

Following the aggression of North Korea against the Republic of Korea In June of 1950, President Harry Truman committed American armed forces to aid the South Koreans in what his White House called a “police action,” and the State Department termed “the Korean conflict.” Under such rubrics fifteen members of the United Nations joined the United States in dispatching armed forces to help South Korea, and five others sent medical units.

But we veterans knew it as war: war against a well armed, determined enemy; a war in an ancient, rural country with few structures, odiferous agriculture, and a primitive road net; a foot-soldier’s war amid daunting terrain and cruel weather; a war that was a profound human tragedy. By the time of the truce in 1953, the UN reported, South Korean casualties were over 1, 300,000, mostly civilians. The UN estimated the invaders lost 520,000 North Korean and 900,000 Chinese soldiers, and another one million civilians. U.S. casualties totaled over 142,000, including 23,300 killed in action and 106,000 wounded in action. Of the more than 7,000 Americans captured or interned, some 2700 died and 4400 were returned. Apart from U.S. losses, the United Nations Command lost over 17,000: some 3,000 dead, 11,000 wounded, and 2,800 missing and prisoners.

Here in the United States the Korean War was anything but popular. Many Americans believed that all that death and sacrifice served no meaningful purpose, that holding the enemy north of the 38th parallel was no substitute for victory. By 1953 President Truman’s approval rating had fallen to 23%, and his Administration was under attack not only for its foreign policy and military strategy, but also for its fiscal policies and alleged communist conspiracies. Popular disfavor extended even to General of the Army George Catlett Marshall, an American respected worldwide as the organizer of victory in War II and of the reconstruction of Europe in its aftermath.

General Marshall had retired in 1945, but then accepted the President’s appointment as his emissary to China. In January 1947 the President recalled him from China, and appointed him Secretary of State, an office he held until December 1948, when he resigned to undergo surgery for removal of a kidney. In September 1950, the President asked General Marshall for the third time to leave retirement and to become his Secretary of Defense. Marshall warned him to reconsider. “They are still charging me with the downfall of Chiang’s government in China. I want to help, not hurt you.” (Greatly moved, Truman wrote to his wife, ”Can you think of anyone else saying that?”) In the debate in the Senate over Marshall’s confirmation, Senator Jennings of Indiana called him “a front man for traitors...a living lie.” While Marshal won confirmation, he was thereafter vilified again and again by demagogues and the media, and he resigned in September 1951 so encumbered.

Harry Truman left office in January 1953. In his farewell address he told the nation that sending troops into Korea had been his single most important decision. It was, he said, a turning point in the Cold War, for whereas free nations had failed often before to oppose an aggression, in Korea they had acted together to nullify one. Yet the horrific potential of modern war had not been allowed to get out of hand, for at issue during the Korean War was world peace in a nuclear age. Future burdens of the Cold War, he said, would be comparably heavy, but he offered this hope:

As the free world grows stronger, more united, more attractive to men on both sides of the Iron Curtain —and as the Soviet hopes for easy expansion are blocked— then there will come a time of change in the Soviet world. Nobody can say for sure when that is going to be... Whether the Communist rulers shift their policies of their own free will —or whether change comes about some other way —I have not a doubt in the world that change will occur. I have a deep and abiding faith in the destiny of free men. With patience and courage, we shall some day move on to a new era....

I did not hear Truman's speech, because I was then in Korea serving in that sector that included Old Baldy, Hill 347, and Pork Chop Hill. But looking back over 40 years in uniform from the end of World War II to the last few years of the Cold War, I wish to express admiration for that doughty President not only for his decision to enter Korea, but also for his resolve in keeping that war limited. For the latter, I hold that all Americans owe a debt of gratitude to his principal military advisor, the sage general who once resided here in Dodona Manor. Truman and Marshall together actualized the strategy of collective security that led to containment, to the tearing down of the Berlin Wall, and to the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

In September 1950, General of the Army Douglas MacArthur had achieved a brilliant operational success at Inchon. George Marshall lent his weight to authorizing MacArthur to pursue with the objective of destroying the North Korean armed forces, but warned him to avoid action that might provoke Chinese or Soviet intervention, and to prepare for the onset of winter. General MacArthur, in a personal meeting with President Truman, exuded confidence that Chinese forces along the Yalu River could not intervene because they lacked air power. MacArthur spurred his field commanders northward, advancing on two fronts separated by the mountainous backbone of the peninsula, intending to unite his forces at the Yalu. Dismissing China as a serious threat, MacArthur was confident that he could entrap all enemy forces in Korea before Christmas.

