



THE AMERICAN PRESS AND THE COLD WAR

The Rise of Authoritarianism in South Korea, 1945–1954

OLIVER ELLIOTT



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Oliver Elliott
Independent Scholar
Barcelona, Spain

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|---------|---|
| AMG | American Military Government |
| AP | Associated Press |
| CIA | Central Intelligence Agency |
| DOS | Department of State |
| DPRK | Democratic People's Republic of Korea |
| FRUS | Foreign Relations of the United States |
| INS | International News Service |
| KMAG | Korean Military Advisory Group |
| KPP | Korean Pacific Press |
| NARA | National Archives and Records Administration |
| NYPL | New York Public Library |
| OSS | Office of Strategic Services |
| ROK | Republic of Korea |
| ROKA | Republic of Korea Army |
| SCAP | Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers |
| UNCURK | United Nations Commission for the Unification and Rehabilitation of Korea |
| UNTCOK | United Nations Temporary Commission on Korea |
| UP | United Press |
| USAMGIK | United States Army Military Government in Korea |

A NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

This book includes both Chinese and Korean names. Both languages have multiple systems of Romanization. Thus, in order to avoid confusion, the book uses the older spellings of names that were in common use in the American press in the 1940s and 1950s.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

The right of the press to scrutinize government is a foundational element of American democracy. Yet, from the very first days of the American Republic, there have been major tensions over the freedom of the press to criticize government, especially in its conduct of foreign affairs.¹ As the United States has become more interventionist overseas, these tensions have become both more visible and more controversial. During the Vietnam War, the role of the press became a highly politicized issue, with critics, including President Richard Nixon, accusing journalists of losing the war on the home front.² In the wake of subsequent interventions in the Middle East and elsewhere, the question of whether the press has been too supportive or critical of US foreign policy continues to inspire much public and academic debate.³

This book sits within a subset of this literature which explores how the press has dealt with one of the most controversial aspects of US foreign policy: its history of close relations with authoritarian allies. From the very beginning of the Cold War era, the United States supported repressive anti-communist governments across the world as part of the strategy of containment against global communism.⁴ Amongst the most significant and controversial of these alliances was the United States' pivotal role in establishing and supporting the Republic of Korea (ROK). Between 1945 and 1948, the United States occupied the southern half of the Korean peninsula and paved the way to its becoming an independent state under the leadership of President Syngman Rhee. An ardent anti-communist and

Korean nationalist who had spent over 30 years in exile in the United States, Rhee used his control of Korean security forces to repress virtually all dissenting political voices and to progressively undermine the power of the elected National Assembly. During and after the Korean War, the authoritarianism of the South Korean government continued to grow, even as it became the beneficiary of one of the largest foreign aid programs in US history.⁵

This book provides an account of how the American press reported on these developments. Rather than focusing on just the Korean War, the volume follows the trend of recent scholarship to look at the roots of authoritarianism in the occupation period. Historians such as Bruce Cumings and Allan Millett have compellingly argued that the United States made major errors in the development and implementation of policy in Korea, and that the negative consequences of these errors were quite visible in the often savage political, social and economic climate of the occupation.⁶ Could the press have done more to bring these mistakes to light? Did the press fail to act as an adequate check on US government power in Korea?

These are questions that have rarely been asked by historians. This project is the first archive-based account of how American journalism responded to one of the most significant stories in the history of American foreign relations. It explores not only why no major controversy ever erupted over American involvement in South Korea during this period, but also how journalists conceived of the problem of authoritarianism within the larger frameworks of the occupation and the Korean War.

THE AMERICAN PRESS AND RHEE-ERA SOUTH KOREA

This book is the first scholarly study of press coverage of South Korea during the Rhee era.⁷ It also the first study to examine any aspect of coverage of Korea in the years between the start of the occupation in 1945 and the onset of the Korean War in 1950. While the literature examining press coverage of the Korean War is relatively sizeable, it has generally focused on how journalists covered US combat operations and other US-centric aspects of the war.⁸ Very little attention has been paid to the way the press wrote about South Korea or its government.

To an extent, this dearth of scholarship simply reflects the limitations of coverage of South Korea during the wartime period. In the most comprehensive study of the relationship between the US government and the

press during the war, Steven Casey concluded that journalists showed a remarkable lack of interest in probing South Korean politics.⁹ In his view, both US authorities and American journalists played a role in suppressing coverage that exposed uncomfortable truths about the regime the United States was fighting to save. In part, this was because the US government, and most journalists, interpreted the war as a Cold War struggle, and not a civil conflict. Moreover, the US military's public relations programs encouraged journalists to ignore problems with the ROK and focus on more positive stories about the US-ROK relationship. As a result, the press chose to overlook allegations of South Korean atrocities and President Syngman Rhee's repression of the ROK's National Assembly until these issues became impossible to ignore.

Similar conclusions were reached by other notable scholars of the Korean War. In his seminal, albeit flawed, history of the origins of the Korean War, Bruce Cumings argued that most correspondents in Korea shared the military's "nauseating stew of racial stereotypes" which perceived little virtue in the Koreans and their affairs.¹⁰ He also contended that American reporters, unlike some of their British counterparts, were simply "afraid to print what they witnessed in Korea."¹¹ Philip Knightley argued, in his celebrated history of war journalism, that the anti-communist patriotism of most American reporters in Korea drove them to ignore the horrendous impact of the war on the Korean population.¹²

While the South Korean people were often given short shrift by the press during the war, the same was not true of their leader, Syngman Rhee. In the 1950s, Rhee became a heroic figure for the American Right and received adoring profiles in popular magazines such as *Time* and *Reader's Digest*. Robert E. Herzstein has shown how Rhee benefitted from a friendly, albeit mercurial, relationship with *Time* publisher and China lobbyist Henry Luce.¹³ In a study of American perceptions of South Vietnamese president Ngo Dinh Diem, Seth Jacobs argued that both Rhee and Diem, as well as nationalist Chinese leader Chiang Kai-Shek, embodied exactly the kind of Christian, pro-American and anti-communist strongman that many on the Right believed the United States needed as a bulwark against Soviet and Chinese expansionism.¹⁴ Yet, Rhee was in some ways quite distinct from his fellow East Asian autocrats. When it was founded in 1948, the ROK was a constitutional democracy with a political system loosely modelled on that of France. Although Rhee had considerable power as president, he depended on the independent-minded National Assembly to pass legislation and, at least in theory, to re-elect him

as president after the end of his four-year term. While Rhee progressively undermined these democratic elements of the political system over the course of his presidency, his pro-democracy rhetoric and credentials were key parts of his appeal in the United States.

The literature's focus on Rhee's right-wing supporters has obscured both the scale and the vehemence of criticism of Syngman Rhee from other voices in the United States. Even before he became president of the ROK, Rhee was a major figure of hate for both liberals and the Left. Magazines such as the *Nation* persistently attacked Rhee for his reactionary anti-communist ideology and his role in polarizing Korean society. Reporters for mainstream newspapers with a liberal internationalist point of view, such as the *Chicago Daily News* and the *Christian Science Monitor*, often described Rhee as an extremist and a brutally repressive autocrat. During the years of the American occupation, an influential group of American journalists fiercely opposed Rhee's rise to power under American auspices. Amongst a significant proportion of the American intellectual elite, Rhee was regarded as a dictator.¹⁵

Despite his significance within the history of US foreign relations, Rhee's relationship with the United States has been neglected in the existing English language literature. Although studies of US relations with authoritarian allies in this period have recently begun to appear in significant number, the Rhee regime has so far failed to attract much interest from historians.¹⁶ No full English-language biography of Rhee has been published since 1960.¹⁷ In histories of the Korean War and its origins, the Rhee regime's controversial status is often alluded to without elaboration.¹⁸ Few scholars have drawn attention to Rhee's obsession with public relations; indeed, Rhee probably dedicated more attention to his image in the United States than any foreign leader in American history. South Korea's entire diplomatic strategy throughout much of the late 1940s and 1950s was fixated on gaining the support of the American public. As Stephen Jin-Woo Kim observed in a study of South Korean foreign policy in the late 1950s: "In place of soldiers, weapons and dollars, Korean officials employed press conferences, lobbying, demonstrations, and the threat of national collapse to implement their singular strategy of miring the United States in Korea."¹⁹ Although this strategy was first deployed by Rhee in the years of occupation, Rhee's public lobbying efforts have received only passing mention in scholarly accounts of US–Korean relations between 1945 and 1954.²⁰

Much of what is known about Rhee's public relations strategy comes from the memoir of former Rhee lobbyist Robert T. Oliver. A professor of rhetoric and speech studies at a series of colleges in the northeast of the United States, Oliver spent 18 years, from 1942 to 1960, moonlighting as Rhee's director of public relations activities in the United States. As part of this work, he published a series of books on the history of the ROK, and a biography of Rhee, for the popular press. Almost two decades after the fall of the Rhee regime, he published a memoir of his time working for Rhee.²¹ Oliver claimed that both American policy-makers and the press reduced the issues in Korea to "oversimplified clichés," with Rhee portrayed as an "extreme rightist" in spite of his supposedly liberal socio-economic views.²² After taking power in 1948, Oliver wrote that Rhee faced a crippling and unjustified barrage of savage criticism for his allegedly totalitarian treatment of the Korean people. Oliver thus portrayed Rhee as a perennial underdog without any major constituency of support in the United States.

Former Tokyo-based reporter Hugh Deane offered a very different interpretation in his memoir published in 1999. A correspondent for the *Nation* and several other left-wing newspapers, Deane recalled that the media portrayed the "Rhee quasi-dictatorship" as a "praiseworthy young democracy valiantly confronting a despotic Soviet puppet in the north."²³ He put the blame for this misrepresentation, at least in part, on the "frigidly Cold War" atmosphere in Korea, with journalists expected to write in support of the fervently anti-communist stance of the American authorities.²⁴ Deane claimed that only a handful of reporters wrote honestly about what they saw—although Deane neither explored the question of how or why their reporting was distinct, nor the methods the authorities used to control the rest of the press. The stark differences in Oliver and Deane's accounts of the same events reflect the need for scholarly synthesis.

Finally, it is important to outline the broader debate in which much of the literature on US–South Korean relations in this period has been framed. Since the 1970s, a "revisionist" approach to the Korean War has emphasized the Korean civil war roots of the conflict and the negative role played by the United States.²⁵ In recent years, this literature has focused on American complicity in acts of extreme violence, most notably the brutal crackdowns on uprisings on the island of Cheju in the late 1940s and atrocities against civilians during the Korean War.²⁶ Although the scale and culpability of the United States for these incidents remains contentious, most historians accept that they represent a dark stain on the record of

American involvement in Korea. Even historians who have been relatively complimentary towards US policy have argued that better approaches could have been found if there had been sufficient “wisdom, vision and courage.”²⁷

This book adds to this debate in several ways. Most obviously, it shows why incidents and problems identified by revisionist scholars never emerged as significant political issues in the United States. This book also helps to build a much more nuanced picture of the prejudices and biases that informed reporting. While the press has long been exploited by scholars as a key source of insight into this period, it has rarely been studied as an independent actor in its own right. Finally, through the use of Syngman Rhee’s papers, the book helps to shine a light on an aspect of the American intervention in Korea which is all too often ignored: the role played by South Koreans in shaping American perceptions of their country.

STUDYING THE AMERICAN PRESS

This study is primarily an investigation into the production processes of press coverage.²⁸ It explores the political, military, institutional, cultural, ideological and personal factors that influenced American journalists working in both South Korea and the United States. In emphasizing these factors, the book avoids the tendency, notably criticized by historian Chris Daly, of much journalism history to focus on “doggedly empirical” accounts of how X covered Y with little connection to other historical fields.²⁹ Instead, this book shows that journalism can only be properly understood in the context of the wider political and cultural forces in American society.

Much of the scholarly literature looking at the press and US foreign relations during the early Cold War has focused on the growing influence of the US government. In the middle decades of the twentieth century, American political leaders developed a range of powerful public relations tools—including press briefings, interviews, conferences, speeches, and the withholding and leaking of crucial information—to set the media agenda and even co-opt journalists into becoming cheerleaders for government policy.³⁰ After World War II, government bureaucracies, including the military, the Department of State, and the occupation governments in the Far East, dedicated significant resources to public relations.³¹ By the time of the Korean War, the Truman administration was able to deploy these sophisticated media management apparatuses to build public sup-

port for the war and the mobilization of the country onto a militarized Cold War footing.³²

A crucial enabling factor in the government's media management capabilities were the institutional structures and professional norms of the press. In the 1940s, American journalism was dominated by the ethic of "objectivity," the expectation that reporters use attributable and reliable sources as the basis for their stories. Government sources were naturally treated as the pre-eminent source of legitimate news and information. This coincided with the development of the culture of "pack" reporting in which groups of journalists tended to cover the same beats and build strong personal relationships with the officials who provided them with stories.³³

The ties between journalists and the government officials grew even stronger following the onset of the Cold War. In a study of coverage of the Vietnam War, Daniel Hallin argued that the perceived existential threat posed by communism led American journalists to make a kind of unofficial pact with the government in their coverage of national security issues: "Journalists gave up the right to speak with a political voice of their own, and in turn they were granted a regular right of access to the inner counsels of government."³⁴ The consequence of this symbiosis between the press and the political establishment was a decline in the range of stories and opinions that could be freely discussed by the media—what Hallin labelled as the "sphere of legitimate controversy." Those journalists who breached the boundaries of acceptable reporting risked permanently isolating themselves from the political establishment and fatally sabotaging their own careers.

Hallin's findings have been confirmed by several similar studies, yet they share some common limitations; most importantly, a focus on just one or two prestigious news outlets—in particular, the *New York Times* or the *Washington Post*.³⁵ In a wide-ranging survey of press coverage of four foreign policy crises during the Kennedy administration, Montague Kern, Patricia W. Levering and Ralph B. Levering demonstrated the heterogeneity of American press coverage of foreign policy issues. The authors showed that although President Kennedy often had a privileged position as newsmaker-in-chief, he nonetheless was just one voice amongst many in the public debate over foreign policy issues.³⁶ Other sources quoted by journalists included foreign sources, non-administration political sources, interest groups, the general public and sources within the press, such as influential columnists. The degree of emphasis put on these different

sources varied with each newspaper; key variables included the geographical location of the newspaper, the demographics of its readership and the political inclinations of its publishers.

