Child of Conflict: The Korean-American Relationship, 1943-1953 (review)

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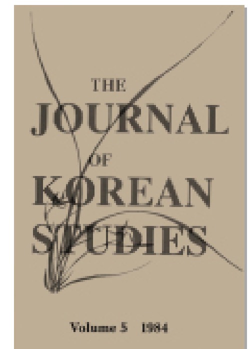

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nature of status, mobility, and land tenure in traditional Korea, social historians may be skeptical of anthropological analyses based on some necessarily tentative assumptions. One would hope that they might yet be as attentive to the Janellis' work as the Janellis were to social history, perhaps with similarly intriguing results.

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Child of Conflict: The Korean-American Relationship, 1943–1953. Edited by Bruce Cumings. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1983, 335 pp.

A rapid reassessment of the foreign policy of the Truman administration is being furthered through the opening of additional American and British archives. The greatest challenge faced by Truman and his colleagues lay in the protracted struggle in Korea between 1950 and 1953. Truman showed decisiveness in handling key issues: notably, the commitment of American resources to oppose North Korea in late June 1950; the crossing of the thirty-eighth parallel and the curious encounter with General MacArthur at Wake Island in October 1950; the determination to survive the days of despair in December 1950-January 1951; the dismissal of MacArthur in April 1951; and the resolute refusal to return prisoners of war to North Korea or China contrary to their wishes. However, Truman was only one and not necessarily the most important of those concerned with the formulation of American policy. Many aspects of the Korean conflict have been controversial or obscure. Why was American policy towards the Korean peninsula erratic and at times contradictory between 1945 and 1950? How interested in Korea were the various parts of the bureaucracy in Washington? What were the intentions of the governing elites in Seoul and P'yongyang? Who provoked whom, or were both sides responsible? What was the relationship between North Korea and the Soviet Union? Did Stalin encourage Kim Ilsŏng in an adventurist policy or not? Where did Peking figures in events before large-scale Chinese intervention? To what extent were Taiwan and Korea linked before Truman's formal statement at the start of the war? Why did it take so long to end the conflict and was this due to malevolence or incompetence?

These questions and many others are examined in this important new volume of essays edited by Bruce Cumings. It is in some

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respects complementary to the valuable work edited by Dorothy Borg and Waldo Heinrichs, *Uncertain Years: Chinese-American Relations, 1947–1950* (New York, 1980). Cumings and his associates cover a longer period but address themselves to some analogous problems. Most of the contributors have relied principally on a wide range of American sources, including the extensive holdings of the National Archives, the numerous papers in the Truman and Eisenhower libraries, and other relevant collections, such as the Dulles and MacArthur archives. Some Korean material has been used but a great deal remains to be utilized, including the voluminous North Korean records seized by the Americans in October 1950. The most difficult areas concern the policies of the Soviet Union and China; as the editor remarks, it will be a long time before these are fully clarified (if ever). Each contributor writes with force and distinction and the volume assumes a more cohesive character than is usual in such collections. The volume is the result of two conferences held in Seattle in 1978 and 1980 and essentially represents the work of young scholars, who have labored in depth over the past decade to ascertain why the Korean war occurred and why it took the form it did.

Bruce Cumings provides a succinct preface and then a lengthy, most stimulating introduction that sets the revisionist tone. He asserts that traditional interpretations of the outbreak of the con flict are erroneous because they depict the administration reacting to events and implementing a strategy of containment. Cumings maintains that in reality Truman and his colleagues were more adventurous and attempted a rollback policy in which communism would be driven into retreat through, in this case, the unification of the Korean peninsula under United Nations auspices. This development is placed in the framework of the coalition within the American establishment advocating the consolidation of the Truman doctrine through dynamic American world leadership: in party terms this connoted most of the Democrats and the liberal Republicans.

The potential significance of Korea was discerned by the Department of State in November 1943 when it was stated that a Soviet-controlled Korea would pose a threat to China and Japan. The theme of the period between the end of the Pacific war and the start of the international struggle in June 1950 is the contrasting attitudes of the Department of State, which regarded Korea as important to American security, and the military planners, who appreciated the limitations of American power with the run down of the armed forces and could not regard Korea as a major priority. Pursuing

arguments he has deployed at more length in the first volume of *The Origins of the Korean War: Liberation and the Emergence of Separate Regimes 1945–1947* (Princeton, 1981), Cumings underlines the extent to which the emergent government in South Korea represented an American creation. Cumings and James Matray emphasize that Korea was more to the forefront of the administration's thinking in 1947 than historians have previously realized. Acheson told a secret congressional hearing in that year that "we have drawn the line in Korea" (p. 21) and Korea was almost incorporated with Greece and Turkey in the planning stages of the Truman doctrine. A sense of mission was present in American policy making and was exemplified by General John R. Hodge and John J. Muccio, the tough ambassador in Seoul. This explained the rigorous suppression of insurgents in the dissident areas from April and October 1948 onwards and the fostering of the virulently anti-Communist government of Syngman Rhee. Rhee had been a thorn in the side of the Americans in the past and was to be so again in the future but there appeared no alternative to him.

