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Truman’s War

By Herman S. Wolk

IN late November 1950, Chinese Communist troops entered the Korean War in force, driving South Korean forces into retreat. This attack 50 years ago by 250,000 Chinese troops transformed the conflict and precipitated a massive US military buildup. Gen. of the Army Douglas MacArthur, commander of United States forces in the Far East and commander in chief, United Nations Command, emphasized, “We face an entirely new war.”

It may be known as “the Forgotten War,” but the Korean conflict in many ways shaped the American military-political landscape for half a century. China’s bold entry into war forced decisions and generated consequences that remain part of today’s military, political, and geographical

picture. Korea remains divided between north and south at the 38th parallel, and United States forces still stand guard.

The Korean War, though close to World War II in time, was far different. It was an undeclared war, a “police action” that triggered a national emergency and a military buildup. The American military fought the war under restrictions—the first major American war, as one historian observed, that was not fought as a crusade. The conflict resulted in the firing of an American Secretary of Defense; the relief of a popular and powerful military commander; brought into military usage the term “limited war”; and produced the “never again” school of US officers, military leaders, and governmental officials com-



mitted to the proposition that the US should not ever again become embroiled in a land war in Asia.

This experience of the Korean War brought about a significant emphasis on the nuclear deterrent and transformed the Air Force’s Strategic Air Command into a major pillar of US foreign policy.

“Stop the SOBs”

Korea was Harry Truman’s war. Under a severe time constraint, the President acted without seeking the consent of Congress or the American people. Truman admonished Dean Acheson, his secretary of state, with these words: “Dean, we’ve got to stop the sons of bitches, no matter what, and that’s all there is to it.”

In his memoirs, Truman called his



decision to intervene in Korea the “toughest” decision of his presidency. He took this action without convening the National Security Council. This was ironic, in that, once the US entered the war, Truman placed heavy reliance on the NSC and regularly participated in its deliberations.

His failure to seek Congressional approval flowed from Acheson’s advice that he should base the military intervention on the President’s constitutional authority as Commander in Chief of the armed forces. Truman, it will be recalled, had also decided in 1948 to confront the Soviets with the Berlin Airlift without calling upon the NSC, which had been established by the National Security Act of 1947.

Once Washington had intervened,

Truman formed a system through which he held tight control over the conduct of the war. In this regard, he set a precedent as Commander in Chief that would be followed by Presidents for the rest of the 20th century. He received daily briefings either from Army Gen. Omar N. Bradley, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, or from a member of the Joint Staff. Truman directed that he give his own approval to all substantive orders concerning the conflict before anyone transmitted them to Far East Command.

Even though the military chiefs carried out the daily strategic direction of the war, Truman gave increased importance to the recommendations of the National Security Council. He directed that the NSC

convene weekly, and he regularly attended these meetings. The President insisted that recommendations which required his approval be staffed through the NSC. Policy was formulated through this institutionalized structure.

Truman maintained a clear picture of what being Commander in Chief required. Although he wanted all but routine military issues to receive his personal approval before being implemented, he trusted his military advisors, especially Bradley. Moreover, he allowed a theater commander flexibility as long as he followed established policy.

He believed firmly that the Commander in Chief should not meddle in tactical situations. “I am not a desk strategist,” Truman emphasized,



At the beginning of the Korean War, FEAF's major combat element, 5th Air Force, flew missions from Japan (above). It launched successful interdiction attacks and gained air superiority in the early days.

“and I don’t intend to be one.” Strategy and tactics were best left to the military, and “I don’t expect to interfere in it, now.”

At the outbreak of war in Korea, Far East Air Forces was commanded by Lt. Gen. George E. Stratemeyer. FEAF was suffering from what Air Force historian Robert F. Futrell, with tongue in cheek, described as “an overdose of economy.” Its major combat element, 5th Air Force in Japan, had been trained primarily for defensive operations such as the protection of Japan, Okinawa, and the Philippines. MacArthur protested in early 1950 that his air units were inadequate even to perform the strictly defensive mission as laid down by Washington.

Punishing Interdiction

Nonetheless, 5th Air Force, commanded by Maj. Gen. Earle E. Partridge, quickly gained air superiority over the North Koreans and launched punishing interdiction attacks from bases in Japan. Maj. Gen. William F. Dean, commanding the 24th Infantry Division, reported that “without question FEAF’s close support sorties had definitely blunted the initial North Korean thrust to the southward.”