This book takes this approach further in several ways. Rather than sampling a small number of newspapers, it explores the trends in coverage throughout the entire American press. It also broadens the scope of its investigation to not only look at the press through the institution of the newspaper, but also at the journalists doing the reporting. It thus follows in the tradition of historians such as Kendrick Oliver, David Engerman and Deborah Lipstadt, who have shown how ideological frameworks and professional practices led individual reporters to ignore or marginalize significant international stories.³⁷

Journalists covering Korea in the 1940s and 1950s found themselves in a particularly challenging moment of professional and ideological flux. World War II had created a generation of reporters accustomed to working closely with military and political authorities in support of the war effort. Although most journalists regarded themselves as fiercely patriotic, their relationship with military authority varied considerably. While some correspondents saw the American military occupations of Japan and Korea as continuations of the war effort, and thus deserving of the complete support of American reporters, others regarded American military authorities as little better than the authoritarian regimes they were replacing.³⁸

Reporters also had very different perceptions of their own autonomy and professional responsibilities. Virtually all reporters strove for objectivity, although opinions differed as what this meant in practice. Earnest Hoberecht, a correspondent with the United Press news service (UP), wrote in his memoir that, in his experience, all correspondents were “obsessed with the idea of getting the truth. They want the facts. They want to get behind the false front.”³⁹ Marguerite Higgins framed the pursuit of truth as a necessary part of holding the government to account for its misdeeds and failures.⁴⁰ In her memoir of the military disasters that befell US forces in the first months of the Korean War, Higgins argued that “as long as our government requires the backing of an aroused and informed public opinion it is necessary to tell the hard bruising truth.”⁴¹ Yet, journalists were also engaged in a competitive race for news; indeed, a reporter’s career depended first and foremost on finding good stories and major scoops.⁴² While a handful of reporters developed stories through investigative reporting and penetrating analysis of the activities of the occupation regimes, most relied on the authorities for tips and leads on big stories.

The political and cultural values of American society also heavily shaped the way journalists wrote about Korea. This was most directly and obviously manifested in the constant demands from editors in the United States for certain kinds of stories that reflected the interests and values of readers, such as accounts of American servicemen in action and human-interest pieces. But, on a more fundamental level, every journalist who went to the Far East also carried a set of ideological assumptions. Most Americans believed that the US model of liberal democracy was superior to that of any other political system. They shared an instinctual dislike of authoritarianism, although a fuzzy distinction was often made between the pragmatic political authoritarianism of a country such as South Korea and the indefensible totalitarianism of the communist world.⁴³

Many journalists struggled to come to terms with the gap between their liberal democratic ideals and the political realities they encountered in Asia. The collapse of Chiang Kai-Shek's corrupt and highly authoritarian Chinese nationalist regime in the late 1940s was a sobering reminder that democracy did not necessarily take root wherever the United States intervened.⁴⁴ Indeed, it was not entirely clear if democracy in Asia was something the United States wanted to encourage. Neither had it been forgotten that populist mass movements had brought into power both the Nazi and Soviet regimes, nor that the governments installed by the Soviet Union in eastern Europe and North Korea referred to themselves as "democratic republics." With its vast, uneducated and desperately poor population, Asia represented particularly fertile ground for communism. After World War II, it appeared quite plausible that communists could co-opt Japan's wartime rhetoric of "Asia for the Asiatics" to build up a populist anti-Western movement capable of seizing power in post-colonial states.⁴⁵

Americans sought pro-Western native elites who could channel these racial and nationalistic sentiments into less threatening political movements. They were generally not expected to establish participatory democracies in the mold of Western nations. Instead, fidelity to political procedure and constitutional order were regarded as the key measures of democratic development.⁴⁶ In South Korea, this was manifested through intensive coverage of elections in 1948 and 1950. Large numbers of correspondents flew in to write detailed accounts of the procedural quality of elections, but few stayed around long enough to judge the actual experience of life under the autocratic Rhee regime.

Few journalists in this era conceived of human rights or even large-scale civilian suffering as something of interest to the American public. Sehr Conway-Lenz has shown how the topic of civilian deaths during the Korean War was largely ignored due to the widespread notion that the death of non-combatants was an inevitable, if unfortunate, part of modern warfare.⁴⁷ In Korea, this disregard for suffering was further amplified by American racial prejudice. According to historian John Tirman, most Americans believed Korean society was too primitive to operate by the liberal and humanistic values found in the United States.⁴⁸ In Asia, many Americans thought, human life was simply considered less valuable than in the West.

While racial prejudice undoubtedly influenced Americans writing about South Korea, its impact was also complex. In the academic literature, much of the debate around racial prejudice has been framed around Edward Said's theory of Orientalism, which posits that writers and artists in the West have systematically corrupted perceptions of the non-Western world through the recycling of simplistic and offensive colonial stereotypes.⁴⁹ In Said's understanding, European civilization has divided the world into two clearly defined and mutually exclusive categories of "West" and "East," or "us" and "them," where the West represents rationality and masculinity, and the East weakness, irrationality, femininity and childishness.⁵⁰ Despite Said's many errors in facts and his selective use of evidence, his basic claim that Western writers often framed their perceptions of the East in highly ideological and racial terms remains a crucial insight.⁵¹

In one of the most successful attempts to refine Orientalism in the context of American perceptions of East Asia, Christina Klein showed how the rejection of scientific racism in the early twentieth century actually encouraged the United States to develop positive relationships with the peoples of Asia, based on bonds of toleration and ethnic inclusivity.⁵² Through an "imaginary of integration," the United States sought to modernize "backward" Asia using cultural exchange rather than colonial exploitation. Cultural prejudices were thus reconfigured in such a way as to justify American interventionism as a paternalistic and non-exploitative liberal project.

In the late 1940s and 1950s, this ambition to modernize Asia went hand-in-hand with the fear of the spread of communism. Some scholars have suggested that, as tensions escalated between the United States and the Soviet Union after World War II, the American media system restructured itself around the ideology of anti-communism. Noam Chomsky and

Edward S. Herman suggested that self-interested capitalist media owners put heavy pressure on editorial staff to condemn communist ideology and to write sympathetically about US foreign policy.⁵³ These pressures could often be indirect and even unconscious: editors might, for instance, decline to run a story in order to avoid upsetting advertisers or readers who had become accustomed to “propagandistic” news values. While Chomsky and Herman’s “propaganda model” was simplistic, it captured the fundamental dynamics at work in the corporate media in the late 1940s and 1950s. From the late 1940s onwards, virtually the entire press presented communism as an existential threat to the United States and its free world allies.⁵⁴ Left-leaning journalists found it increasingly difficult to find work as the left-wing press collapsed and mainstream news outlets sought to avoid accusations of harboring communists.

However, even at the height of Senator Joseph McCarthy’s witch-hunts in the early 1950s, major political divisions still existed on foreign policy issues, including the US commitment to Korea. McCarthy himself was sympathetic to isolationism and rarely spoke about the Korean War beyond the occasional attack on Truman and his Secretary of State Dean Acheson for blundering into a war which had cost thousands of young American lives.⁵⁵ While anti-communism undoubtedly narrowed the range of views that could be publicly expressed, debate, opposition and dissent remained key parts of American public culture.

ARGUMENT

This book argues that five major factors influenced press coverage of South Korean authoritarianism. The first and most fundamental factor was the marginalization of South Korean affairs through the dominance of anti-Korean and Cold War press narratives. These narratives were greatly strengthened by four other discrete phenomena: the deference of most journalists to American authorities, the major constraints put on reporting by American military authorities, the increasing effectiveness of the Syngman Rhee regime in its public relations activities and the low level of US political interest in the situation in South Korea for most of the period covered by this study.

The anti-Korean narrative emerged in the first year of the occupation of Korea. Prior to World War II, the press had little knowledge of, or interest in, Korea, which was then regarded as an obscure part of the Japanese Empire. After the Cairo Conference made Korean independence an

explicit goal of the war in 1943, the press accepted the view of most American experts that Koreans were a primitive and servile colonial people who would require a lengthy period of foreign trusteeship before being ready for independence.

Following the division of Korea into American and Soviet spheres of occupation, Korean society rapidly polarized into leftist and rightist camps, while the American-occupied zone suffered intense social and economic strife. The small American press corps in Seoul largely ignored these problems due to their lack of interest in Korean affairs and their close connections with the American military government. Attempts by a handful of visiting liberal journalists to reveal the true extent of the problems in the American-occupied zone were aggressively suppressed by both the American Military Government (AMG) in Seoul and the military government in Japan. As the situation continued to deteriorate, observers became increasingly fatalistic about the situation: Korea was a tragic mess in which the United States could do little to alter the course of events.

This situation only began to shift in the autumn of 1947, when the United States handed responsibility for southern Korea's future to the United Nations. At this moment, it became clear that Syngman Rhee, the leading rightist political figure in American-occupied Korea, was destined to become president of an independent South Korean state. Years of lobbying by Rhee and his supporters in the United States paid off when a handful of right-wing American press outlets began to give Rhee their backing as a bulwark against Soviet expansionism. This laid the basis for the second major press narrative explored in this book: the Cold War narrative.

As relations between the United States and the Soviet Union deteriorated in the late 1940s, the two occupation zones in the Korean peninsula emerged as separate states. The America-occupied zone became the ROK, a fervently anti-communist democratic republic. Although the ROK appeared just as the Cold War was entering its hottest phase in Europe, it was not until the onset of the Korean War that the press fully accepted Korea as an important part of the global Cold War. Over the course of the war, the astonishing rebirth of the South Korean army and Syngman Rhee's highly public anti-communist stance helped the country re-establish itself as a crucial ally against communism in Asia.

A key argument of this book is that these were not the only narratives that were available. During the occupation period, an eclectic group of Americans and Koreans criticized the fatalistic and anti-Korean mind-set

of many Americans in Korea, and argued that the United States could make a significant positive impact if it adopted a different approach. In the early days of the occupation, a group of Tokyo-based correspondents became ardent critics of the American military governments in both Japan and Korea. They were horrified by the AMG's tacit support for the persecution of leftist elements by followers of Syngman Rhee and other leading rightists. However, the tight military controls on the press made it extremely difficult for correspondents to report on these developments.

In the years between the establishment of the ROK and the onset of the Korean War, the liberal critique of the ROK regime came close to becoming the dominant narrative. The ROK was beset by political, economic and military problems. Mass arrests of dissidents and government suppression of the Korean media received widespread coverage. Following the defeat of the Chinese nationalists in the Chinese Civil War in 1949, many observers predicted that South Korea's corrupt and reactionary government was destined for a similar fate.

After the onset of the Korean War in 1950, several critical narratives emerged and then fell by the wayside. During the first month of the war, many commentators pondered whether the Rhee regime was too unpopular to survive the North Korean invasion. In the summer and autumn of 1950, Americans were shocked by a series of reports of atrocities committed by South Korean police and military units against civilians. In 1952, a handful of American reporters accused Rhee of dictatorship when he arrested his opponents in the National Assembly and used violent force to force them to support a constitutional amendment which effectively removed the last checks on his power as president. However, none of these narratives gained significant political traction in the United States. Press coverage of these incidents was too fleeting and the focus on the broader Cold War aspects of the conflict too strong. By the time the war ended in 1953, few observers bothered to comment on the authoritarianism of the ROK regime.

SOURCES

This book takes advantage of several archival sources which have never before been used by historians working on American press coverage of South Korea. Amongst the most significant are the papers of the AMG in Korea, and the papers of General James Van Fleet and Syngman Rhee. They have been supplemented with material from many other archives,

including the Truman and Eisenhower presidential libraries; State Department records at the National Archives and Records Administration; the institutional archives of Associated Press, *Time* and the *New York Times*; and the personal papers of many of the key figures mentioned in this book.

It is necessary, however, to note the fragmentary nature of much of the archival material. The inconsistent nature of the US commitment to Korea is very much reflected in the records available in official government archives. The period from 1948 to 1950, when the United States did not have a very significant bureaucratic presence in South Korea, is particularly poorly documented.⁵⁶ Newspaper and journalist archives have proven to be even more problematic. Few news organizations have publicly accessible archives and much of what is available is a very limited sampling of correspondence. A handful of journalists donated their personal papers to archives, yet the majority left nothing. Where possible, gaps have been filled using memoirs and published newspaper material to gain more insight into editorial decision-making and biographical details.

A further significant limitation on the source base for this book is its exclusive focus on English-language sources. While Korean-language archives undoubtedly contain material that could strengthen and enrich our understanding of how Koreans sought to influence American perceptions of their country, accessing them remains extremely challenging and there is little reason to believe that such material would fundamentally change the story told by this book. By far the most important Korean influence on the American press, Syngman Rhee and his US lobby carried out their internal communications in English. Although they are frustratingly incomplete, the Syngman Rhee papers provide a vital insight into how Koreans tried to influence public opinion in the United States.⁵⁷

STRUCTURE

The main body of the book is divided into seven chapters, arranged in chronological order. Chapters 2, 3, and 4 look at the period before the onset of the Korean War; the period of American occupation and the first two years of the existence of the ROK. Chapters 5, 6, 7, and 8 then explore the wartime period and its aftermath.

Chapter 2 begins by providing a general overview of coverage of the Korean situation prior to the start of the occupation. It then explores four major facets of coverage during the first year of the occupation: the

controversial start of the occupation, the AMG's co-option of the Seoul press corps, the attempts by a small group of Tokyo-based correspondents to draw attention to the severity of the crisis brewing in the country and, finally, the growing prominence of Syngman Rhee in the United States.

Chapter 3 looks at the period from December 1946 to August 1948. It begins by examining the battle in Washington between the AMG and Syngman Rhee for influence over American perceptions of the occupation regime and the possibility of a joint trusteeship with the Soviet Union. It then shifts focus back to Korea and the continued success of the AMG in suppressing hostile coverage of the occupation. In the winter of 1947, Rhee secured the backing of key right-wing publications in the United States, while a small number of liberal journalists made a desperate bid to prevent elections which they believed would usher in a reactionary authoritarian government in South Korea.