Dean Acheson was the most intelligent and influential of the decision makers. Most of the essayists are impressed with Acheson's panoramic vision and comprehensive grasp of the issues. In discussing Acheson's views on Taiwan and Korea, Cumings states that the vital point to appreciate in understanding the distinction drawn between the two is that Taiwan was connected with Acheson's desire to separate China from the Soviet Union while North Korea was perceived as a satellite of Moscow and was therefore more offensive to Acheson.

Rollback emerged in American policy formulation in 1949–50 (as in the original draft of NSC 48). The annexation of Taiwan was now contemplated and the view was expressed by those regarding Moscow and Peking as synonymous that the expansion of Communist China must be halted. The Japan Firsters achieved more success with George Kennan's encouragement in urging the expansion of the Japanese economy to reduce the burden on the United States and to strengthen the resistance to communism. Acheson took the initiative in persuading Dulles to join the administration and convinced a somewhat unwilling Truman of the political benefits that would accrue thereby in defusing at least some of the growing Republican criticisms of the administration (Dulles probably did not need much persuading for his own reasons). American policy was undoubtedly hardening towards East Asia in the months preceding June 25, 1950, when that trend was so dramatically accelerated. Cumings aptly remarks that the chief obscurity is the failure of

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Truman and Acheson to launch a public or diplomatic initiative to define American policy and to prevent the looming confrontation.

As regards North Korea, it is known that Kim Ilsŏng secured the transfer of at least thirty thousand Korean Communist troops who had fought for Mao Tse-tung and that these returned to Korea in 1949–50. The prominent role of officers with combat experience from China is underlined in that approximately 80 percent of North Korean officers had been in Yenan or fought in the civil war. Cumings sees North Korean policy as explicable in terms of a triangular struggle between P'yongyang, Peking, and Moscow for dominance in North Korea. Kim Ilsŏng and his followers were motivated by fervent nationalism and by the wish to unify the Korean peninsula on a basis that would minimize or exclude Russian and Chinese influence. The Soviet Union and China competed in providing assistance for Kim. Cumings maintains that while there was perhaps some South Korean provocation, at the time North Korea began the conventional war on June 25 the situation must be seen as an extension of the civil conflict in the peninsula since 1945. Kim now believed his objective of an independent, united Korea was within his grasp.

Interesting indirect evidence pointing toward primary North Korean responsibility for June 25 is adduced in a footnote (pp. 40–41, n. 59). Cumings states that a North Korean source indicates that planes were being prepared for action between June 19 and June 22. The North Koreans are seen as the key element with the Russians on the sidelines. Cumings contends that at best Stalin acquiesced in the North Korean action and that it is conceivable that Kim Ilsŏng proceeded against Stalin's wishes. Of course, matters were viewed differently in Washington in 1950 and the Russians were held responsible; as one American briefing officer was later to observe, Stalin and Kim Ilsŏng should be seen as enjoying a relationship similar to that between Walt Disney and Donald Duck. Evidence currently available suggests that the North Korean offensive was organized in the week preceding June 25 by a small number of top officials; even some members of the cabinet were kept in ignorance.

Cumings ends his introduction by reflecting on the unifying impact of the Korean fighting in top American circles and comments on the liberal consensus in favor of rollback in October 1950. Ironically, liberals and MacArthur were in agreement in wishing to eliminate communism in Korea. MacArthur's willingness to accept war with China and his growing truculence, however, led ultimately to his downfall.

In his commentary on Cumings's introduction, Lloyd Gardner observes that more attention should have been focused on Truman and what he said in explaining the American response in June 1950. Cumings says little on Truman and clearly regards Acheson as the most important individual prior to June 1950. Gardner would have welcomed more discussion of North Korea.

In the first essay, Mark Paul considers the connections between the use of the atomic bomb against Japan and the division of Korea. In the closing phase of the Pacific war, the State Department anticipated that Korea would be rapidly overtaken by revolution. The start of American-Soviet rivalry in the peninsula could be discerned: the United States insisted on the adoption of the thirty-eighth parallel to maximize territory controlled by the Americans. Truman and Averell Harriman favored a tougher policy towards Moscow in the summer of 1945 and they believed it was vindicated in August 1945 after the Japanese surrender. Paul provides a careful analysis of subject matter, which is in the main familiar from the large amount written on this topic of the circumstances of concluding the Pacific conflict.