Dean continued, “Without this continuing air effort, it is doubtful if the courageous combat soldiers, spread thinly along the line, could have withstood the onslaught of the vastly numerically superior enemy.”

Truman saw right away that the US military required an immediate infusion of funds and resources. At the same time, Secretary of Defense Louis A. Johnson knew he was in trouble. Although he claimed to be trimming fat from the defense budget, Johnson and the Administration actually had cut deeply into the military’s capabilities. In September 1950, Truman decided to replace Johnson with retired Gen. George C. Marshall. Truman described Johnson as an “egomaniac,” the biggest one he’d ever encountered, “and I’ve seen a lot.” Truman added, “He offended every member of the Cabinet.”

Although Johnson initially had been stunned by Truman’s request for his resignation, he left full of praise for the President and Marshall. In order to appoint Marshall, Truman requested Congressional legislation, since the National Security Act of 1947 prohibited a military officer from becoming Secretary of Defense within 10 years of being on active duty. The legislation was drafted, both the House and Senate quickly approved, and on Sept. 21, 1950, Marshall became Secretary of Defense.

Meanwhile, MacArthur’s stunningly successful landing at Inchon, followed by the Eighth Army’s breakout from the Pusan Perimeter and the subsequent drive northward, convinced Truman and Acheson that the North Korean army must be pursued above the 38th parallel and destroyed.

Thus, instead of restoring the status quo, all of Korea was to be unified.

In late September, the President approved a directive to MacArthur, stating: “Your military objective is the destruction of the North Korean armed forces. In attaining this objective, you are authorized to conduct military operations, including amphibious and airborne or ground operations north of the 38th parallel in Korea.” A United Nations resolution passed in early October gave approval for this decision to unify Korea. It authorized all necessary steps to ensure conditions of peace throughout the whole of Korea.

However, Truman emphasized that MacArthur would not be allowed to cross the borders of North Korea into Manchuria or the Soviet Union. MacArthur was also instructed to use only South Korean ground troops in provinces bordering China and the USSR.

Troubling Indications

Supported by FEAF, the allied forces in October 1950 drove northward, and the campaign seemed everywhere successful. In October, however, allied military leaders picked up indications of Chinese intervention. To better understand this fast-moving military situation and to gain a personal assessment of his Far East commander, Truman traveled to Wake Island in mid-October to meet with MacArthur. Truman later wrote in his memoirs that MacArthur assured him that victory in Korea was around the corner and that Chinese intervention was unlikely. MacArthur looked forward to the end of enemy resistance by Thanksgiving and to the withdrawal of the US Eighth Army to Japan by Christmas.

“No commander in the history of war,” emphasized the Far East commander, “has ever had more complete and adequate support from all agencies in Washington than I have.” MacArthur again insisted that there was “very little” chance that the Chinese Communists would enter the war, saying, “Had they interfered in the first or second months it would have been decisive. We are no longer fearful of their intervention.”

Nonetheless, after the success of the Inchon landings, the Chinese had intensified their threats to intervene in the conflict. The Indian govern-

ment reported that if UN or US forces crossed the 38th parallel, China would send troops into North Korea. Even as the CIA provided evidence that Chinese troops were already in North Korea, Washington discounted the Chinese threats as no more credible than the numerous other threats made by China over the years against “American imperialists.”

Truman’s NSC met in early November 1950, and its members noted that China’s objectives might include forcing the United States to fight a war of attrition or even driving the UN Command out of Korea. The point was also made that the Yalu would soon freeze over and become passable without bridges.

The fact is, however, that the US government could not fathom China’s intentions, and it did not know that, as officials attempted to solve the puzzle, China was completing a massive infiltration of North Korea that had been under way since October. It had moved some 250,000 troops at night into the mountains of North Korea, where they awaited combat.

By Nov. 11, 1950, Eighth Army, advancing northward, had run into stiff resistance just above the Chongchon River. Eighth’s commander, Gen. Walton H. Walker, informed MacArthur that the enemy’s resistance included “fresh, well-organized, and well-trained units, some of which were Chinese Communist Forces.”

MacArthur decided to launch an offensive on Nov. 24. For nearly two days it went well, but late on Nov. 25, more than 200,000 Chinese troops attacked, driving through the South Korean Army’s II Corps and pulverizing the right flank of Eighth Army. In an instant, the war had been transformed.