Chapter 4 shows how a sharp polarization of views of the ROK developed in the period between the creation of South Korea in 1948 and the onset of the Korean War in June 1950. Although the right-wing press greeted the establishment of the ROK with enthusiasm, a major uprising in October 1948 raised troubling questions regarding the stability of the new country. Over the course of 1949, the Rhee regime and the Truman administration struggled to convince critics that the ROK could avoid the fate of Chiang Kai-Shek's nationalist Chinese regime, while liberal correspondents drew attention to the political failings of the regime to an unprecedented extent. However, in the spring of 1950 a series of positive steps, most importantly the May 1950 elections, demonstrated that the regime was doing better than its critics had claimed.

In Chap. 5, the impact of the start of the Korean War on press perceptions of the ROK is examined. It shows how concerns over the unpopularity and controversial status of the regime were raised by the press during the first chaotic weeks of the war, but failed to gather significant momentum amidst the Cold War-centric press narrative of the crisis. While many journalists reported on ROK atrocities against civilians throughout the first six months of the war, these stories did not trigger a major outcry in the United States. Instead, the South Korean government's public relations officials effectively won over the press to their cause.

Chapter 6 explores press coverage of the worsening relationship between Rhee and the National Assembly during the Korean War, and the constitutional crisis that erupted in the summer of 1952. It shows how the majority of American media outlets treated Rhee's anti-democratic methods as,

at worst, only a mild provocation and gave the story marginal attention, reflecting the widespread sympathy for Rhee amongst the highest levels of the American media elite, the logistical challenges of reporting on the political situation in South Korea and a belief that South Korean domestic affairs were largely beyond the purview of the international community. Once the United States chose not to intervene in the crisis, the press re-framed the story around elements of Rhee's own self-justifying narrative.

Chapter 7 reveals how the press covered the collapse and rebirth of the ROK Army (ROKA). In one of the most dramatic developments of the Korean War, the ROKA recovered from almost total annihilation to become one of the world's most advanced military forces in just a few years. It shows how the press initially wrote about the ROKA from the highly critical perspective of American military officials. After May 1951, Eighth Army commander General James Van Fleet worked hard to publicize the greatly improved capability of the ROKA. By 1953, the ROKA's military prowess became a key part of the ROK's new image as a major Cold War ally for the United States.

Chapter 8 explores South Korea's image in the wake of the Korean War. It shows how Syngman Rhee became an ever more dominant figure in American perceptions of the ROK as a result of his high stakes diplomatic battle with the United States over the long-term future of the armistice. At the same time, Rhee worked with prominent American supporters of a more aggressive Cold War strategy to win the support of the American public for a resumption of the Korean War. Although this effort met with little success, Rhee established himself as a martyr figure in the eyes of many on the American Right. Finally, the chapter shows how American foreign correspondents covering South Korea faced growing political repression from the Rhee regime as he removed the last constitutional constraints on his rule.

NOTES

1. The often difficult relationship between the government and the press during major foreign policy crises is explored in detail in Ted Galen Carpenter, *The Captive Press: Foreign Policy Crises and the First Amendment* (Washington, DC: Cato Institute, 1995). For a general overview of the development of the American press, see Michael Emery, Edwin Emery and Nancy L. Roberts, *The Press and America: An Interpretive History of the Mass Media* (9th ed.) (New York: Pearson, 1997).

2. Peter Braestrup, *Big Story: How the American Press and Television Reported and Interpreted the Crisis of Tet 1968 in Vietnam and Washington, Volume 1* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1977); Robert S. Elegant, *How to Lose a War: The Press and Viet Nam* (Washington, DC: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1982). Both works produced a strong critical response from fellow Vietnam reporters: Peter Arnett, "Tet Coverage: A Debate Renewed," *Columbia Journalism Review*, Jan./Feb. 1978; Charles Mohr, "Once Again – Did the Press Lose Vietnam?," *Columbia Journalism Review*, Nov./Dec. 1983. For a more scholarly analysis, see Daniel C. Hallin, *The "Uncensored War": The Media and Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986). Left-wing critics claimed that the press did not go nearly far enough in questioning the rationale for the war: James Aronson, *Press and the Cold War* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1970), 103–26.
3. For critical assessments of coverage of particular interventions, see Steven Livingston, *When the Press Fails: Political Power and the News Media from Iraq to Katrina* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); Ernest Hakanen and Alexander Nikolaev, eds., *Leading to the 2003 Iraq War: The Global Media Debate* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); Philip M. Taylor, *War and the Media: Propaganda and Persuasion in the Gulf War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998). For more general overviews of coverage of US military interventions, see Susan Carruthers, *The Media at War* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Michael S. Sweeney, *The Military and the Press: An Uneasy Truce* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2006).
4. For more on the history of US support for right-wing authoritarian regimes, see David F. Schmitz, *Thank God They're on Our Side: The United States and Right-Wing Dictatorships, 1921–65* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1999); David F. Schmitz, *The United States and Right-Wing Dictatorships, 1965–1989* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006). For more background on the origins and development of containment as the basis of US strategy, see John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982).
5. One former US diplomat wrote that, by the mid-1950s, "No one dared threaten or seriously contend for rule. The institutions of democracy were either disregarded, overridden, corrupted or turned against themselves": Gregory Henderson, *The Politics of the Vortex* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968), 168. Many South Koreans today regard Rhee as the man responsible for dividing the peninsula and condemning the country to almost half a century of dictatorial rule: "Syngman Rhee's legacy still disputed," *Korea Times*, 27 July 2015, online http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2015/07/116_183581.html.

6. Bruce Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War, Vol. 1: Liberation and the Emergence of Separate Regimes, 1945–1947* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981); Bruce Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War, Vol. 2: The Roaring of the Cataract, 1947–1950* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981); Allan R. Millett, *The War for Korea, 1945–1950: A House Burning* (Lawrence, KA: University Press of Kansas, 2005). Similar arguments have also been made about the growing authoritarianism of the wartime period, although it has been far less studied: Edward C. Keefer, “South Korean Political Crisis of 1952: Democracy’s Failure?,” *Pacific Historical Review* 60, no. 2 (1991), 145–68.
7. Several studies have looked at other periods of US press coverage of Korea. Journalists and academics contributed to a volume on press coverage of Korea during the transition to democracy in the late 1980s: *First Drafts of Korea: The U.S. Media and Perceptions of the Last Cold War Frontier*, ed. by Donald A. L. Macintyre, Daniel C. Sneider and Gi-Wook Shin (Stanford, CA: Walter H. Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center Books, 2009). Patrick Chung wrote about reporting of civil rights issues in South Korea in the 1970s: Patrick Chung, “‘The Pictures in Our Heads’: Journalists, Human Rights, and US–South Korean Relations, 1970–1976,” *Diplomatic History* 38, no. 5 (2014), 1136–55. Jimin Kim’s Ph.D. thesis explored journalistic perceptions of Korea during the Japanese colonial period: Jimin Kim, “Representing the Invisible: The American Perceptions of Colonial Korea” (Unpublished Ph.D. Diss.: Columbia University, 2011). Brandon K. Gauthier has written about media portrayals of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) during the 1950s: Brandon K. Gauthier, “A Tortured Relic: The Lasting Legacy of the Korean War and Portrayals of ‘North Korea’ in the U.S. Media, 1953–1962,” *Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 22, no. 4 (2015), 343–67.
8. Studies which have looked at US-centric aspects of press coverage include Steven Casey, “Wilfred Burchett and the UN Command’s Media Relations during the Korean War, 1951–52,” *Journal of Military History* 74, no. 3 (2010), 821–45; John Jenks, “Consorting with the Enemy: American Reporters and ‘Red Sources’ at the Korean Truce Talks, 1951–1953,” *Journal of Conflict Studies* 22 (2002); Dane J. Cash, “The Forgotten Debate: American Political Opinion Journals and the Korean War, 1950–1953” (Unpublished Ph.D. Diss., Boston University, 2012); Sun-A Kim, “Life and War in Korea: Photographic Portrayals of the Korean War in Life Magazine, July 1950–August 1953” (Unpublished Ph.D. Diss.: University of Missouri-Colombia, 2008); Mason Edward Horrell, “Reporting the ‘Forgotten War’: Military-Press Relations in Korea 1950–1954” (Unpublished Ph.D. Diss.: University of Kentucky, 2002). The only general history of foreign affairs journalism barely mentioned coverage of

- Korea: John Maxwell Hamilton, *Journalism's Roving Eye: A History of American Foreign Reporting* (Baton Rouge, LO: Louisiana State University Press, 2009). John Hohenberg's narrative account of the careers of the most celebrated American foreign reporters provided little analysis of broader trends in coverage: John Hohenberg, *Foreign Correspondence: Great Reporters and Their Times* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1995). Philip Knightley offered a more insightful yet largely anecdotal account of war journalism in Korea: Phillip Knightley, *The First Casualty: The War Correspondent as Hero and Myth-Maker from the Crimea to Iraq* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), chap. 14. The chapter on Korea in James Aronson's history of the press during the Cold War has to be read in the context of his status as a trenchant left-wing critic of the war: Aronson, *Press and the Cold War*, 103–26. Korean War coverage has also been explored as part of bigger trends in American cultural history: Andrew J. Huebner, *Warrior Image: Soldiers in American Culture from the Second World War to the Vietnam Era* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2008); Susan Carruthers, *Cold War Captives* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008); Tom Engelhardt, *The End of Victory Culture: Cold War America and the Disillusioning of a Generation* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2007); Lisle A. Rose, *The Cold War Comes to Main Street: America in 1950* (Lawrence, KA: University Press of Kansas, 1999).
9. Steven Casey, *Selling the Korean War: Propaganda, Politics, and Public Opinion in the United States, 1950–1953* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 350.
 10. Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War, Vol. 2: The Roaring of the Cataract, 1947–1950*, 696. Cumings' work has received much criticism for its overtly polemical critique of US foreign policy in the 1940s. For a more detailed examination of the historiographical debate, see William Stueck, "The Korean War as History: David Rees' Korea: The Limited War in Retrospect," Conference on "The Power of Free Inquiry and Cold War International History," National Archives II, September 1998, <http://www.nara.gov/research/coldwar/coldwar.html>.
 11. Cumings, 701. He re-stated these views in his most recent book on the Korean War: Bruce Cumings, *The Korean War: A History* (New York: Modern Library, 2011). Apart from a brief discussion in Chap. 4, this book does not look at coverage of Korea by non-American correspondents. Australian coverage of Korea has received significant scholarly attention in several books: Fay Anderson and Richard Trembath, *Witnesses to War: The History of Australian Conflict Reporting* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Publishing, 2011); Prue Torney-Parlicki, *Somewhere in Asia:*

- War, Journalism and Australia's Neighbours 1941–75* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2000).
12. Knightley, *The First Casualty: The War Correspondent as Hero and Myth-Maker from the Crimea to Iraq*, 389.
 13. Robert E. Herzstein, *Henry R. Luce, Time, and the American Crusade in Asia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 114–16.
 14. Seth Jacobs, *America's Miracle Man in Vietnam* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2004), 122–4.
 15. Many scholars of South Korean politics have agreed with the assessment that Rhee was a dictator, or at the very least highly authoritarian. See, for instance, Jinwung Kim, *A History of Korea: From "Land of the Morning Calm" to States in Conflict* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2012), 400; J. B. Palais, "'Democracy' in South Korea, 1948–1972," in *Without Parallel: The American–Korean Relationship Since 1945*, ed. by Frank Baldwin (New York: Pantheon, 1974), 318–57; Süng-ju Han, *The Failure of Democracy in South Korea* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1974); John Kie-Chiang Oh, *Korea: Democracy on Trial* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1968).
 16. David Schmitz explored how US policy-makers came to support right-wing dictatorships as part of the broader Cold War strategy of containment, although he did not look at either the role of the press or South Korea: Schmitz, *Thank God They're on Our Side: The United States and Right-Wing Dictatorships, 1921–65*. In stark contrast to Korea, a lively historiographical debate has developed surrounding the evolution of US support for the controversial government of South Vietnam in the 1950s: see, for instance, Edward Miller, *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the Fate of South Vietnam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013); Mark Philip Bradley, *Imagining Vietnam and America: The Making of Postcolonial Vietnam, 1919–1950* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); James T. Fisher, "A World Made Safe for Diversity: The Vietnam Lobby and the Politics of Pluralism, 1945–1963," in *Cold War Constructions: The Political Culture of United States Imperialism, 1945–1966*, ed. by Christian G. Appy (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000), 217–37.
 17. Richard C. Allen, *Korea's Syngman Rhee: An Unauthorized Portrait* (Rutland, VT: C. E. Tuttle Co., 1960). For unclear reasons, the author of this relatively balanced biography wrote under a pseudonym. Critical Korean language scholarship on the Rhee regime is also relatively undeveloped. In 2014, South Korean scholar Young Ick Lew published an English translation of his laudatory biography of Rhee's life up until 1948, although the bulk of the book focuses on his early years: *The Making of the First Korean President: Syngman Rhee's Quest for Independence, 1875–1948* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2014). More general works on

- US–ROK relations usually focused exclusively on diplomatic and military aspects of the relationship. See, for instance, Bruce Cumings, ed., *Child of Conflict: The Korean–American Relationship 1943–1953* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1983); Tae-Hwan Kwak et al., eds., *U.S.–Korean Relations 1882–1982* (Seoul: Kyungnam University Press, 1982).
18. See James I. Matray, *Reluctant Crusade: American Policy in Korea, 1941–50* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1986). Charles Dobbs argued that South Korea’s political symbolism was a crucial factor in US Korea policy before the Korean War yet did not explore how this symbolism was publicly manifested: Charles M. Dobbs, *The Unwanted Symbol: American Foreign Policy, the Cold War, and Korea, 1945–1950* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1981). Several studies have looked at the relationship from the opposite direction—South Korean perceptions of the USA: Sang-Dawn Lee, *Big Brother, Little Brother: The American Influence on Korean Culture in the Lyndon B. Johnson Years* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2002); *Korean Attitudes Toward the United States*, ed. by David I. Steinberg (London: M. E. Sharpe, 2005); *Korean Perceptions of the United States*, ed. by Young Ick Yew and others (Seoul: Asan Foundation, 2006).
 19. Stephen Jin-Woo Kim, *Master of Manipulation: Syngman Rhee and the Seoul–Washington Alliance 1953–1960* (Seoul: Yonsei University Press, 2001), 3.
 20. Millett, *The War for Korea, 1945–1950: A House Burning*, 110–13; William Stueck, *Rethinking the Korean War: A New Diplomatic and Strategic History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 41–7, 56.
 21. Oliver’s role in managing Rhee’s public relations activities inevitably raises questions over the reliability of his work. While his biography of Rhee was hagiographic, he nonetheless made some effort to include the perspectives of Rhee’s critics. His later writings were significantly more analytical and critical, although he never renounced his support for Rhee. Robert T. Oliver, *Syngman Rhee and American Involvement in Korea, 1942–1960* (Seoul: Panmun Book Company, 1978). Also Robert T. Oliver, “My Life as a Korean Ghost,” *Korean Journal* 33, no. 4 (1995), 68–80; Robert T. Oliver, “Transition and Continuity in Korean–American Relations in the Postwar Period”, in *Korean–American Relations 1866–1997*, ed. by Yur-Bok Lee and Wayne Patterson (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1999).
 22. Oliver, *Syngman Rhee and American Involvement in Korea; 1942–1960*, 30, 208.
 23. Hugh Deane, *The Korean War: 1945–1953* (San Francisco, CA: China Books & Periodicals, 1999), 19.
 24. Deane, *The Korean War: 1945–1953*, 23.