Stephen Pelz looks at U.S. decisions on Korea from 1943 to 1950 and offers certain hypotheses. He dissents from James Matray's argument advanced in *Pacific Historical Review* (1981) that Truman and Byrnes wished to use the atomic bomb before the Soviet Union could advance into Korea. Pelz holds that American policy in Korea was based on bluff—attempting to prop up South Korea through the United Nations, which was American dominated. United States defense policy was muddled and complicated by the running down of the armed forces after 1945 and Truman knew he was vulnerable to accusations of having carried defense reductions too far, much as he would have preferred to transfer the entire responsibility to his vocal Republican critics. Thus, Pelz states, Truman knew he had to be resolute in meeting the challenge presented by the events of June 25.

Truman appointed Louis Johnson to the Department of Defense with instructions to cut expenditure, but Johnson disliked Acheson and openly advocated his dismissal in a telephone conversation with Senator Robert Taft in the presence of Harriman, favored by Johnson as Acheson's replacement. Truman was loyal to Acheson and in the end Johnson suffered the fate of MacArthur, several months before the general's recall. Acheson's position was seriously weakened, however, by the unscrupulous campaign of right-wing Republicans and maverick Democrats, accentuated by Alger Hiss's conviction for perjury.

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Of the roles played by Truman and Acheson after June 25, Pelz believes that Truman at first felt he could avoid committing ground troops to Korea; he made up his mind firmly by June 28. On the other hand, Cumings states that Acheson rather than Truman pushed American policy in that direction by bringing Korea before the U.N. Security Council before consulting Truman. American defense chiefs did not initially wish to accept military responsibilities in Korea, but the president and secretary of state decided that intervention was inevitable. Pelz concludes that for a combination of international and domestic reasons, Truman had to act as he did in late June 1950.

John Merrill considers internal warfare in Korea between 1948 and 1950. He emphasizes the often forgotten fact that there was a total of more than 100,000 casualties in Korea as a result of civil strife before the formal opening of the confict. The United States forced through the United Nations in March 1948 a resolution calling for separate elections against the wishes of the majority of the U.N. Commission. The Yŏsu rebellion occurred on October 19, 1948, when two thousand South Korean constabulary troops mutinied as they were about to embark for Cheju Island. Extensive Communist infiltration of the constabulary had taken place; about twelve hundred civilians and pro-government forces were killed as well as fifteen hundred rebels and their supporters. Of the numerous border incidents, Merrill attributes responsibility for southern provocation largely to trigger-happy commanders. The north was responsible for various incidents but these were of a disciplined nature and had distinct political objectives. The timing of specific incidents was occasionally linked to wider issues, such as the withdrawal of American occupation forces, the formation of the Democratic Front for the Unification of the Fatherland, the visit of Chiang Kai-shek, and the propaganda campaign against South Korean provocation. The most serious of the border clashes amounted to major battles. Although General Roberts believed that the South Koreans greatly exaggerated the numbers involved in clashes, Merrill contends that some at least attained significant dimensions.

The start of the conventional war came when the guerrilla movement in the south had effectively been destroyed. The original North Korean hope that Rhee's regime could be overthrown internally was frustrated and the military option was the only one left. Merrill discusses the speculation over the precise position and intentions of Pak Honyŏng, the North Korean foreign minister, rendered more intriguing by Pak's subsequent purge after the war. Therefore Merrill sees North Korea beginning the conventional war as the

second stage of North Korean policy, a continuation of the internal struggles since 1945.

In his commentary on Merrill's paper, Jon Halliday underlines the importance of the Haeju and P'yongyang conferences; he cites interviews conducted with North Korean officers in 1977, which indicated that South Korea did not launch a major offensive across the thirty-eighth parallel in June 1940.

James I. Matray examines Korea as a test case of containment in Asia. An aid program was implemented in 1947 despite the attention focused on Greece. Matray brings out the role of John M. Allison, who was largely responsible for devising the procedure that led to the creation of a separate state in South Korea. He mentions the discussions over troop withdrawals and the views put forward in NSC 8 that the United States should not become so deeply involved that action by another power could be deemed a *casus belli,* and he emphasizes the impact of the Communist victory in China in the direction of stiffening resolve in Korea. Matray believes that Truman was committed to containment in Korea in the sense of creating a regime that was politically, economically, and militarily viable, and that historians have underestimated the administration's commitment to Korea. When viewed in the context of American policy in 1949–50, the reactions in June 1940 are less surprising than usually believed.