Then the Chinese struck. On 28 November 1950 the President was told that MacArthur faced 260,000 Chinese in Korea, and that U.N. forces, outnumbered 3:1, had gone over to the defensive. MacArthur urged reinforcements, and authorization to attack into China. That afternoon the National Security Council met. General Marshall, speaking gravely, stated that American involvement in Korea had to continue as part of a United Nations undertaking. The U.S. should look for a way to "get out with honor." There must be no hostilities in China. He stated emphatically "we should use all available political, economic, and psychological action to limit the war."

Marshall, out of his usual strategic perception, had described the course the nation would follow over the ensuing years of the war. President Truman agreed. Thereafter the U.S. sought a defensible line in Korea from behind which U.N. forces could negotiate a cessation of hostilities.

During December, the Eighth Army fell back under heavy pressure —amid sub-zero temperatures, Siberian winds, ice and snow— retreating nearly 300 miles to positions south of the 38th parallel, accompanied by millions of refugees. The South Korean government fled from Seoul to Pusan. General MacArthur reported that Eighth Army troops were tired and dispirited, and could only be reinvigorated by Washington's changing the political basis upon which they are being asked to trade life for time.

Fortunately the Chinese advance slowed as their supply lines extended. General Walker, commander of Eighth Army, was killed in a jeep accident, and his command passed to General Matthew Ridgway. In mid-January Marshall telephoned the President to report that Ridgway's leadership had wrought a major change in Eighth Army's morale and effectiveness. On 25 January 1951 Eighth Army launched a counteroffensive that by the end of March reestablished U.N. forces along the 38th parallel.

The President and his advisers then undertook to negotiate a cease-fire proposal with the allies, informing MacArthur of its principal terms. But MacArthur thereupon issued a public statement that deprecated the military capability of China and its army, offered to negotiate with the Chinese commander, and threatened expansion of U.S. military operations to China's ports and internal bases.

President Truman, furious at General MacArthur's unprecedented insubordination and upstaging, wanted immediate relief, but Marshall urged caution, citing the potential for a Congressional firestorm. Truman hesitated. But House Minority Leader Joe Martin publicly declaimed that "If we are not in Korea to win, then this Administration should be indicted for the murder of American boys." On 5 April 1951 Martin read to the House a letter to him from MacArthur advocating attacks into China, and stating that "the real war against communism was in Asia, not in Europe... There is no substitute for victory." Martin's ploy, plus a news report from Tokyo predicting a preemptory resignation by MacArthur, impelled the President to act. The General learned while at lunch that he had been fired. Ridgway took his place, and General James Van Fleet took of command Eighth Army.

The people of the United States were sharply divided over MacArthur's dismissal, especially after his poignant address to a joint session of Congress, heard over multiple radio channels, and watched on television by a record 30 million viewers. At the Capitol there was much talk of impeachment. On May 3, 1951 the Senate Foreign Relations and Armed Services Committees began seven weeks of joint hearings. MacArthur, persuasively articulate, admitted to no mistakes or errors of judgment. He blamed the CIA for failing to anticipate the Chinese intervention; he asserted that attacking China itself involved little risk of precipitating Soviet intervention.

However, George Marshall's testimony was decisively contrary. He began by deploring that he had to express views directly opposed to those of a great American for whom he had "tremendous respect." Marshall contrasted his perceptions and recommendations with those of MacArthur:

MacArthur: Present policy leads to stalemate, further deaths. Marshall: there is hope for an honorable outcome.

MacArthur: attacking China is only path to victory. Marshall: attacks from air and sea will be inconclusive.

MacArthur: Soviets are deployed wholly for defense. Marshall: Soviets are building up strike forces in Asia

MacArthur: A quick victory will avert WWII. Marshall: impossible to confine a wider war to Asia,

MacArthur: U.S. China policy century's worst mistake. Marshall: U.S. China policy best possible under circumstances.

MacArthur: Allies must not interfere with U.S. interests. Marshall: Allies are indispensable for global security.

MacArthur: Time is wasting; foes arming faster. Marshall: coalition forming: any time of global peace is a gain.

Americans ought to remember Korea, if only to avoid MacArthur's mistaken belief in the efficacy of air power — his own, or the Chinese lack of it. Marshall knew from World War II that air bombardments could not stop a determined enemy, and that "...in Korea we had complete air superiority...and yet, we couldn't do anything until we got the troops to get down on the ground..." And they should remember Korea because, as T.R Fehrenbach stated: "Americans in 1950 discovered something that ever since Hiroshima they had forgotten: you may fly over a land forever, you may bomb it, atomize it, pulverize it and wipe it clean of life —but if you desire to defend it, protect it, and keep it for civilization, you must do this on the ground, the way the Roman legions did, by putting your young men into the mud. The object of warfare is to dominate a portion of the earth, with its peoples, for causes either just or unjust. It is not to destroy the land and people, unless you have gone wholly mad."