



The Korean War: A War That Never Really Ended

A Divided Korea Becomes a Cold War Battleground

When World War II ended in 1945, Korea emerged from 35 years of Japanese rule only to find itself divided between the victorious Allies. Soviet forces occupied Korea north of the 38th parallel, while American forces occupied the south. What was intended as a temporary arrangement hardened as the Cold War developed.

By 1948, two separate governments had been established. Communist North Korea, led by Kim Il Sung, was supported by the Soviet Union, while South Korea, under Syngman Rhee, was supported by the United States. Both governments claimed the right to rule the entire peninsula.

The uneasy division exploded into war on June 25, 1950, when North Korean troops crossed the 38th parallel and invaded South Korea. Their armies rapidly swept southward. President Harry Truman, concerned that allowing South Korea to fall might encourage communist expansion elsewhere, committed American forces to its defense under the authority of the United Nations.

The United Nations Goes to War

The United States supplied most of the troops and military equipment, but forces from more than a dozen other nations fought under the United Nations Command. General Douglas MacArthur, already famous for his service in World War II and his administration of occupied Japan, was placed in command.

At first, the situation was desperate. North Korean forces drove the South Korean army and its allies steadily southward until United Nations troops held little more than a defensive pocket around the southeastern port of Pusan. Then MacArthur dramatically changed the course of the war.

MacArthur's Gamble at Inchon

On September 15, 1950, United Nations forces launched an amphibious invasion at Inchon, far behind North Korean lines. The location was considered extremely risky because of its narrow approaches, formidable tides, mudflats and seawalls, but MacArthur's gamble succeeded brilliantly.

His troops seized Inchon and recaptured Seoul while United Nations forces broke out of the Pusan Perimeter. North Korea's invading army suddenly faced encirclement and retreated northward. Within weeks, the military situation had been completely reversed.

What had begun as an effort to save South Korea now became an attempt to destroy the North Korean army and reunify the peninsula. United Nations forces crossed the 38th parallel and advanced toward the Yalu River, Korea's border with Communist China.

China Enters the War

Chinese leaders had warned that they would not tolerate hostile forces approaching their border, but MacArthur discounted the likelihood of massive Chinese intervention. He was wrong. Beginning in October 1950 and in overwhelming force the following month, hundreds of thousands of Chinese troops entered the fighting and drove United Nations forces southward in a bitter retreat.

By early 1951, UN forces had recovered and pushed the Chinese and North Koreans back toward the vicinity of the 38th parallel. Under General Matthew Ridgway, the front gradually stabilized. The Korean War was becoming a stalemate on the ground, but above the battlefield another kind of warfare was introducing the world to the jet age.

The Jet Age Goes to War

The Korean War introduced Americans to a new kind of aerial combat. World War II had ended only five years earlier, but the familiar propeller-driven fighters of that war were rapidly giving way to jets. American pilots soon encountered the Soviet-designed MiG-15, a fast and highly capable swept-wing fighter flown by North Korean and Chinese pilots and, secretly, experienced Soviet pilots.

The United States countered primarily with the F-86 Sabre, and the two aircraft fought spectacular high-speed dogfights over northwestern Korea. The region near the Chinese border became known as "**MiG Alley.**" American newspapers regularly reported these aerial battles, making the Sabre and MiG familiar names to Americans following the war from home.

American pilots generally gained the upper hand in these encounters, aided by training, tactics and the experience of many pilots who had already flown combat missions during World War II. Meanwhile, Air Force, Navy and Marine aircraft attacked bridges, railroads, supply lines and enemy positions while providing close air support for troops on the ground. B-29 Superfortresses, veterans of World War II, also flew bombing missions, although the appearance of the MiG-15 made daylight operations increasingly dangerous.

Korea demonstrated how rapidly warfare was changing. Within only a few years, aviation had advanced from the propeller-driven fighters of World War II to swept-wing jets fighting at speeds approaching the sound barrier. The dogfights over Korea marked the arrival of the **jet age in modern warfare**.