William Stueck discusses the march to the Yalu as seen from Washington between August and December 1950. He sees Acheson as a hard liner but less so than Allison and Dean Rusk. In the course of July 1950, opinion in the Policy Planning Staff moved toward accepting the possibility of advancing beyond the thirty-eighth parallel; only George Kennan was opposed and he was then drifting out of policy-making circles. Stueck defines MacArthur's view of Korea as a twilight zone between the Chinese offshore islands and the Asian continent. MacArthur had always opposed war on the Asian continent but he had believed, at least since 1948, that a collision with the Chinese Communists was unavoidable ultimately. This struggle could be resolved through use of the atomic bomb.

The most crucial issue concerned American perception of the likelihood of Chinese intervention. Conflicting opinions were expressed in September 1950. The Indian ambassador in Peking, K. M. Pannikar, at first thought the Chinese would not intervene and then changed his mind. American officials on the whole thought the Chinese would keep out because they had enough difficulty in consolidating their authority and in surmounting China's economic problems. The British government had reservations over crossing

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the thirty-eighth parallel and these were conveyed to General Bradley by Lord Tedder in early October.

The straws in the wind pointed to the wisdom of caution rather than audacity. Acheson had shown ire in the past year at Chinese maltreatment of Angus Ward and the takeover of consular property. Stueck identifies the departure of W. Walton Butterworth from the Department of State to the Stockholm embassy as perhaps the most significant element in the misreading of Chinese intentions because he was more tenacious yet also more flexible than Rusk and might well have successfully urged a more gradual response. Intelligence reports between October 8 and 14 revealed an appreciable build-up of Chinese forces but this was construed as bluff by some in Washington and Tokyo. At Wake Island MacArthur told Truman that China would not intervene and cited intelligence estimates on China's strength, which were very different from intelligence reaching the joint chiefs of staff a little later. By the second week in November sufficient evidence existed that China was intervening and that Chinese policy was no bluff.

The men in Washington were confronted with the immense prestige of MacArthur because of his brilliant achievement in the Inchon landing. MacArthur believed that the United States would be compelled to attack the Chinese mainland and that this would be accepted in Washington. Stueck fittingly remarks that the tragedy for Dean Acheson was that he failed to assert himself on this occasion and allowed MacArthur to dominate the situation, something Acheson bitterly regretted afterwards. In the Princeton seminars in 1954 Acheson frankly described Chinese participation in the Korean war as one of the greatest disasters in American foreign policy and certainly the worst catastrophe experienced by the Truman administration. The outcome was the more galling for Acheson who had been conscious in 1949–50 of the need to separate China from the Soviet Union.

Stueck comments that the United States still retained flexibility toward China before November 1950 but this underestimates the commitment to Taiwan, despite the efforts of Truman and Acheson to impose limits on that commitment, and developments since 1950 have shown abundantly the complications posed by Taiwan in the normalization of relations between Washington and Peking. Stueck provides an able analysis of the dilemmas facing the administration and concludes his essay with some interesting "ifs" that might have altered the American perception of Korean developments in November 1950.

John Kotch examines the origins of the American security commitment to Korea. The interminable arguments over how to end the war from July 1951 to July 1953 demonstrated the growing differences between the United States and South Korea. Relations with Rhee had often been tempestuous and became intensely so in this period because of Rhee's potent desire to see Korea unified militarily through the actions of the United Nations. On a number of occasions Rhee sought to sabotage peace talks, most blatantly through releasing prisoners of war in June 1953. General Eisenhower's victory in the 1952 presidential election meant that South Korea now had to deal with a Republican administration, which rendered it more awkward for Rhee's friends in Washington to act as they had done toward Truman and Acheson. American weariness with the protracted armistice talks had intensified and Eisenhower was determined the stalemate should not long continue. Washington decided to threaten withdrawal from Korea and to make an independent agreement with the Communists if Rhee remained obdurate. Thought was given to the possibility of inspiring a coup against Rhee. Ironically, however, Rhee's domestic position, which had often been shaky in the past, was now much strengthened since he enjoyed solid support in the national assembly and in the army. A further irony was that pressure for South Korean acceptance of an armistice was exerted by the improbable trio of Senators Knowland and Smith and Representative Walter Judd. Even Rhee was forced to recognize that he could go so far and no further. In his final statement he indicated that South Korea would not sign the truce but would not obstruct it. Kotch ends his essay with a careful assessment of the security treaty with South Korea and cites the operative clauses.