25. The first major work of the revisionist school was Joyce Kolko and Gabriel Kolko, *The Limits of Power: The World and United States Foreign Policy, 1945–1954* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972). Bruce Cumings has since become the dominant figure associated with Korean War revisionism, although he personally rejects the term. See William Stueck, “Revisionism and the Korean War,” *Journal of Conflict Studies* 22, no. 1 (2002), 17–27.
26. The renewed interest in this topic can be traced back to 1999, when Associated Press (AP) caused a major outcry with the publication of a story alleging that Korean civilians had been massacred by American soldiers near the village of No Gun Ri in July 1950. As more alleged atrocities subsequently came to light, the South Korean government established a Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 2005 to investigate atrocities committed by government agencies in Korea between 1910 and 1993. For the AP reporters’ account of this investigation, see Charles J. Hanley, Martha Mendoza, and Sang-hun Choe, *The Bridge at No Gun Ri: A Hidden Nightmare from the Korean War* (New York: Holt Paperbacks, 2001). For examples of recent scholarship on political repression and war-time atrocities, see Su-kyoung Hwang, *Korea’s Grievous War* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2016); Tae-woo Kim, *Bombing: Reading the Korean War through the Aerial Bombing Records of the United States Air Force* (Seoul: Changbi Books, 2013); Jeremy Kuzmarov, “Police Training, ‘Nation-Building,’ and Political Repression in Postcolonial South Korea,” *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus* 10, no. 27 (2012); Suh Hee-Kyung, “Atrocities Before And During The Korean War,” *Critical Asian Studies* 42, no. 4 (2010), 553–88.
27. Jongsuk Chay, *Unequal Partners in Peace and War: The Republic of Korea and the United States, 1948–1953* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2002), 67.
28. With a couple of exceptions, this book does not look at broadcast media coverage. Although the Korean War received significant attention on both radio and television, very few records relating to these programs have survived. However, the crude level of recording technology in this era meant that little of this coverage was produced in the field or involved independent reporting: J. Fred MacDonald, *Television and the Red Menace: The Video Road to Vietnam* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1985), 33–6.
29. Chris Daly, “The Historiography of Journalism History: Part 1: ‘An Overview,’” *American Journalism* 26, no. 1 (2009), 141–7. See also Barbie Zelizer, *Taking Journalism Seriously: News and the Academy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2004).
30. David Randall Davies, *The Postwar Decline of American Newspapers, 1945–1965* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2006), 36.
31. James Reston, “Acheson Acts To Increase Foreign Policy Information,” *New York Times*, 3 November 1949. For more on how the US military

- used television for propaganda purposes, see Nancy E. Bernhard, *U.S. Television News and Cold War Propaganda, 1947–1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
32. Casey, *Selling the Korean War: Propaganda, Politics, and Public Opinion in the United States, 1950–1953*, 6.
 33. Bernard C. Cohen, *The Press and Foreign Policy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963), 144.
 34. Hallin, *The “Uncensored War”: The Media and Vietnam*, 8.
 35. See, for instance, Tsan-Kuo Chang, *The Press and China Policy: The Illusion of Sino-American Relations 1950–1984* (Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing, 1993); W. Lance Bennett, “Toward a Theory of Press-State Relations in the United States,” *Journal of Communication* 40, no. 2 (1990), 103–27; Nicholas Berry, *Foreign Policy and the Press: An Analysis of the New York Times, Coverage of U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990). All these studies found evidence of a close relationship between the press and the government, although Bennet suggested that Congress was the most significant influence on the *Times*’ support for US policy in the case of Nicaragua in the 1980s.
 36. Montague Kern, Patricia W. Levering, and Ralph B. Levering, *The Kennedy Crises: The Press, the Presidency, and Foreign Policy* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1983), 6–12.
 37. All three of these scholars have explored the question of why the American press ignored stories of great human suffering that have been retrospectively understood as atrocities. Kendrick Oliver showed how the working practices and ideological loyalties of journalists covering the Vietnam War resulted in them overlooking serious lapses in the conduct of US military forces. David Engerman has argued that the famine in Ukraine in the early 1930s was ignored by American journalists due to a combination of prejudice against Soviet peasants and an ideological attachment to the project of Soviet industrialization. Deborah Lipstadt suggested that coverage of the growing repression against Jews in Nazi Germany was limited by the widespread anti-Semitism of American society and the refusal of many journalists to believe that the Nazis could be engaging in such heinous crimes: Kendrick Oliver, *The My Lai Massacre in American History and Memory* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), 16–52; David Engerman, “Modernization from the Other Shore: American Observers and the Costs of Soviet Economic Development,” *The American Historical Review* 105, no. 2 (2000), 383–416; Deborah Lipstadt, *Beyond Belief: The American Press and the Coming of the Holocaust 1933–1945* (New York: The Free Press, 1986).
 38. See, for instance, Mark Gayn, *Japan Diary* (New York: William Sloane Associates, 1948).

39. Earnest Hoberecht, *Asia Is My Beat* (Rutland, VT: C. E. Tuttle Co., 1961), 12.
40. It was in this era that the moniker the “fourth branch of government” came to be commonly used to describe the vital role of the American press in the system of checks and balances on governmental power. For the classic statement of this view of government–press relations, see Douglass Cater, *The Fourth Branch of Government* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1959).
41. Marguerite Higgins, *War in Korea: The Report of a Woman Combat Correspondent* (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1951), 78.
42. Robert Miraldi, *Muckraking and Objectivity: Journalism’s Colliding Traditions* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990), 9.
43. Benjamin Alpers, *Dictators, Democracy, and American Public Culture: Envisioning the Totalitarian Enemy, 1920s–1950s* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 253. The distinction between totalitarian and authoritarian societies became a major topic of academic debate in the 1950s. In 1982, Ronald Reagan’s Ambassador to the United Nations, Jeane J. Kirkpatrick, controversially codified this distinction in terms of US foreign policy: Jeane J. Kirkpatrick, *Dictatorships and Double Standards: Rationalism and Reason in Politics* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1982).
44. Not everyone saw authoritarianism as the main cause of Chiang Kai-Shek’s downfall. After 1948, many American conservatives accused the Truman administration of failing to provide adequate support to the nationalist government.
45. Matthew Jones, *After Hiroshima: The United States, Race, and Nuclear Weapons in Asia, 1945–1965* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 17–18.
46. Modernization theorists in the United States at this time were grappling with many of these same issues, albeit in a rather more intellectually rigorous fashion. Few, if any, journalists in the Far East would have had any direct awareness of these debates: Nils Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 2003), 42–56.
47. Sahr Conway-Lanz, *Collateral Damage: Americans, Noncombatant Immunity, and Atrocity after World War II* (New York: Routledge, 2006).
48. John Tirman, *The Deaths of Others: The Fate of Civilians in America’s Wars* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 121.
49. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003). In an earlier book, Said explored media coverage of the Islamic world: Edward Said, *Covering Islam: How the Media and The Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World* (New York: Pantheon, 1981).

50. Although his work focused on European conceptions of the Orient, Said suggested that many of the same ideas had taken root in the United States following its emergence as a global superpower after World War II: Said, *Orientalism*, 295.
51. Robert Irwin, *Dangerous Knowledge: Orientalism and Its Discontents* (New York: The Overlook Press, 2006); John M. MacKenzie, "Edward Said and the Historians," *Nineteenth-Century Contexts: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 18, no. 1 (1994), 9–25.
52. Christina Klein, *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination 1945–1961* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003).
53. Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York: Vintage, 1995).
54. Louis W. Liebovich, *The Press and the Origins of the Cold War, 1944–1947* (New York: Praeger, 1988).
55. Edwin R. Bayley, *Joe McCarthy and the Press* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin, 1981), 164.
56. The most significant American presence in South Korea during most of this period was the Korean Military Advisory Group (KMAG).
57. Given the importance of Syngman Rhee to this book, the provenance and limitations of his papers should be explained. While his official papers are kept at the Yonsei Institute in South Korea, a set of digital copies are available for consultation at the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington, DC. These papers are far from complete. Virtually nothing exists from before December 1950, presumably as a result of the loss of Rhee's archives during the communist invasion. Correspondence after that date is patchy, with almost nothing from 1952 or 1953. Part of the collection is also labelled the "Robert Oliver papers" but this is missing almost all of the documents mentioned by Oliver in his books on Rhee. A separate and apparently much more extensive collection of documents also known as the "Robert Oliver papers" is held by Professor Emeritus Chong-Sik Lee of the University of Pennsylvania. Unfortunately, there does not seem to be any way to access these papers. To add even further confusion, two more sets of documents known as the "Robert Oliver papers" are held by two South Korean research centers. Oliver's book on Syngman Rhee's relationship with the United States remains a vital resource for understanding the development of the Rhee lobby: Oliver, *Syngman Rhee and American Involvement in Korea; 1942–1960*.



CHAPTER 2

Occupation 1945–1946: Hope and Failure

On September 8, 1945, the United States began the occupation of the southern half of Korea, a once-independent nation that had been annexed by Japan in 1910. While the American occupation lasted just three years, its consequences for Korea were catastrophic. The pragmatic administrative decision to divide the country into separate American and Soviet zones of occupation created a political border without precedent in Korean history. While the communists installed a Stalinist-style Korean-led communist regime in the northern half of the peninsula, in the south the United States struggled to develop a coherent political strategy. Within the chaotic whirl of politics in the south, nationalistic anti-communist groups became increasingly dominant. Under the auspices of the American occupation government, anyone perceived as having an association with or sympathy for communists could be subject to harassment, detention and violence. By the time the two halves of the peninsula declared their independence in 1948, South Korea had effectively eliminated the Left as a political force, cementing the division of the peninsula into two opposed ideological camps.

The occupation period has been of significant interest to historians since the publication of Bruce Cumings' two-volume history of the origins of the Korean War. Cumings controversially argued that the American Military Government (AMG), led by General John Hodge, had enthusiastically backed the establishment of a tyrannical rightist Korean-led government in the American zone of occupation. Although liberal internationalists

at the State Department initially tried to salvage plans for a joint trusteeship with the Soviet Union, Cumings claimed that, in the early months of 1946, Washington “fell in behind Seoul” and supported the development of a rightist police state totally incompatible with trusteeship.¹

Cumings’ interpretation of the occupation era has received a great deal of scholarly criticism. Amongst the most influential and convincing rebuttals are the first two volumes of Allan Millett’s planned three-part study of the US role in Korea from 1945 to 1954, which portrayed Hodge as a rather ineffectual and pragmatic leader.² In Millett’s view, the AMG was deeply frustrated by the attachment of policy-makers in Washington to unworkable geostrategic goals through virtually the entire occupation period. Hodge faced the near impossible task of laying the foundations of a Korean government in the south while simultaneously keeping the door open to joint US–Soviet trusteeship over the whole of Korea.

Neither Cumings nor Millett paid much attention to the role of the press. The only notable assessments of press coverage during the occupation are the memoirs of two Americans who worked in South Korea in the late 1940s and were highly critical of US policy. The first of these was published, pseudonymously, in 1950 by Richard D. Robinson, an intelligence officer in the AMG who fiercely criticized US support for Korean rightist groups and claimed that 75% of all that was written on the occupation was “either outright fabrication or highly inaccurate.”³ He blamed US officials for being so obsessed with classifying all information that “even the basic political policy document for Korea was stamped ‘top secret’ and kept in a carefully guarded safe.” Robinson believed that both civilian and military authorities had a deep-seated fear of public scandal: “If our activities in South Korea had been reported accurately in the contemporary press, events—and people—might have been altered. But as it was, secrecy prevailed and the Americans indulged in fantastic flights of fantasy in reporting events in Korea. These inaccurate press accounts were not without their international repercussions.”

Left-wing reporter Hugh Deane made similar, albeit more polemical, accusations in his part memoir, part history of the Korean occupation period. Comparing the situation in Korea to that later faced by correspondents in Vietnam, Deane argued that press coverage was often based on the product of official handouts and briefings.⁴ AMG officials made it clear to visiting reporters that they could only write on the topics deemed officially acceptable. Deane also criticized the tiny American press corps based in South Korea for its complicity in sticking to the official “Cold War” line, although his account was somewhat marred by basic factual errors.⁵

This chapter and Chap. 3 reveal a rather more complex story. The lowly status of Korea in the minds of the American public gave journalists few incentives to learn or write about the political situation in the country. Most of the reporters who covered Korea in this period accepted without question that Koreans were too backward to rule themselves—a racialized paternalism that was heavily reinforced by the anti-Korean attitudes of American officials in both Korea and Washington.⁶ The manifold problems of the occupation were blamed on the obstreperousness and political naivety of the Koreans. As a result, the press became increasingly negative and fatalistic about Korea's prospects and effectively gave up on extensive reporting on the conditions in the American occupation zone.

