

A War That Should Never Have Been Necessary, the Division of an Ancient People Against Their Will

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Today, June 25th, 2015, marks the 65th anniversary of the North Korean invasion of South Korea, in a war that was to last over three years, kill 36,000 Americans and perhaps a million Koreans and 400,000 Chinese, as well as devastate a beautiful country. At the end, the Armistice had achieved nothing but a minor shift in the dividing line between the two Koreas to a new Demilitarized Zone nearby. As the leading South Korean General, Paik Sun Yup, said later: "The war accomplished nothing but a more permanent division of our country after drenching the Korean peninsula in blood."

That war might never have happened but for two terrible decisions by American leaders, first in 1905, to allow the Japanese (hereditary enemies of the Koreans) to occupy Korea; and second, in 1945, to allow the Soviet Union, another country with designs on Korea as a satellite communist country, to occupy the northern half without consulting any Koreans. It was predictable what would happen. The Russians installed Kim Il Sung as dictator, trained his army of hardened veterans of years of war against the Japanese and Chinese in Manchuria, gave him first-rate weapons and left the country in 1948. We countenanced the dictatorship of Syngman Rhee in South Korea and, fearing that he would invade North Korea, gave him only defensive weapons. We then left the country in 1948, leaving behind a few military advisors.

Like the Vietnamese, whom we had also divided in 1945, to our eternal damnation, the Koreans were one people, not two. The North Koreans, with help from the Soviets in 1950, had the same aspiration of the North Vietnamese under Ho Chi Minh... to reunite their country. Kim Il Sung not only had Soviet backing, but 150 T-34 tanks, against which neither

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the South Koreans nor the first three U.S. Divisions to arrive in Korea had the means of stopping. There is no question but that Kim Il Sung would have taken all of South Korea in a few weeks had not Harry Truman got an immediate Resolution from the UN Security Council, condemning the invasion and asking all UN members to go to South Korea's assistance. Some three U.S. divisions and a Marine Brigade were in Korea by August 1st, defending a shrinking Pusan Perimeter. U.S. naval and airpower were pounding the lengthening North Korean supply lines. It was a close thing.

General MacArthur, now commanding the armed forces of 16 nations as well as the shattered South Korean army, then won a smashing victory, landing the Marines at Inchon and taking Seoul in two weeks, reinstating Syngman Rhee.

But then came another great decision, reminiscent of the terrible betrayals of the Koreans in 1905 and 1945. With little knowledge of the new China under Mao Tse Tung, ignoring Mao's warning, Truman and MacArthur elected to send U.S. troops across the 38th Parallel and on to the Yalu, Korea's historic border with China. Hundreds of thousands of Chinese crossed the Yalu at night, hid in the forests and villages of North Korea during the days, and in November, administered a shocking defeat to both Marines and UN forces, driving them south well into central South Korea.

The war would last until July 27, 1953, ensuring the continuing division of the Korean peoples. We would extend our nuclear shield to protect South Korea's burgeoning economy. North Korea would endure an ever-closed-in-society and now possesses between four and ten nuclear weapons.

The Korean civilization is centuries older than ours. The size and shape of the Korean peninsula is much like that of California: 900 miles from north to south, but not as wide. It is divided by the same 38th Parallel that passes through Marin County. Its mountains and countryside are fully as beautiful as the Sierra Nevada and the remaining rural countryside of Northern California. Seoul is larger than any California city save the greater Los Angeles area. Its towering skyscrapers and apartments are within easy artillery range of the North Korean forces across the DMZ.

I was lucky, as a 23-year-old Marine, to survive some close combat in Korea, and luckier still to get to Pyongyang in 2014 and meet with a North Korean Lieutenant General who had been a 17-year-old machine gunner in the same mountains where he had been wounded three times and me twice. We talked of what we had seen and done, realized that we may well have shot at each other 63 years earlier, embraced and saluted each other and agreed that we hoped our grandchildren would never have to fight a war. It was a wonderful healing for me, and I hope it gave him the thought that not all Americans hated all North Koreans.

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If the people of the two Koreas, all of whom desire reunification, reach out to each other, and if the United States could extend the hand of friendship to both, it could be that another war need never be fought.

America, having been responsible for approving the cruel Japanese occupation for forty years, and casually allowing the division of the country in 1945, should lead the way in working towards reconciliation no matter how daunting the task.

Blessed be the peacemakers.