Truman, now deeply concerned, convened the NSC again, emphasizing that the US had to avoid being sucked into a general war against China. He reaffirmed the prohibitions against bombing Manchuria and Yalu dams and hydroelectric stations.

MacArthur’s late November offensive—he called it “a reconnaissance in force”—had brought a massive Chinese response, and critics claimed the US had suffered a defeat. Truman, though he continued to give MacArthur his strong support, stuck to his conviction that the conflict had to remain “limited.”

“My decisions had to be made on



Gen. Douglas MacArthur (second from left) visits a Far East Air Forces base in Korea shortly before Truman relieved him of command. With him are Maj. Gens. Doyle Hickey, Leven Allen, and Earle Partridge.

the basis of not just one theater of operations but of a much more comprehensive picture of our nation’s place in the world,” Truman explained. “Neither [MacArthur] nor I would have been justified if we had gone beyond the mission that the United Nations General Assembly had given us. There was no doubt in my mind that we should not allow the action in Korea to extend into a general war. All-out military action against China had to be avoided, if for no other reason than because it was a gigantic booby trap.”

Heading Off General War

The Chinese onslaught left the armed services and the Washington establishment deeply shaken. Gen. Hoyt S. Vandenberg, Air Force Chief of Staff, had all along been concerned that, with the US preoccupied in Korea, the Soviet Union might make a move westward in Europe. With the move by China into Korea, Vandenberg recommended to the chiefs that the US attack targets in Manchuria. He also directed Gen. Curtis E. LeMay, head of USAF’s Strategic Air Command, to bring his forces to alert status.

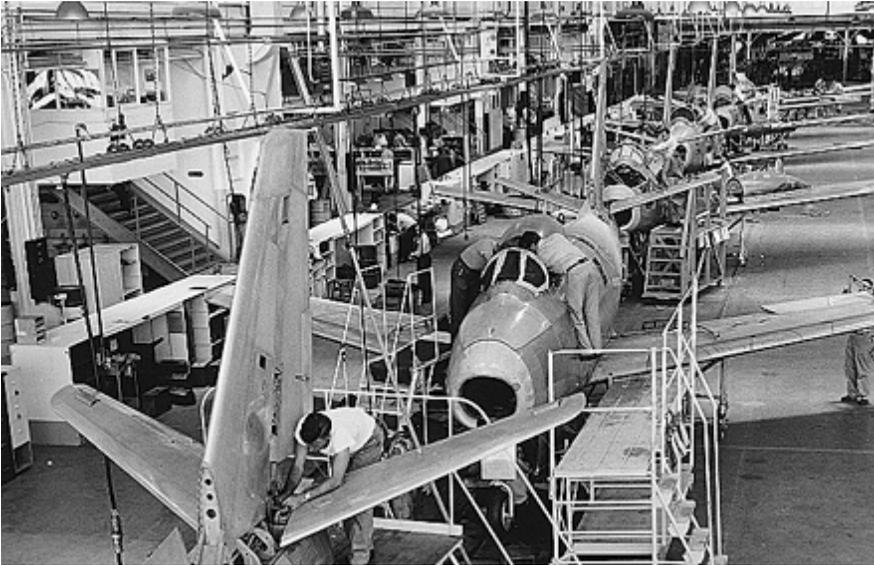
At the same time, the chiefs forwarded to the theater commanders a communiqué of warning that read, in part: “The JCS consider that the current situation in Korea has greatly increased the possibility of general war. Commanders should take such action as feasible to increase readi-

ness without creating an atmosphere of alarm.” It seemed that major war might soon break out.

This precarious military situation held both dangers and possibilities for USAF. Tactical Air Command’s 9th and 12th Air Forces only a few years earlier had distinguished themselves in Europe during World War II. However, in the short interval between the end of World War II and the start of the Korean War, both had been significantly reduced in size. TAC could put into the air only 11 fighter groups and fewer than 32,000 men. The Air Force had placed top priority on SAC, its nuclear deterrent force. Moreover, in December 1948, the Air Force had reduced TAC to an operational and planning headquarters under Continental Air Command. Ninth and 12th Air Forces, in addition to being separate TAC units, became CONAC subordinate units. Consequently, TAC was forced to relinquish administrative and logistic control over its forces, with CONAC allocating them for specific missions or training assignments.