While Deane was correct to accuse the small and highly deferential press corps in Seoul of relying on the AMG for both the raw information and interpretative frameworks for their stories, he neglected to mention the attempts by a group of reporters based in Tokyo to promote alternative—and, at times, highly critical—perspectives on US policy in South Korea. Critics of US military rule in the Tokyo press corps sought to bring public attention to the negative impact of the occupation on the Korean population. However, their attempts to report from South Korea were thwarted by the repressive behavior of military authorities and, in the case of at least one journalist, the lack of editorial interest in further coverage from the Far East.

A second alternative perspective was presented by a group of Korean and American activists allied to former exile and Korean nationalist leader Syngman Rhee. Working through a US-based publicity organization established by Syngman Rhee during World War II, known as the Korean Commission, Rhee's supporters tried to raise awareness of the problems caused by the occupation and to create public sympathy for the establishment of an independent Korean state. As the American journalists in Tokyo, however, they struggled to overcome the negative attitudes of most Americans towards the Korean occupation.

REDISCOVERING KOREA

In November 1943, delegations from the United States, United Kingdom and Republic of China met in Cairo to discuss plans for the next stage of the war against Japan. After several days of discussion, they released a joint statement to the press which set out the war aims of the Pacific Allies. These called for Japan's colonial empire to be disassembled and its

constituent parts returned to their previous governing states. A sentence added at the urging of President Franklin D. Roosevelt specified that this would include the restoration of Korea, a nation that had been fully annexed by Japan in 1910 and largely forgotten by the outside world in the 40 years since.⁷ Thus, the Allies declared, “in due course, Korea shall become free and independent.”

The reporting of the decision to restore Korean independence marked the first time most newspapers had given serious thought to Korea’s political status since the failed March 1 uprising against Japanese rule in 1919. During that uprising, which had been organized partly in response to President Woodrow Wilson’s call for greater global self-determination, many American newspapers had offered their sympathy and even their support for Korea’s struggle for freedom.⁸ In 1943, however, the geopolitics of war and the changes in America’s perceptions of its role in Asia made Korea’s future a far more complicated prospect. An editorial in the *New York Times* in December 1943 argued that the position of the Allies was “not necessarily taken for the benefit of the Koreans. It is part of the program to weaken Japan by stripping her of her loot.”⁹ Reflecting the widespread assumption amongst the US policy elite that Korea would be too backward to govern itself when liberated from Japanese rule, the *Times* suggested Korea should end up under some kind of protectorate until ready to manage its own affairs.

A mixture of pragmatic realpolitik and racial prejudice dominated the thinking of the American elite on Korea’s future in the early 1940s. Under Japanese rule and with no direct involvement in the war, Korea’s internal political situation was little understood or discussed outside of the small group of State Department officials tasked with planning post-war policy. Within these circles, experts believed that after 40 years of colonial rule and with no history of democratic self-rule, the Korean people would need time to develop the personnel and institutions to rule themselves.¹⁰ Moreover, many policy-makers believed that it was the duty of the United States, alongside other Western powers, to provide this young nation with the tutelage necessary to rule itself. This paternalistic idealism reflected what Christina Klein has described as the “imaginary of integration,” the belief that both the United States and Asia stood to benefit from the transfer of Western wisdom and assistance to underdeveloped peoples.¹¹ Plans were thus drawn up to establish a trusteeship, a modernized form of the mandates that had been established by the League of Nations after World War I.¹²

As the war drew to a close in the summer of 1945, leading commentators relayed aspects of these discussions to the general public. In June 1945, Walter Lippmann, the country's most influential media voice on foreign affairs, argued that a trusteeship was necessary in Korea—although, in a sign of how marginal the issue was perceived to be by leading strategic thinkers, he provided no justification for this position.¹³ After the Japanese surrender in mid-August, the *Boston Globe* printed an editorial from former US diplomat Sumner Welles that called for Korea to be placed under international trusteeship until “such time as the people of Korea are prepared for the responsibilities of self-government.”¹⁴

At this early stage, the only significant dissenting perspective on trusteeship emanated from a small group of Korean exiles based in the United States. By far the most prominent of these was the septuagenarian Korean independence activist Syngman Rhee. A leading nationalist modernizer in the 1900s, Rhee had been imprisoned and tortured by the Japanese and subsequently forced into exile in the United States.¹⁵ A key figure in the March 1 anti-Japanese protest movement, Rhee had become the president of the provisional Korean government-in-exile in 1919. Although he had lost this title following a factional dispute in 1925, Rhee still claimed to represent the Korean provisional government in the United States. Just before the start of World War II, he had moved to Washington, DC to lobby for a strong American response to Japanese militarism and for the US government to recognize Korea's government-in-waiting. He was aided by a small group of American and Korean supporters who made persistent, albeit mostly ineffectual, efforts to bring the Korean issue to the attention of policy-makers and the American public.¹⁶

Identifying as a non-denominational Protestant, Rhee found his greatest source of support amongst Church congregations in Washington, DC.¹⁷ Through weekly attendance at sermons and other social functions, Rhee came to make several contacts who profoundly influenced his relationship with the American press. In September 1942, Rhee met Robert T. Oliver, a scholar of rhetoric who was working in Washington as part of the war effort. Although Oliver had no personal connection with Korea, he was captivated by Rhee's impassioned plea for help in liberating his country.¹⁸ Within a few months, Oliver began publishing lengthy articles and letters in internationally focused magazines and Washington newspapers about Korea's tragic history and forgotten status, using information provided by Rhee and his followers.

Rhee also met Henry Luce, publisher of Time Inc., one of the most important media companies in the United States. Luce was a leading figure in the so-called “China Lobby,” an elite group of Americans who shared a strong interest in China’s future and a deep attachment to its controversial leader Chiang Kai-Shek.¹⁹ As the child of American missionaries in China, Luce had witnessed first-hand the influence the United States could play in East Asia’s march towards modernity. Just months before Pearl Harbor, Luce had published an editorial essay in *Life*, then the most popular news and picture magazine in the country, which set out a program to spread American ideals around the world and establish the twentieth century as the “American century.”²⁰ Combining his deep-seated liberal paternalism with pious Christian sermonizing, he called for the United States to lift mankind “from the level of the beasts” to just a “little lower than the angels.”

Although Syngman Rhee’s Protestant, Americanized background was a perfect match for Luce’s vision of postcolonial leadership in the “American Century,” he declined to take up Rhee’s cause directly. He did, however, push media outlets under his control to give exposure to the situation in Korea. In March 1944, *Time* ran two articles on Korea, one highlighting the anniversary of the 1919 uprising against Japanese rule and the other on the historic role of American missionaries in providing Koreans with both “education and a sense of national pride.”²¹ In early June 1944, just one week after the D-Day landings in France, Luce instructed his editors to add Korea to the subjects they should be looking at, on the basis of Korea’s potential strategic importance after the war.²² A few months later, *Life* ran an article outlining the basic history and culture of Korea.

Outside of the Luce press, Rhee struggled to be taken seriously. According to *Time* journalist Frank Gibney, most Washington reporters dismissed him as an eccentric. One press agency correspondent remembered Rhee as a “funny old guy—always trying to get somebody to talk to him. We used to buy him lunch every once in a while, but he’s a little nuts. A real lunatic.”²³ Although Rhee’s warnings about the danger posed by Japan had been vindicated by Pearl Harbor, most journalists continued to ignore him until the end of the war.²⁴ Associated Press (AP) correspondent Oliver King remembered being ordered by his managers to dismiss handouts sent out by Rhee, in early 1945, which accused the United States of handing over Korea to the Soviet Union at Yalta.²⁵

The only newspaper to give prominent space to Rhee’s claims, the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, was owned by the eccentric and fiercely isolationist Colonel Robert R. McCormick.²⁶ Although McCormick knew Rhee and

had demonstrated interest in the Korean problem, the *Tribune* ultimately showed little editorial concern for Korea's political fate in the summer of 1945.²⁷ The publication of Rhee's Yalta allegations was little more than an opportunistic attack on the perceived pro-Soviet agenda of the American policy-making elite.

While Rhee mostly failed in his bid to raise awareness of the Korean issue during the war, his lobbying efforts ultimately delivered dividends. He forged crucial links with a group of influential Americans that would form the bedrock of the Korea lobby in the United States. His rise to public prominence had to wait, however, until his return to Korea in the autumn of 1945, as the United States grappled with the challenge of imposing an occupation on a nation that had been eagerly awaiting liberation.

OCCUPATION CRISIS

When Japan issued its formal surrender in August 1945, the fate of Korea presented a complicated problem for Allied planners. On August 8, the Soviet Union had declared war on Japan and begun an invasion of Japanese-occupied Manchuria and Korea. In an attempt to avert the complete Soviet domination of Korea, the United States suggested a temporary division of the country into Soviet and American zones of occupation, along the same lines as Germany and Austria, with the dividing line set at the 38th parallel. The Soviet Union accepted the offer, leaving the southern half of Korea to await the arrival of American occupation forces from Okinawa in early September.

The first weeks of the American occupation of Korea offered the American public a dramatic and chaotic first insight into the country's political situation. The country teemed with American war correspondents hoping to chronicle the experience of liberation for the Korean people. While the Koreans initially provided a warm welcome for the Americans, the failure to deliver immediate independence caused growing confusion and resentment. At the heart of the crisis was the severe disconnect between the expectations of the Korean people and the approach adopted by the Americans. The hurriedly appointed military commander of the American occupation zone, Lieutenant General John R. Hodge, had arrived in Korea without specific instructions from Washington on occupation policy beyond establishing law and order, and preventing reprisals against the hundreds of thousands of Japanese who still remained on the peninsula (Fig. 2.1).



Fig. 2.1 Korean welcome, fall of 1950. Source: Don O'Brien, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/dok1/1525759209/in/album-72057594053303502/>. Used under CC BY 2.0 license

Hodge interpreted his mandate conservatively and refused to recognize a Korean-led leftist-oriented provisional government, known as the Korean People's Republic, that had taken control of much of the country in the weeks after the Japanese surrender in August. With very limited manpower and resources available to him, Hodge kept much of the Japanese police state in place for the transition to American rule, including its despised Japanese governor. These developments shocked much of the Korean population and changed the American presence from a cause for celebration into a source of growing resentment and frustration.

The problems with the occupation government were far from surprising for some of the veteran reporters in Korea who had covered the Pacific theatre and regularly witnessed severe incompetence by military commanders. Reporting on these problems, however, had often been impossible. Throughout World War II, General Douglas MacArthur's strategic and tactical mistakes had been suppressed by censors and the Supreme Commander's adoring inner circle.²⁸ Even after Japan's surrender, journalists still faced censorship on their dispatches.

One group of reporters was able to ignore these censorship restrictions entirely. In the late summer of 1945, the Air Force had ordered public relations officer Tex McCrary to chaperone a group of high-profile journalists around East Asia on a mission to show off the devastation inflicted on Japan by US bombers. Before their arrival in Japan, McCrary had warned the correspondents not to trust MacArthur as he sought to secure his position as Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (SCAP) in Japan. In order to help reporters relay their articles back to their editors in the United States as quickly as possible, the Air Force equipped their B-17 with a long distance short-wave radio set which allowed them to communicate directly with Washington, thus avoiding both Army and Navy censorship.²⁹ As the McCrary group moved from spot to spot through East Asia, they were free to report on stories as they saw fit.

By far the most famous member of McCrary's flying squad was *New York Herald Tribune* reporter Homer Bigart. As a battlefield reporter in Europe and Asia, he had earned national recognition for his fearless courage in depicting the lives and deaths of American fighting men. Bigart also had something of a reputation for being antagonistic towards authority figures.³⁰ While working as a young reporter at the *Herald Tribune* he had shied away from the crime and politics beats, preferring instead to cover human interest stories as a general assignment reporter.³¹ As a war reporter, he rarely held back in his criticism of military leaders. In the early summer of 1945, he had severely embarrassed the US Navy with a bitter critique of its bloody frontal assault strategy during the Battle of Okinawa. After arriving in Japan with the McCrary group, Bigart published a powerful account of the devastating impact of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima, much to the annoyance of General MacArthur.³²

Just a few days after visiting Hiroshima, the group arrived in Korea once again on the hunt for big stories. Although they stayed in Korea for less than 24 hours and did not attend any press conferences, the correspondents picked up on rumors from their colleagues and Korean activists.³³ These were particularly vicious following an outcry over General Hodge's announcement that Japanese administrators were to remain in office during the transition to American rule.³⁴ While most of the press reported the basic facts of the situation, Homer Bigart stormed onto the front page of the *New York Herald Tribune* with an attack on the AMG for keeping Japanese officials in power:

Sullen Japanese police, armed with bayonets, are still patrolling the flag-decked streets of the Korean capital with the approval of Lieutenant General John R. Hodge, commanding the American occupation force, who believes the country is not yet ready for self-rule ... In an interview this morning Hodge defended not only the use of the Japanese police, but also his continued employment of the local government, which is completely dominated by Japanese. Hodge said the Korean members of the police department were absent from duty too often, and besides they were "the same breed of cat as the Japanese."³⁵

Elsewhere in the article, Bigart accused Hodge of giving the impression that the "sole function of the occupation was to maintain law and order and act as custodians for Japanese property." He condemned the occupation for dismissing Korean political activity as an intolerable nuisance and for failing to recruit Koreans into senior positions. He wrote that the defense of the status quo on the pretext of military expediency seemed invalid since the American force was not fighting a campaign and that "any confusion that might result from the replacement of Japanese officials by untrained Koreans would not seriously hamper the occupations units."

