. Serving as company commander during World War I, Truman had led men into battle before returning to a depressed American economy. His business failed, but he repaid bankruptcy debts at full rate. He ran for county judge and won. He had promised and maintained honest government; threatened by the local Klan, he driven to their rally and faced them down. His was an education from experience, augmented by voracious reading of history; and he had no problem maintaining Roosevelt's Balance-of-Power foreign policy.^{vii}

Previewed briefly by Wilson in the pre-War years and revived vigorously by FDR, Balance-of-Power diplomacy based United States security upon the existence of multi-national continents. America's economic, political, and social institutions thrived when her people could deal with individual nations—Great Britain, France, Italy, Greece in Europe; Japan, China, and India in Asia; Nigeria, Angola, and Mozambique in Africa.^{viii} A continent dominated by one entity alone—as Kaiser Wilhelm II or Adolf Hitler desired in Europe, or Emperor Hirohito wished in Asia—was as dangerous for the United States as the Napoleonic empire had been for England a hundred fifty years earlier. Consequently, when other diplomatic venues failed, twentieth-century Americans went to war: with Germany in 1914 and with both Germany and Japan in 1941. It did not hurt that specific factors aroused citizen wrath: the Zimmerman telegram and sinking of the Lusitania or the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Long before these incidents, Washington policymakers knew it was only a matter of time before the encroaching malefactors had to be constrained.^{ix}

Truman agreed. So, along with his advisors, he viewed Josef Stalin's creation of a shatter belt barrier in Europe with a jaundiced eye. One by one, Bulgaria, Rumania, Hungary, West Germany, Poland, and finally Czechoslovakia acknowledged Soviet control. Had the take-overs been more subtle or Stalin less belligerent, American reaction might have been milder. But the dictator's refusal of Western aid through the Marshal Plan; his attempt to starve West Berliners into submission; his denotation of the atomic bomb; and finally his apparent support of revolutionary groups along the Mediterranean ended any patience left in Washington. Seeking Congressional approval for economic and military aid to Greece and Turkey, the President proposed the United States "support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures."^x

Thus was born the Truman Doctrine. But despite its subsequent interpretation, the policy did not at first promise comprehensive American help for any oppressed country. Ever the fiscal conservative, Truman was worried about the effect a resurgent military would have on the post-war economy. Moreover, there was always the hope that money alone could swing rebel nations—like Tito's Yugoslavia—away from Russia. Some even predicted that Mao Tse-tung would eventually reject Stalin and come to the arms of American foreign aid.^{xi}

But Mao was nowhere near abandoning his Soviet henchmen; in fact, he increasingly extolled them as he tightened his grip on his nation.^{xii} That--and a new American National Security Council's Economic

Advisory Report that building up the military would not increase inflation--began to tip the balance. In early 1950, the Security Council decided that American resistance to communism anywhere on the globe was not only necessary but also economically feasible—and it sent the report to Truman.^{xiii}

Already smarting from Republican barbs that he had “lost” China and conscious of the increasing virulence of McCarthy's attacks at home, Truman pondered the efficacy of the National Security report. With the establishment of NATO a year earlier, rampart Marxism seemed subdued in Europe. Asia was quiet with General MacArthur in Japan. And the French were hanging on in Indochina. Protectorates in North Africa were protesting against guardian powers, but that appeared to be an internal problem of the nations involved. Governments in Mexico, Central, and South America were courting oil companies, and that promised profits. All seemed remarkably stable for the moment, so stable the President initiated plans to cut, rather than increase, the Defense Department budget. Then news came: North Korea had invaded the south.^{xiv}

Shocked and concerned, Truman was not the only leader caught off guard by the invasion. In a Foreign Affairs speech given just six months earlier, Secretary of State Acheson had not even mentioned Korea in his list of Asian trouble spots; General MacArthur had visited it only once during his five years in occupied Japan; and Texas senator Tom Connally, chairman of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, blithely stated in May that “Korea was not an indispensable part of the United States' defense strategy and that the Communists could overrun it whenever they ‘take a notion’ to do so.”^{xv} Such negligence fortified Kim Il-sung's bellicosity. Convinced that unification of his country must be achieved soon, he had flown to Moscow in March to win Stalin's consent for a northern attack. Fresh from his dealings with China on the Sino-Soviet Treaty, Stalin gave conditional approval but insisted Kim consult with Mao first. In Beijing two months later, Kim met every Chinese argument with counter-argument, even assuring Mao that he need not worry about United States intervention: North Korean forces would achieve total victory so quickly America would not even have time to deploy forces.^{xvi}

Winning Mao's grudging assent, Kim hurried home and reviewed his armaments: 258 T-34 tanks, 178 warplanes, 1,600 artillery pieces and mortar, several detachments of naval vessels, and more than 100,000 men, augmented by 14,000 Chinese Koreans transferred to his army in January. Then Stalin sent his seal of approval: a team of three top-notch Soviet generals to liaise with Kim's North Korean military. Working in secret, Kim and Stalin set the invasion date for early Sunday, June 25, purposely making sure

the attack would not only surprise Harry Truman and Syngman Rhee, but also their reluctant partner, Mao Tse-tung.^{xvii}