The outbreak of war in Korea immediately caused the Air Force to begin the rebuilding of TAC. On Dec. 1, 1950, just a few days after China entered the war, TAC was separated from CONAC and restored to its status as a major command, headed by Gen. John K. Cannon, one of the greatest tactical air commanders of World War II.

For all the dangers it posed, China’s



This busy F-86 assembly line at North American Aviation in Los Angeles symbolizes the vast Air Force buildup that the Joint Chiefs of Staff requested after the Chinese entered the Korean War.

push into Korea did not shake Truman's conviction that the West's true enemy was the Soviet Union. The Chinese leaders, noted Truman, were "known to be in close relations with the Kremlin." In a special message to Congress on Dec. 1, the President described the Chinese "act of aggression in Korea" as "serving the ends of Russian colonial policy in Asia." Vandenberg, also suspicious of Soviet motives and fearful that the Kremlin would take advantage of the Asian war to cause trouble in Europe, thought it best to avoid getting bogged down in a war of attrition in Asia.

These factors helped to generate a brief international nuclear flap. At one point, Truman's public statements seemed to suggest that the American leader had not ruled out use of atomic weapons in Korea. Subsequently, he made clear that he was not giving any consideration to nuclear weapon employment but was, instead, pushing for a conventional buildup.

Defense Budget Boost

Truman on Dec. 1 asked Congress to increase the defense budget by a whopping \$129 billion (as calculated in today's dollars, with compensation for inflation), which amounted to a one-year 35 percent rise. He emphasized that this funding was required not only to sustain the United Nations action in Korea but also to increase American military readiness "in other areas of the world."

The budget growth continued for several years, too. The three Korean War-era budgets were as follows: 1951, \$366 billion; 1952, \$481 billion; and 1953, \$400 billion. By contrast, the last prewar budget, for 1950, was only \$141 billion.

To Truman, the Chinese attack was merely part of a global strategy directed from Moscow by Soviet leaders. "The aggressors were armed with Soviet Russian weapons," he noted. "From the early days of the attack, it became clear that the North Korean forces were being supplemented and armed from across the frontier. Men and equipment were coming out of these dark places which lie behind the Iron Curtain."

For the Air Force, Truman's military buildup had a major, long-lasting impact. When war broke out, USAF comprised 48 wings of varying operational capability. After the Chinese came in, the Joint Chiefs requested a 95-wing Air Force by mid-1952. The vast Air Force buildup was under way.

Following the Chinese attack, with Truman's decision to limit the war, restore the status quo at the 38th parallel, and preserve the independence of the Republic of Korea, FEAF again performed a critical role, as it

did in the earlier stages of the conflict, pounding the invaders and relieving the pressure on Eighth Army. By mid-1951, Seoul had been recaptured and the war entered a long stalemate.

End of MacArthur

MacArthur, meanwhile, had become high strung and somewhat petulant after China entered the war, and by early 1951, his calls for widening the conflict struck an increasingly sour note in the ears of the chiefs and the President. In April 1951, Truman, feeling that his Far East commander was attempting to circumvent the nation's official policy, relieved MacArthur and replaced him with Army Lt. Gen. Matthew B. Ridgway.

Military historians still recall the testimony of Army commanders that, without support from the Air Force, UN forces would have been pushed off the peninsula. As a result, the conflict led to a substantial expansion of the Air Force. Soon, the Joint Chiefs were setting the new requirement at 143 wings.

Truman's conduct of the war set a precedent. He became the first US President to confront the possibility of a major war in the nuclear era. He laid down the principle that, in the age of atomic and thermonuclear weapons, wars would have to be fought for limited and carefully delineated political objectives. The era of fighting a war as a crusade ended with the Second World War, in his view. The age of limited wars had been inaugurated.

As Commander in Chief, Truman held a close rein on the conflict. He steadfastly refused to expand the war after the UN drive to the Yalu precipitated Chinese intervention. The war remained a "police action," with Truman settling for a stalemate that proved highly unpopular at home.

Perhaps forgotten by the public at large, the Korean War nonetheless made an impact on the political and military psyches of the United States. There, the war is still very much alive. Fifty years after it broke out, the Forgotten War is anything but forgotten. ■

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