The story hit a nerve in the United States, where there were growing concerns about the fitness of the military to handle post-war occupation duties.³⁶ Although fellow correspondents felt that Bigart and his editors had succumbed to the temptation to throw a "high, hard lead," the story was generally regarded as legitimate.³⁷ Moreover, as one *Time* correspondent argued in a private message from Korea, the crisis allowed editorial writers to go on the attack against the "helpless carcasses of Hodge and Macarthur." Indeed, on September 16, *Herald Tribune* columnist and CBS radio broadcaster William L. Shirer even went as far as to accuse Hodge of doing his best to insult the Korean people and "prolong their slavery to a hated people."³⁸

The scandal prompted a swift intervention from Washington, which ordered Hodge to reverse the policy on using Japanese officials. However, sensational reports of rioting and Korean anger towards the occupation continued to appear for several more weeks. In a cable to *Time*, photographer George Silk alleged that US correspondents were being exploited by Koreans for political purposes. He claimed that, every evening, Korean political groups vied to entertain reporters in the hopes of gaining their attention and sympathy. In such an environment, it was hardly surprising that some reporters "let fly with both barrels" on the basis of a one-sided Korean perspective.³⁹

Unfortunately for the Koreans, reports of their rage against the renewal of foreign rule under the AMG did little to advance the cause of Korean independence. The *Boston Globe* and *Baltimore Sun* reminded their readers that a period of international tutelage was still clearly necessary for a country with no recent experience of self-rule.⁴⁰ Even the *Washington Post*, which had published several articles by Robert T. Oliver during the war, argued that the Cairo declaration's pledge to make Korea free "in due course" had not implied Korean independence in the short-term:

There was no intention of turning Korea adrift on the international seas as soon as Japan had been conquered. Any such course would have been disastrous for Korea. Either she would have become a battleground for contending factions or she would have drifted into the care of her nearest strong power, in this case Russia. Korea must be helped to freedom, and this can only be done by putting Korea under the trusteeship of the United Nations.⁴¹

COVERING KOREA

The public relations crisis faced by the budding occupation regime in Korea in September 1945 was a stark reminder to American authorities of the potential threat freewheeling reporters could pose to the occupation government once wartime censorship ended. During the Pacific War, General MacArthur's head of public relations, Brigadier General LeGrande A. Diller, had carefully protected his commander's reputation by censoring casualty reports and emphasizing MacArthur's central role in Allied victories. In the view of *New York Herald Tribune* reporter Frank Kelley, "with the help of sycophantic correspondents who scrambled for small favors, and aided by a ruthless system of censorship which was political as well as military, the Public Relations Office of MacArthur's headquarters built MacArthur into a demigod."⁴² Now MacArthur's headquarters faced the challenge of preserving his public relations machine in the face of journalistic demands for greater freedom.

In early October, Diller made clear his intention to curtail the press presence in the Far East with the introduction of a quota system for foreign journalists. Under the plan, only seven newspapers were allowed to station correspondents across the entire Far East, with the press corps in the Korean occupation zone limited to just one correspondent from each of the major press agencies.⁴³ Correspondents were also set to lose their

automatic military privileges, making them entirely dependent on military beneficence for access to food, housing and transportation. Although Diller claimed that the plan was a necessary response to the lack of billeting facilities, newspaper correspondents were incensed by what they perceived as unjustifiable restrictions on the press. Reporters in Tokyo formed their own press association and announced the establishment of a special press hostel that provided accommodation for all visiting foreign correspondents.⁴⁴ As criticism of the quota system mounted in both Japan and the United States, the War Department asked MacArthur to rethink his approach. MacArthur responded by firing Diller and abandoning the quota system. Although the Diller crisis ended in a victory for the press, MacArthur made it clear that military assistance to the press was something he viewed as discretionary. For the rest of the occupation, the threat of losing logistical support from the military continued to hang over the American press corps in Tokyo.

In Korea, General John Hodge had even less tolerance for journalists. A traditional Army infantry general with a forthright manner and a short fuse, he did not take kindly to challenges to his authority. His main goal in any dealings with the press was to present the occupation in as positive a light as possible and to emphasize that any problems were a consequence of forces outside his control—most importantly, the administrative challenges presented by the division of the country into separate occupation zones and the political intransigence and corruption of most Korean leaders.

Fortunately for Hodge, he faced only a small and relatively novice press corps in the American zone of occupation. While dozens of news agencies and newspapers from around the world appointed correspondents in Tokyo, only the three main American wire press agencies—AP, United Press (UP) and International News Service (INS)—and the *New York Times* assigned reporters to Seoul. In these press agency bureaus, turnover was rapid as fresh young reporters used the Seoul posting as a stepping-stone to better assignments elsewhere. UP's correspondent in late 1946, Stanley Rich, had only received his degree in journalism the year before.⁴⁵ INS' William Harvey "Tiny" Buntin had worked as a departmental editor for several Nevada newspapers, but knew little about foreign correspondence and was regarded by some in Korea as an unprofessional drunk.⁴⁶ Press agency reporters were also expected to dedicate much of their time to selling their news service to the local Korean press. One AP correspondent in Korea complained that he spent so much of his time preparing news for local distribution that, during his first six weeks in Seoul, he had not been able to interview any Korean leaders.⁴⁷

Press agency reporting during this period slavishly conformed to the strictures of journalistic “objectivity,” which required journalists to build stories around facts and quotations from trusted reliable sources, such as US military authorities. Reporters had little incentive to engage in independent investigative reporting or interpretative analysis. Instead, they developed close relationships with American officials in the hopes of getting tip-offs on major news events.⁴⁸ UP’s Stanley Rich told journalist Mark Gayn that his bosses persistently instructed him to “apple-polish” senior officers. AP and UP reporters were so fearful of missing out on the official daily government handout that they almost never left Seoul. Rich claimed that he only ventured out to report on major rioting in October 1946 when his main rival, AP reporter Roy Roberts, was hospitalized with meningitis. Press agencies thus operated as little more than forwarding offices for occupation press releases, which often read like propaganda. In one case, AP published a virtually verbatim press release from an AMG official which showed how Korean classrooms were bursting with “the spirit of democracy”:

Democracy Action ‘Bursting’ in Korea

Seoul, Korea, April 10 (AP)—The spirit of democracy is bursting so loudly in Korean school rooms that both teachers and students frequently confuse it with their devotion to partisan politics, a Military Government Official said.

Keyed up teachers have made stump speeches in their classrooms and committed whole classes and schools to political action and have mobilized school parades for parties.

Military Government are attempting to teach the teachers that the schools belong to the whole community and in a democracy the classroom may not be used to influence opinion in favor of a single party.⁴⁹

The short, non-analytical stories produced by press agency reporters were a particularly poor fit for a complex issue such as Korea. Within months of the start of the occupation, Korean politics had fractured into a bewildering variety of political parties and movements with confusing political goals.⁵⁰ Aside from the South Korean communists, most parties did not have political agendas that could be easily explained in Western terms. For instance, the Korean People’s Party, the group associated with the provisional government established following the Japanese surrender, espoused

both socialism and nationalism—a combination which did not easily fit into Moscow-centric understandings of leftist movements. More obviously appealing to American sentiments was the Korean Democratic Party, a group of wealthy, well-educated and business-oriented Koreans. Yet, many of its members had politically toxic connections to the former Japanese colonial regime. The final major group was made up of returning former exiles of the Korean provisional government, most importantly Syngman Rhee and Kim Koo, the President of the Korean provisional government in Chungking, who rapidly established themselves as anti-communist nationalists, vociferously opposed to any foreign political control of Korea.

Journalists faced even greater uncertainty over the nature of the relationship between the two occupation zones. Although the Soviet occupation regime refused American reporters entry into its zone, refugees from the north relayed stories of mass looting and brutal crackdowns on dissenters by Soviet forces.⁵¹ As the Soviets cut transportation links along the parallel and suspended supplies of key industrial goods to the south, it became increasingly evident that they intended to sever all inter-zonal activity. However, official US policy remained focused on the negotiation of a joint US–Soviet trusteeship over all Korea. For almost two years, Washington instructed the AMG to maintain an official stance supportive of trusteeship, even as some AMG officials believed that the American zone was better off pursuing independence.

Understanding the nuances of these issues was difficult enough for the military and diplomatic officials entirely focused on dealing with them. For non-expert American reporters, keeping up to speed was virtually impossible. Press agency reporters thus depended on the AMG not just for stories, but also the interpretative background necessary to put such stories in context. This exacerbated the tendency of press agency reporters to act as relays for AMG publicity. In some cases, the reporters were also influenced by the increasingly cynical and negative views of occupation officials, many of whom saw Korea as an expensive drain on precious military resources, and regarded Koreans as too primitive and backward to make democracy work. In an article for an American magazine, UP correspondent Palmer Hoyt Jr. explained that neither of the two main political groups in South Korea, Rhee's and Koo's provisional government or the Korean People's Party, had a meaningful political platform, or even the capability to achieve democracy:

Both talk vaguely of agrarian reform, political reform, democracy and mostly of independence. Their talk of immediate democracy is a mockery. Immediate democracy cannot be accomplished by either of these groups. Today the people of Korea are not politically conscious. Of the 25,000,000 population probably five per cent know anything of the political situation. The rest do not care.⁵²

Like most Americans in Korea, Hoyt had grown deeply fatalistic about the future of the American occupation zone. He believed that any Korean-led government established in the immediate future would be a benevolent oligarchy, dominated either by the Americans or the Russians.

A rather different dynamic developed between General Hodge and the *New York Times* correspondent Richard J. H. Johnston. Unlike press agency reporters, Johnston was expected to produce in-depth analytical coverage of political developments in Korea—a freedom which made Johnston the most influential journalist in the country until his reassignment in January 1950. Prior to Korea, Johnston had mostly worked as a crime and general assignment reporter for the *Times* in New York, jobs which often depended on close relationships with police and political officials.⁵³ In 1944, Johnston had been assigned to Europe as a war reporter, where he earned a reputation as a “carefree, if not swashbuckling, chronicler of the day-to-day fighting.”⁵⁴ Unlike many of his peers in Europe and the Pacific, Johnston showed no sign of developing a temperamental aversion to military authority. After arriving in Korea alongside General Hodge in early September, Johnston waxed lyrical about the momentousness of the occasion:

American occupation forces here under command of Lieut. Gen. John R. Hodge are charged with an experiment unprecedented in history. When the first American troops came ashore at the port of Jinsen on Sept. 9 they were hailed by the Koreans as liberators of the country that had been ground under vicious Japanese domination for forty years. The job facing General Hodge was not one of restoring a government, but, with the help of the Koreans, of building an entirely new political structure from the ground up.⁵⁵

Johnston claimed that the Koreans were eager partners in the occupation—so much so that their main fear was of an American and Russian withdrawal from the peninsula. During the first months of the occupation, he paid little attention to the large number of Koreans demanding

immediate independence, instead producing a stream of positive stories about developments in Korea, often based on press briefings by Hodge or military government spokesmen.⁵⁶

In January 1946, Johnston's close relationship with the military government may have helped him avoid a major scandal when the leader of the southern Korean communist party, Pak Hon-yong, and several Korean correspondents alleged that Johnston had misquoted him in a press conference. In an article that was mysteriously leaked before making it into print, Johnston claimed that Pak had told the assembled correspondents that he was willing to see Korea end up under complete Soviet domination, or even become part of the Soviet Union. Pak was instantly branded a traitor by rightist parties and lost much of his political credibility.⁵⁷ A report ordered by Hodge exonerated Johnston of distorting Pak's comments, although Korean and American correspondents at the conference apparently gave conflicting testimony as to what exactly Pak had said.⁵⁸

Johnston's close relationship with General Hodge was reflected in his sympathetic coverage of both the occupation government and, after January 1946, the Korean nationalist groups led by Syngman Rhee and Kim Koo that emerged as the dominant political force in the American occupation zone. Although Johnston did not explicitly endorse the nationalist opposition to trusteeship, he was praised by Rhee for his sympathetic interest in the nationalists and criticism of the Korean Left.⁵⁹ Rhee's followers showered Johnston and other visiting *Times* journalists with attention and even gifts.⁶⁰ In October 1946, Rhee told a visiting journalist that Johnston was vital for both his and Korea's future: "We need him. Korea needs him. How can we go on without the support of the *Times*?"⁶¹

Despite the entreaties of the Korean nationalists, Johnston's main loyalty ultimately remained with Hodge. When John Sheridan, the chairman of the House Military Affairs Committee, threatened to recall Hodge from Korea, ostensibly because of the low morale of American soldiers in Korea, Johnston launched an unprecedented attack on Hodge's treatment by officials in Washington and US policy more generally. He argued that Korea's shortcomings should be blamed on the "vigorous and unceasing interference from the Soviet-inspired Communists in South Korea" and "Washington's refusal or inability to give [Hodge] clear-cut directives."⁶² As the political situation, and the relationship between Rhee and Hodge, deteriorated further in the autumn of 1946, Johnston acted as an informant for Hodge on developments in Washington during his brief recall to the United States.⁶³

THE CRITICS

While Hodge found the Seoul press corps supportive of his goals, he was deeply concerned about the potential of the so-called “pinko press” based outside Korea to negatively influence perceptions of the occupation in Washington and to trigger further embarrassing political interventions.⁶⁴ Hodge’s head of public relations, Major Buel A. Williamson, made it his business to brief every visiting reporter before they had time to form their own opinions about the situation in the occupation zone. Like Hodge, Williamson possessed a strong disdain for the press and had no qualms about making the lives of visiting correspondents difficult if they did not fall into line.

Hodge and Williamson belonged to a generation of military officers with very simplistic perceptions of the political allegiances of the press. Anyone critical of American military authority tended to be regarded as a pinko or leftist. After serving as a press officer at the UN Command in Tokyo during the Korean War, Williamson later recalled sending “left-wing” American war correspondents out of Korea to stop them giving away military secrets in their dispatches, only to watch with frustration as State Department officials sent them back to Korea.⁶⁵ This highly inaccurate and self-serving rendition of what occurred ignored the fact that virtually all correspondents who covered the war from the UN side were pro-American and anti-communist, and that military authorities during the opening stages of the war failed to offer clear guidance as to what was to be considered militarily sensitive information.⁶⁶ These military men simply could not comprehend that some reporters felt obligated to report both honestly and critically.

During the first year of the occupation, many American journalists in Tokyo were suspicious of US military authorities. Four reporters, however, were more skeptical than most: Gordon Walker of the *Christian Science Monitor*, Mark Gayn of the *Chicago Sun*, John Luter of *Time* and Joe Fromm of *World Report* (the forerunner of *U.S. News And World Report*).⁶⁷ Although the authorities in Tokyo and Seoul privately regarded the reporters as communists, Mark Gayn perceived himself and his colleagues as liberals—a term which he associated with a commitment to democracy and the rejection of authoritarian rule of any kind.⁶⁸ Yet, in spite of their shared views on the flaws of military government, these four reporters had very different approaches to reporting and opportunities to publicize their views.