Ignorant of this *contretemps* among Communists but all too aware of the threat of a Marxist Asia, Truman flew from Independence, Missouri, directly to Washington the morning after the invasion. After calling an emergency meeting with his top advisors, he heard their views, then stated the obvious: North Korea must be stopped. “The Russian were trying to get Korea by default,” he reasoned, “gambling that the United States....would put up no resistance.” But this President would not be rushed into war. After another meeting, he sent air and naval aid to Syngman Rhee; increased American forces in the Philippines; augmented military aid to Indochina while he waited for further action by the United Nations, which had already called for a “cessation of hostilities.”^{xviii}

By mid-morning the next day, Truman was ready to publicly announce his aid to South Korea, an action applauded by the public but decried by Rhee. Forced to flee his capital city amid a panicked retreat, he castigated the Americans for help that was, he whined, “too little, too late.” General Mac Arthur was more brutal in his analysis: “the South Koreans appear... incapable of stopping the North Korean advance: ‘a complete collapse is imminent.’”^{xix} So far, Kim Il-sung had been overwhelmingly correct in his assessment of the Republic’s military weakness. Civilians had not yet rushed to his banner, but that would surely be remedied once the entire country was under his rule.

Then, the United Nations acted, voting to back the United States in its decision to use armed force to stop armed force—America would not be in this fight alone. Finally on Friday, June 30, at 5:00 in the morning, President Truman committed ground troops to combat in Korea, American foreign policy jumped from Cold War to hot—and the lives of American soldiers and civilians would never be the same.^{xx}

Notes

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1. David Halberstan, *The Coldest Winter: America and the Korean War* (New York: Hyperion, 2007), 47-52; Orlando Figes, *A People's Tragedy: A History of the Russian Revolution* (New York: Viking, 1996), 682, 794-795, 800-804; Terence Barragy, "Russian and Soviet History" (lecture series, Texas A&M-Kingsville, Kingsville, TX, April 13, 2000), copy in the author's possession.
 2. Sergie N. Goncharov, John W. Lewis, Xue Litai, *Uncertain Partners: Stalin, Mao, and the Korean War* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993), 129-136; Halberstam, *The Coldest Winter*, 70-81.
 3. Harrison Salisbury, *China: One Hundred Years of Revolution* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1983), 199; Goncharov, *et al*, *Uncertain Partners*, 157-158.
 4. Stalin had agreed to remove troops from Manchuria and Xinjiang in due time, but his ejection of Koreans and Chinese twelve years earlier left few but Soviets there by 1950; the unpublicized agreement stipulated that no other foreigners could enter, leaving the region effectively controlled by Russians. Goncharov, *et al*, *Uncertain Powers*, 32-37, 41, 45-48, 112-129; Salisbury, *China*, 193, 199.
 5. Goncharov, *et al*, *Uncertain Powers*, 1-9, 47-55, 66; Salisbury, *China*, 200.
 6. Halberstam, *The Coldest Winter*, 4-69.
 7. David McCullough *Truman* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 115-135, 151, 170-171, 254-261; Halberstam, *The Coldest Winter*, 202-206.
 8. National names are those commonly used in the early Twentieth Century.
 9. John Lewis Gaddis, "Reconsiderations: The Cold War—Was the Truman Doctrine a Real Turning Point?" *Foreign Affairs*, January 1974, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/print/24491> (accessed September 10, 2009); Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Cycles of American History* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1986), 202-204.
 10. J. A. Garraty and M. C. Barnes, *The American Nation*, vol. 2 (New York: Longman, 2000), 808-814; Halberstam, *The Coldest Winter*, 180-183.
 11. Goncharov, *et al*, *Uncertain Partners*, 33-34, 46; Halberstam, *The Coldest Winter*, 197-198; Gaddis, "Reconsiderations: The Cold War, *passim*."
 12. Goncharov, *et al*, *Uncertain Partners*, 113-114, 128-129.
 13. Halberstam, *The Coldest Winter*, 199-201; Gaddis, "Reconsiderations: The Cold War," *passim*.
 14. Gaddis, "Reconsiderations: The Cold War," *passim*; Garraty and Barnes, *The American Nation*, 808-814.
 15. Truman, *Memoirs of Harry S. Truman: 1946-1952 Years of Trial and Hope* (New York: Konecky and Konecky, 1955), 331-332; Halberstam, *The Coldest Winter*, 61; Goncharov *et al*, *Uncertain Partners*, 151.
 16. Goncharov, *et al*, *Uncertain Partners*, 146-151.

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17. Ibid., 153-154.
 18. Truman, *Memoirs*, 335-339; McCullough, *Truman*, 778.
 19. Truman, *Memoirs*, 339-343; McCullough, *Truman*, 779; Goncharov, *et al*, *Uncertain Partners*, 163.
 20. Truman, *Memoirs*, 342-344; McCullough, *Truman*, 780-783.