Barton Bernstein considers the exchanges over the Korean armistice. The American negotiators were not professional diplomats: Admiral Joy and his colleagues were somewhat naïve and obsessed with their hostility to communism. The acrid dispute over the freedom of prisoners of war to decline to return to North Korea or China was regarded as a fundamental moral principle by Truman and Acheson and one that could not be compromised. The Chinese felt too much emphasis was being put on the issue and that they had been misled over the basis on which the talks would proceed. The Americans were prepared to bomb the North Koreans into compromise but did not wish to use ground forces owing to the fear of large-scale casualties. The Communists did make the significant concession of recognizing that the thirty-eighth parallel need not be the armistice line.

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The North Korean and Chinese forces included men who had been forced to serve and wished to take the opportunity to escape. The Chinese troops included many who, until very recently, had supported the Chinese nationalists; some of these had become disillusioned with communism and had no desire to return to China. Similarly the North Koreans included some conscripted during the successful offensive south. On the other hand, prisoner of war camps were sometimes controlled by anti-Communists who could pressure others into proclaiming their wish to remain in the south or to go to Taiwan.

Truman was greatly frustrated, appreciating the impatience of the American people and the repercussions for the Democrats in 1952. Bernstein cites Truman's "secret thoughts" in which the president spoke of the temptations of using the atomic bomb against the Soviet Union and China. Too much significance should not be read into this, for we know only too well of Truman's peppery qualities and capacity to commit himself indiscreetly on paper. Conventional bombing was used against the Suiho plant late in June 1952 with additional bombing in May, July, and August 1952. Intensified attacks occurred in August 1952, urged by Kennan, now ambassador in Moscow; the timing coincided with a visit by Chou En-lai to Moscow. Little was achieved by the bombing and Britain and Canada wanted positive steps to end the war.

Bernstein remarks on the strange reversal of positions effected by the war: the United States had entered it to avert a greater threat to Europe yet Acheson was threatening that the European commitments might have to be reassessed unless Britain gave firm support. In fact this threat had already been made in tense Anglo-American exchanges in January 1951 over the UN motion condemning Chinese aggression, but Anglo-American unity was restored late in 1952 through Vyshinsky's maladroit condemnation of the Indian compromise proposal.

Eventually the armistice agreement was signed in July 1953 following the combined effects of Stalin's death, conventional bombing, and the implied threat to use the atomic bomb. A total of 82,500 prisoners of war (including 6,700 Chinese) chose repatriation while approximately 50,000 (including 14,700 Chinese) opted not to return to North Korea or China.

In the final contribution Jack Saunders provides a most useful account of the categories of papers available in the National Archives, Washington, for studying the antecedents and nature of the Korean war. The staff of the National Archives is, from the present

writer's experience, particularly helpful in advising on the most relevant material to see.

In conclusion, this volume is greatly to be welcomed. It gives a comprehensive survey of the Korean conflict and incorporates the latest research findings. The focus is strongly on American perceptions, but it would have been useful had there been more on both parts of Korea and how they evolved after 1945. There are, however, considerable problems in analyzing decisions in P'yongyang, Moscow, and Peking. Other aspects that ideally might have been covered would include the role of the United Nations itself before and after June 25, 1950, with reference to constituent bodies and secretariat. More might have been made of relations between the United States, Britain and the Commonwealth, and France. The extent of the friction in Anglo-American relations at various times, notably in December 1950-January 1951, is well worthy of study; the British archives in the Public Record Office, London (Kew) contain a great deal of interest in this context. It is, however, impossible for all these areas to be pursued and we may look forward to the future conferences—and their proceedings—in which these and other topics will be discussed. Bruce Cumings is to be congratulated on having edited an outstanding collection. This is one of the most important works to have appeared on the Korean war and will do much to clarify aspects that have been obscure hitherto.

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The Fall of Syngman Rhee By Quee-Young Kim [Kwi-yŏng Kim]. Research Monograph, no. 7. Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, 1983.

He who is not a radical at twenty does not have a heart; he who is still one at forty does not have a head.

S. M. Lipset[1]

The questions run a familiar gamut: Was it an "incident" *(sakŏn)*? Was it an "episode" *(sabhwa)* ? Was it a righteous "uprising" *(ŭigŏ)*? Was it a "revolution" *(hyŏngmyŏng)*? Their focus is *Sailgu*, the massive protest

1. Quoted in Ellis S. Krauss, *Japanese Radicals Revisited: Student Protest in Post-War Japan* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1974), p. xi.