Gayn had one of the most unusual backgrounds of any journalist working for an American newspaper in the 1940s. The son of Russian dissidents exiled to China in the early 1900s, Gayn grew up with a deep attachment to his adopted home. While attending journalism school in California, the American democratic system made a strong impression on Gayn, although he found Americans disturbingly complacent about their position in the world. After returning to China as a stringer for the *Washington Post*, he covered the war with Japan in the late 1930s. Horrified by Japanese atrocities, Gayn called for the United States to break free of its isolationist shackles and resist Japanese expansionism with military force.⁶⁹ After the end of World War II, Gayn feared that American military authorities would not fundamentally reform Japan's militaristic tendencies. As the Japan correspondent for the *Chicago Sun*, Gayn dedicated himself to revealing the accommodation he believed the occupation was making with Japan's fascist elites.

Walker's path to becoming a critic of military government was rather more prosaic. After leaving Harvard to join the *Monitor* aged just 17, Walker had slowly worked his way up the reportorial ranks at its Boston headquarters. After being assigned to the Pacific as a war correspondent in 1942, Walker grew increasingly frustrated with the treatment of the press by MacArthur's public relations officials. When battlefield censorship ended in October 1945, Walker wrote a bitter comment article revealing how correspondents had been "bullied, cajoled, insulted, threatened and even coerced one way or another into writing General MacArthur's 'success story'."⁷⁰ Walker personally lost out on one of the biggest scoops of the war when, after becoming the first American to reach central Tokyo after the Japanese surrender, he was ordered to withdraw to a mile outside the city limits until the US First Cavalry Division could officially liberate it—an event instead reported to the world by the main Japanese press agency.⁷¹

Crucially, Walker and Gayn represented papers that believed in giving their correspondents the freedom to cover provocative stories without fear of sanction. Established in 1908 by Christian Scientist founder Mary Baker Eddy, Walker's paper, the *Christian Science Monitor*, had severed direct links with the Church in the early 1920s and subsequently emerged as one of the country's most respected newspapers.⁷² Its global humanitarian focus was unlike that of any other contemporary mainstream newspaper. Indeed, the *Monitor's* foreign correspondents were allowed to write at length about issues generally ignored by the rest of the media. When

Walker began his stint in Tokyo, the paper had a newly appointed editor, Erwin D. Canham, who was a passionate believer in the paper's liberal humanitarian mission and made it a point of principle to not withhold tragic or distasteful news from readers.⁷³

Gayn's paper, the *Chicago Sun*, was part of a media group owned by Marshall Field III, a Chicago business magnate with strong links to the progressive movement. Many *Sun* journalists also wrote for the more experimental and socialist-leaning Field-owned newspaper *PM*, a New York-based paper which carried a large number of well-known left-leaning writers, including the celebrated investigative journalist Izzy Stone. Gayn was greatly respected by *Sun* journalists, even after he became involved in a major scandal involving the passing of secret government documents to communists in mid-1945. Marshall Field's lawyer, Louis Weiss, personally helped to defend Gayn from criminal prosecution and begin his assignment as the Tokyo correspondent for *Sun* in occupied Japan.⁷⁴

Gayn and Walker's freedom to report freely made them the envy of other correspondents in Tokyo, many of whom lived in fear of MacArthur's public relations officers writing to their editors and accusing them of communist sympathies.⁷⁵ As was standard practice at the time, much of Luter's copy to *Time* was heavily edited to remove critical material while Joe Fromm was careful to not provoke his editors at *World Report*, a magazine which had been founded by the conservative columnist David Lawrence. This left Gayn and Walker as the only correspondents with both the motivation and the freedom to write about the stories they were interested in, although Gayn noted that Walker tended to get front-page play and far more latitude in editorial comment.⁷⁶

This perhaps explains why, on Walker's first visit to Korea in the autumn of 1945, the AMG regarded him as a one-man mission to discredit the military government. In a report on his activities, an officer wrote that Walker had arrived in Korea hostile to the military and "apparently with avowed sympathies for any and all leftist movements."⁷⁷ According to those who had spoken with him, Walker described "American Army Officers as fascists and unfit to operate any government or deal with a people." The report argued that such statements were part of a "crusade" to convert fellow correspondents to his point of view and discredit those who disagreed with him.

In his dispatches back to the *Monitor*, as well as two articles for the British *Observer*, Walker was more restrained in his criticism, although

they still made for uncomfortable reading in Seoul and Tokyo. In an article at the end of October, Walker accused the military government of letting the Soviets get ahead in the race to reform Korea due to an exaggerated fear of communism in the American zone of occupation. Walker added that the military government, being a purely military organization, was “not accustomed to anything which smacks of opposition to orders.”⁷⁸ A few weeks later, he wrote that America’s prestige across the Far East was being “weakened in countries like this where politically untutored American Army officers are at present the only teachers of American-style democracy.”⁷⁹ He compared the military government to the “tightest military dictatorship” and suggested that it was dangerously dependent on the support and advice of right-wing landlords and former Japanese occupation officials.

Walker’s dispatches caused controversy in both Seoul and Washington. The Department of State asked the AMG to account for an article in the *Observer* which once again made reference to Hodge’s infamous “same breed of cat” statement.⁸⁰ AMG political adviser William Langdon wrote to the Secretary of State to explain the remark and clarify that the United States was not represented in Korea by colonial-minded men contemptuous of the Korean people. Hodge, he claimed, was “100% trusted by all Korean leaders.”⁸¹ While Langdon criticized Walker for never meeting with Syngman Rhee during his time in Korea, he did not reveal to the State Department any of the more lurid allegations found in the internal military government report. Instead, the American occupation regimes used more indirect and informal methods to silence Walker. Gayn claimed that the military authorities repeatedly blocked Walker from accessing transportation back to Japan until the *Monitor* protested to Washington and forced Tokyo to grant Walker permission to return.⁸² Once back in Japan, MacArthur’s new public relations chief, General Frayne Baker, told Walker that “we’ll give you an opportunity to start afresh, as if you’d never done anything wrong.” However, Walker continued to publish articles about Korea from Japan, causing Hodge to write a bitter complaint to MacArthur that Walker was inventing material.⁸³ According to Gayn, it was subsequently intimated to Walker that he would face a court martial if he returned to Korea.⁸⁴

While Walker’s articles accurately reflected the feelings of the large number of Koreans who had expected the Korean People’s Republic to be recognized as an independent state and his assessment of the growing polarization between left and right proved highly prescient, his coverage

had only a limited impact on the press debate about Korea in the autumn of 1945.⁸⁵ His attempt to change the narrative of the occupation was too clearly fueled by hostility to the military government to cause a major sensation. Ultimately, his self-righteous approach only served to limit his ability to do any further reporting from Korea.

After Walker left Korea in November 1945, very few significant stories on the political situation by visiting journalists appeared in the American press. The focus of the Korea story shifted from the occupation itself to the growing tensions between the United States and Soviet Union over the country's future.⁸⁶ According to an agreement signed in Moscow in December 1945, the United States, Soviet Union, United Kingdom and China were committed to working out a model for joint trusteeship over the whole of Korea. But the glacial progress of the talks and inscrutability of the Soviets did not make for engaging press copy. No one followed up on Walker's interest in the mistakes of the occupation regime or the concerns of the Korean political classes. Most American observers accepted that the problems of the occupation were a result of the unfortunate division of the country and any resolution depended on reaching a compromise with the Soviet Union. The Koreans simply had to learn to deal with the reality of superpower politics; as the *New York Times* wrote at the end of December 1945, "regardless of how unpalatable the decision made at Moscow will be to Korean leaders, we hope they will accept it as the best bargain that can be made at this time."⁸⁷

The situation in southern Korea only reappeared on the press agenda in October 1946, when thousands of Koreans took to the streets in large-scale riots across the American occupation zone. While much of the violence centered on the isolated city of Taegu, attacks on police stations and sabotage were reported across the country. According to internal AMG reports at the time, the unrest drew strength from widespread grievances over the high level of inflation, particularly a steep rise in the price of rice, and festering anger over police brutality.⁸⁸ However, in its public statements the AMG pinned the blame on communists and "professional troublemakers" who had infiltrated from Soviet-occupied Korea to undermine the government in the south.⁸⁹

The uprising was not well reported in the American press. The only newspaper correspondent in Korea at the time, the *New York Herald Tribune's* Tokyo correspondent Ralph Chapman, wrote a series of brief factual articles which mainly focused on the AMG's military response.⁹⁰ One of those less than impressed with coverage of the uprising was Mark

Gayn, who applied for travel permission to spend several months doing detailed reporting across the American occupation zone. Ultimately, he was granted just one month—a period in which he perhaps learned more about the AMG's procedures for controlling journalists than the situation in the country.

Gayn was under suspicion even before his arrival in Korea. On 20 October, while still in Tokyo, he had been brought in for questioning over the source of a story he had written about a planned purge of Japanese wartime-era officials, only to be released when many of Gayn's colleagues, including AP's Russell Brines and the *Times*' Burton Crane, rallied to his defense.⁹¹ Once in Korea, Gayn quickly found himself under pressure to stick to the official line. On his first day, General Hodge attempted to give Gayn an off-the-record briefing—a move which Gayn suspected was designed to make it difficult to write about certain topics without opening himself up to accusations of breaching Hodge's confidence.⁹² Gayn heard that Hodge had used a similar tactic with press agency reporters a week before the start of the riots; by informing them that the military government had captured documents which indicated plans for a communist uprising, Hodge forced them to adopt a framing narrative of the riots as a communist conspiracy.⁹³

In Seoul, Gayn met *Newsweek* freelancer Charlotte Ebener, a young reporter who had hoped to make her name with the first report by an American reporter on life in Soviet-occupied Korea.⁹⁴ When she learned that the Soviets were not letting any American correspondents into the north, she opted to join Gayn on his intensive survey of the American zone. Hodge initially refused Gayn and Ebener permission to travel outside Seoul, only to relent when Gayn threatened to report the incident to his editors in Chicago.⁹⁵ Once on the road, the two correspondents were assigned a chaperone who carefully managed their interactions with military officials on sensitive issues. In one instance, after consulting with the chaperone, an American provincial governor told Gayn and Ebener that he was not willing to speak to any reporters, whether Korean or American. When Gayn complained about the military's efforts to obstruct his reporting, the chaperone told Gayn that they did not like visitors doing investigations and that the press (and through them the American people) interfered with the Army's work in Korea and thus were not welcome—citing a *Time* story from January which had mocked the military government's welcome to a visiting Russian delegation.⁹⁶

Gayn conducted interviews with many of southern Korea's leading political figures. While he perceived the preferred American candidate Kim Kyu-Sik to be a puppet of the military government, he admitted to admiring the "old fraud" Rhee for his "guts and political shrewdness."⁹⁷ He faced much greater difficulty tracking down leftist leaders, most of whom were in jail or in hiding after a police crackdown. During a secret meeting at a labor union headquarters, a police officer, aided by a group of young militia members, broke into the room and arrested Gayn's interview subject, Moon Eun-Chong, supposedly on the authority of General Hodge. When Gayn protested to the occupation authorities, he was initially accused of disrupting the arrest and fabricating the presence of the rightists. The *New York Times*' editorial writer Foster Hailey, who happened to also be visiting Korea at the time, called to ask Hodge what was going on and was told that he had no knowledge of the arrests.⁹⁸

The Moon incident was a stark demonstration of the extent to which the United States was acquiescing to the brutal and authoritarian police state run by rightist political forces. While observing elections for the establishment of a Legislative Assembly in the south, an American official in Pusan admitted that the elections were undemocratic and that they would lead to Syngman Rhee's almost complete domination of the Assembly, in contradiction to the military government's strategy of supporting Korean moderates. When Gayn brought this up with Leonard Bertsch, one of the few AMG advisers with whom he felt he had a good relationship, Bertsch told him that the Assembly could simply be gerrymandered to diminish Rhee's power.⁹⁹ A few days later, Gayn was horrified to discover dozens of half-starved political prisoners being kept in tiny prison cells. An officer assigned to escort Gayn around Pusan told him that complaints about Korean police brutality were ignored by American commanders. In his published diary, Gayn would write that Korea was "the blackest, the most depressing story I have ever covered."¹⁰⁰

Due to the primitive state of communications technology in Korea, and the heavy restrictions on using the military's telephone to contact Tokyo, Gayn could not easily transmit stories home.¹⁰¹ Only two of his articles were published by *The Chicago Sun* and its sister paper *PM* during the time that he was in Korea. The first was a short factual report on an appeal by South Koreans to revive the US–Soviet joint commission talks.¹⁰² The impetus for this story came from a meeting with Lieutenant Bertsch, who had told Gayn that he had played a role in drafting the appeal.¹⁰³ The second, and more controversial, story came at the end of Gayn's trip and

suggested that the results of the election for the planned Legislative Assembly might be voided due to Korean protests over its “travesty of democratic procedure.”¹⁰⁴

After returning to Tokyo, Gayn wrote up the trip into a series of eight reports which began with an explanation that it was the “inside story” of a 24-day reporting trip that the US Army had done all it could to prevent.¹⁰⁵ The reports discussed topics including censorship, land reform, the Autumn Harvest Uprising and police abuses. In the last dispatch, Gayn suggested an eight-point program of reform which called for the appointment of a new civilian governor, immediate democratic elections, the release of all political prisoners, and an end to all official relations with Syngman Rhee and other rightists connected with violence.