Truman Versus MacArthur

While American pilots battled MiGs overhead and soldiers fought below, another confrontation was developing far from the battlefield. MacArthur believed the United States should pursue victory rather than accept a stalemate. He favored widening the war against Communist China, including attacks on Chinese bases beyond the Korean border and greater use of Nationalist Chinese forces from Taiwan.

Truman saw a much greater danger. China was already directly involved, the Soviet Union possessed atomic weapons, and expanding the conflict into China could turn the Korean War into a third world war. Truman therefore insisted that Korea remain a limited war.

Their disagreement soon went beyond military strategy. MacArthur publicly challenged administration policy and increasingly behaved as though a theater commander could independently influence American foreign policy. For Truman, that crossed a constitutional line.

On April 11, 1951, Truman relieved MacArthur of all his commands. The decision was enormously controversial. MacArthur returned to the United States to a hero's welcome and later addressed a joint session of Congress, ending his speech with his famous observation that "old soldiers never die; they just fade away."

Whatever Americans thought of MacArthur or Truman, the episode reaffirmed an important principle of American government: **the military remains subordinate to elected civilian authority**.

From Movement to Stalemate

After the dramatic advances and retreats of the war's first year, the conflict settled into bloody fighting over hills and ridgelines near the 38th parallel. Negotiations began, but the fighting continued for two more years while diplomats argued over boundaries, prisoners of war and the terms of an armistice.

Finally, on July 27, 1953, representatives of the United Nations Command, North Korea and China signed an armistice. The agreement established a heavily fortified Demilitarized Zone

roughly following the battle line near the 38th parallel. South Korea did not sign the agreement, and no permanent peace treaty followed. The Korean War therefore stopped without formally ending.

Two Koreas, Two Futures

The human cost had been staggering. Millions of Korean civilians and soldiers were killed, wounded or displaced, tens of thousands of American servicemen died, and countless Korean families were permanently separated by the new border.

Although the battlefield ended almost where it had begun, the two Koreas followed radically different paths afterward. North Korea became one of the world's most isolated and authoritarian countries. Under Kim Il Sung and later his son and grandson, the country developed a rigid political system centered on the ruling Kim family, the military and nearly complete government control of society. The old description of Korea as the "**Hermit Kingdom**" found a new home in the communist North.

South Korea began the postwar era devastated and impoverished, but its future was remarkably different. Beginning in the 1960s, it underwent an extraordinary economic transformation. Much like postwar Japan, South Korea developed an export-driven industrial economy and eventually became a world leader in automobiles, shipbuilding, electronics and advanced technology.

Today, two peoples sharing a common language, culture and history live under profoundly different systems—one an isolated dictatorship and the other a prosperous modern democracy.

What Did the Korean War Accomplish?

The Korean War produced no surrender ceremony, no conquered enemy capital and no peace treaty. American and United Nations troops essentially finished the war defending approximately the same dividing line they had been sent to defend in 1950. It can therefore appear to have been an inconclusive war.

But South Korea survived, and with the passage of time that became perhaps the war's most important legacy. The impoverished country defended by American and allied troops in 1950 eventually became one of the world's major economies.

The war also established a pattern that would characterize much of the Cold War. The United States demonstrated that it was prepared to resist communist expansion militarily, while Truman demonstrated that such resistance had limits when escalation threatened a wider war between nuclear powers. His confrontation with MacArthur reinforced another enduring principle: even America's most celebrated general remained subordinate to civilian authority.

The guns largely fell silent in 1953, but they were never silenced by a peace treaty. More than seven decades later, American troops remain in South Korea, the Demilitarized Zone remains one of the world's most heavily fortified borders, and the Korean peninsula remains divided.

The Korean War ended with an armistice, a divided peninsula and an uneasy peace that continues to this day.