This version of the series was ultimately never published. Gayn’s no-holds-barred approach to Korea was unquestionably controversial for its time. Although Gayn was careful to emphasize that he had interviewed a wide range of people in Korea, including members of the military government and rightist politicians, his criticisms of the mistakes and duplicity of US military authorities threatened to trigger a major scandal.¹⁰⁶ But Gayn was also the victim of unfortunate timing: he arrived back in Tokyo to discover that the *Sun* was letting him go as part of an economy drive. After an unsuccessful bid to stay on in Japan as a correspondent for another newspaper, Gayn left Japan just one month later, much to the delight of American authorities. Although the *Sun*’s editor, Eli Dimitman, still claimed to be interested in the series, he finally rejected it in late January 1947. Gayn believed this reflected both the paper’s shift away from the liberal camp and the fact that Dimitman had been invited on a military junket to meet with MacArthur and Hodge.¹⁰⁷ By this point, Gayn also wanted to publish the story elsewhere and offered condensed versions to *Harper’s* and the *New Republic*. The *New Republic* accepted one article for its September 1947 edition, almost one year after the trip to Korea.¹⁰⁸ Parts of the series also formed the basis for five articles Gayn wrote for *PM* in November 1947.¹⁰⁹ Yet, the lag between reporting and publication stripped these articles of almost all of their news value. The new versions focused on general aspects of the situation in Korea and contained little criticism of military censorship.

Gayn’s failure to publish his account of Korea was a great missed opportunity. As Joe Fromm argued in a letter to Gayn, it was potentially a major scoop, “the only story on one of the biggest peasant revolts in history and one which would have made one of the bigger stinks in Washington.”¹¹⁰

While several other correspondents visited Korea during this time, the coverage they produced was perfunctory.¹¹¹ As a result, assessments of the cause of the riots in the US press were often deeply confused. In its initial AMG-inflected account of the riots, *Time* suggested that the rioting was a communist orchestrated scheme to wreck US plans for a popular election in Korea.¹¹² However, the following week, *Time* published an article, based on a briefing by State Department officials, which argued that both economic and political problems had made the Korean population susceptible to communist influence.¹¹³ It assailed the military government's political mistakes—in particular, its willingness to “string along with doddering Korean oldsters” and its grievous mishandling of rice supplies. A detailed and powerful critique of the occupation at this crucial moment could potentially have focused this critical coverage into a wider demand for a shift in policy. Ultimately, however, the moment passed and the momentum for Rhee's rise to power became increasingly irresistible.

THE RHEE LOBBY

One of the most remarkable aspects of coverage of South Korea during the occupation period was the emergence of Syngman Rhee as the major, and perhaps only, Korean figure with any name recognition in the United States. Following his years of obscurity in Washington, Rhee exploded onto the Korean political scene in October 1945 after General Hodge persuaded the State Department to allow Rhee to return to Korea, seemingly with the hope that he could be nurtured into supporting US goals in Korea.¹¹⁴

After his arrival in Korea on October 16, Hodge arranged for Rhee to stay in a palatial suite at the Chosun hotel in Seoul with armed guards and his own personal military aide.¹¹⁵ Rhee's American background made him a subject of intense interest for the American press corps in Seoul. Following a deluge of requests for interviews, Hodge instead enthusiastically introduced Rhee to journalists at a hastily arranged press conference (Fig. 2.2). A few days later, Hodge presented Rhee to the crowds at a national holiday event by describing him as a “great man who has given his entire life to the freedom of Korea.”¹¹⁶

The press coverage Rhee received in his first weeks and months in Korea greatly surpassed anything he had received before in terms of scale and positivity. Richard Johnston portrayed him as the “elder statesman of Korea's political freedom movement,” and someone who could mend the



Fig. 2.2 Syngman Rhee speaking on his return to Korea in October 1945. Lt. Gen. John Hodge, left. Source: Don O'Brien, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/dok1/111087982/>. Used under CC BY 2.0 license

divisions in Korean politics.¹¹⁷ Another visiting correspondent wrote that “the Koreans appear to love, trust and respect him.”¹¹⁸ Equally importantly, he was the only politically significant man in Korea who claimed that he did not want to be president. Even Gordon Walker, a staunch opponent of the rightist movement in Korea, admitted that Rhee was a celebrated figure amongst many Koreans, although he was at pains to stress that Rhee’s apparent popularity did not necessarily reflect his level of political support.¹¹⁹

While the arrival of other members of the Korean provisional government, in particular President Kim Koo, also received press coverage, none of them shared Rhee’s one great advantage; his close ties to the United States. After Koo and Rhee positioned themselves as the leaders of the nationalist movement against trusteeship in January 1946, Rhee could count on his lobby network, based around the Korean Commission in Washington, DC, to draw attention to *Rhee’s* campaign for Korean independence.

A key figure in Rhee’s lobby network was former Office of Strategic Services (OSS) operative Preston Goodfellow, whom Rhee had first met in 1941 when the US government was gathering intelligence about Japan in anticipation of a military conflict.¹²⁰ Following Pearl Harbor, Goodfellow worked with Rhee to recruit one hundred young Koreans for a War Department scheme to infiltrate guerrilla fighters into Korea and use them to sabotage Japan’s war fighting capability. Although the plan did not come to fruition, their relationship blossomed and Goodfellow was invited to join Rhee in Korea in October 1945. A hawkish anti-communist, Goodfellow was committed to the cause of establishing an independent government in the American occupation zone as a bulwark against Soviet annexation of all of Korea. Until his retirement in May 1946, Goodfellow worked as a political adviser to the AMG, acting as a go-between for General Hodge and the anti-trusteeship nationalists.¹²¹ After returning to the United States, he continued in this role, as well as meeting with policy-makers, journalists and other members of the foreign policy elite through his OSS contacts.¹²²

A small group of Rhee supporters worked alongside Goodfellow on lobbying and public advocacy projects. Amongst the most important of these figures were Robert T. Oliver and Colonel Ben C. Limb, the Chairman of the Korean Commission.¹²³ Following the announcement of plans for trusteeship at the “Big Three” Moscow conference in December 1945, Oliver and Limb took advantage of the increased public

interest in Korea by writing a series of letters to major newspapers. In these letters, they argued that trusteeship was a mistake and that Korean nationalist groups represented the best chance of establishing a broad-based democratic movement against communism. Limb suggested that their main rival, the leftist Korean People's Republic, was hopelessly compromised by its connections with the Soviet-controlled communist regime in the north.

Other Koreans made more dramatic attempts to draw attention to the Korean situation. An anti-trusteeship demonstration in Manhattan by the Korean Society of New York and Korean-American Council attracted significant coverage in the New York press.¹²⁴ In September 1946, Rhee sent Louise Yim, another longstanding Korean independence activist, to lobby member states of the United Nations to sponsor a resolution calling for Korean independence. Although Yim's efforts won the sympathy of a few journalists, the United States and the Soviet Union worked to quietly kill the plan.¹²⁵ The UN would not discuss Korea unless the superpowers wanted it.

While Rhee's US-based lobby helped him establish a stronger profile in the United States, none of its attempts to generate greater public interest in Korea met with much success. Preston Goodfellow failed in his goal of making Korea a potential campaign issue for the Republicans in the 1946 mid-term elections.¹²⁶ Scattered articles and letters in newspapers could not persuade the American public to care about what seemed to be a remote and intractable problem. Rhee's reputation also began to slide after Korean leftists seized on rumors that he was enriching his American friends at Korea's expense. When Goodfellow suggested returning to Korea to General Hodge in October 1946, Hodge informed him such a trip would be ill-advised since rumors of a "Rhee-Staggers-Oliver-Goodfellow commercial combine" had made many Koreans suspicious, even amongst the rightist groups.¹²⁷ By the start of 1947, these rumors were spreading into the liberal press in the United States.¹²⁸

With the political situation in Korea looking increasingly stalemated by the end of 1946, Rhee became convinced that the future of Korean independence rested with decision-makers in Washington. Having exhausted the political possibilities in Korea, Rhee decided to return to his lobbyist roots and once again make his case to the American public and their political leaders in person. Thus, in December 1946, Rhee set off for Washington to make one last decisive bid for the independence of his country.

CONCLUSION

The first year of the occupation was a decisive moment in Korea's post-war trajectory. The United States faced the challenge, as Richard Johnston put it, "of building an entirely new political structure from the ground up" in Korea.¹²⁹ By the end of 1946, however, it was clear that no one had any real idea what this structure should look like. The failure of the United States and the Soviet Union to establish a political framework for Korean independence inspired Koreans in both zones of occupation to begin the process of political consolidation around fiercely polarized ideologies. This marked the first stage of the rise to power in southern Korea of a fervently anti-communist political elite with no qualms about using repressive methods to silence opposition.

American press coverage of these developments was very limited. A combination of lack of interest in Korea and widespread assumptions about the backwardness of the Korean population encouraged a fatalistic approach to the occupation's problems—a fatalism that was exacerbated by the effectiveness of the AMG in avoiding negative press coverage. Since the AMG appeared to be making the best of difficult circumstances, few observers saw a need for a change in policy. Only a small group of American correspondents, with unusual personal backgrounds and professional working conditions, offered dissenting views on the situation in southern Korea. They could not, however, overcome the power of American military authorities to control the flow of information about the occupation back to the United States.

Although the apathy over Korea helped shield the AMG from controversy in its first year, it stored up trouble for the future. The lack of significant public debate about Korea made it easy for the US government—and, in particular, the State Department—to ignore the deteriorating situation on the ground. The indecision in Washington created a political vacuum in which Syngman Rhee and his US-based supporters sought to seize the initiative. Although these efforts achieved little in 1946, Rhee laid the foundations for a rather more successful campaign the following year.

NOTES

1. Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War, Vol. 1: Liberation and the Emergence of Separate Regimes, 1945–1947*, 428–44.
2. Millett, *The War for Korea, 1945–1950: A House Burning*, 52–71.

3. Robinson wrote that he first began to question the occupation while working for its Bureau of Public Opinion in 1946. After reporting that Koreans were deeply unhappy with the occupation, he was transferred to the historical section of military intelligence where he was able to read high-level reports by occupation officials that he believed deliberately falsified information about the situation in South Korea: Richard D. Robinson, "A Personal Journey Through Time and Space," *Journal of International Business Studies* 25, no. 3 (1994), 436–7; Richard D. Robinson [Will Hamlin], "*Betrayal of a Nation*" (Unpublished manuscript: Georgetown University Library, 1950), 2.
4. Deane, *The Korean War: 1945–1953*, 23.
5. Deane, for instance, claimed that, prior to 1950, the Seoul press corps primarily consisted of the wives of AMG personnel working as stringers for the main press agencies. In reality, the three major American press agencies had dedicated correspondents throughout this period: Deane, *The Korean War: 1945–1953*, 24.
6. The impact of racialized and "orientalist" thinking on American officials in Korea has been explored in several recent studies: William Stueck and Boram Yi, "'An Alliance Forged in Blood': The American Occupation of Korea, the Korean War, and the US–South Korean Alliance," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 33, no. 2 (2010), 177–209; Bruce Cumings, "American Orientalism at War in Korea and the United States," in *Orientalism and War*, ed. by Tarak Barkawi and Ketih Stanski (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); Charles Kraus, "American Orientalism in Korea," *Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 22, no. 2 (2015), 147–65.
7. Ronald Ian Heiferman, *The Cairo Conference of 1943: Roosevelt, Churchill, Chiang Kai-Shek and Madame Chiang* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2011), 112.
8. Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 127–32; AP, "Korean Women and Children Speared," *Washington Post*, 28 March 1919; "Japan's Plan Unjust," *Washington Post*, 27 July 1919.
9. "Hope for Korea," *New York Times*, 2 December 1943.
10. Since Korea was rarely mentioned in American news media prior to World War II, Jimin Kim has argued that travel writing in the 1930s played a major role in cementing American perceptions of the backwardness of the Korean people. Magazines such as *National Geographic* generally depicted native Koreans as trapped in their traditional and underdeveloped ways of life, in stark contrast to the modernizing efforts of their Japanese rulers: Jimin Kim, "Representing the Invisible: The American Perceptions of Colonial Korea" (Unpublished Ph.D. diss.: Columbia University, 2011), 237–43.

11. Klein, *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination 1945–1961*, 26.
12. The primary architect of the trusteeship concept was William Langdon, a State Department official who had served in the American consulate in Seoul in the 1930s. For a full account of how US plans for trusteeship evolved during and after World War II, see Matray, *Reluctant Crusade: American Policy in Korea, 1941–50*.
13. Walter Lippmann, “Toward an Asiatic Settlement,” *Washington Post*, 28 June 1945. Lippmann probably read, or was briefed on, the contents of a confidential State Department report which emphasized the potential for political chaos in Korea and the necessity of American aid in the creation of an independent and democratic Korean republic; “An Estimate of Conditions in Asia and the Pacific at the Close of the War in the Far East and the Objectives and Policies of the United States,” 22 June 1945, *FRUS* 1945, 6, 556–80. Lippmann’s failure to justify the need for trusteeship received public criticism from at least one supporter of Korean independence: Inez Kong Pal, Letter “Lippmann on Korea,” *Washington Post*, 8 July 1945.
14. Sumner Welles, “America’s Duty in Far East to Free All China from Foreign Intrusion,” *Boston Globe*, 30 August 1945.
15. Rhee’s early life has been extensively explored in several biographies: Lew; Chong-Sik Lee, *Syngman Rhee: The Prison Years of a Young Radical* (Seoul: Yonsei University Press, 2001); Allen; Robert T. Oliver, *Syngman Rhee: The Man Behind the Myth* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1954).
16. Jay Jerome Williams, Letter “Korea Appeals for Our Help,” *New York Herald Tribune*, 10 September 1944; Colonel Ben C. Limb, Letter “Hope for Korea,” *New York Herald Tribune*, 8 November 1944.
17. Rhee’s Christian faith was much commented on by the American press. Rhee claimed to have converted to Christianity while imprisoned by the Japanese in Korea. Although he initially identified as a Methodist, he left the Church in 1916 after a dispute over the segregation of Korean children in Hawaiian schools. See Allen, *Korea’s Syngman Rhee: An Unauthorized Portrait*, 54.
18. Oliver, “My Life as a Korean Ghost,” 70.
19. For more on the origins and political influence of the China Lobby, see Ross Y. Koen, *The China Lobby in American Politics* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974). On Luce’s relationship with China, see Herzstein, *Henry R. Luce, Time, and the American Crusade in Asia*.
20. Henry Luce, “The American Century,” *Life*, 17 February 1941.
21. “Voices in Bondage,” *Time*, 13 March 1944; “Missionaries to Korea,” *Time*, 13 March 1944.

22. Luce to All Managing Editors, 12 June 1944, Time-Life-Fortune Papers, John Shaw Billings Papers, South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina.
23. Frank Gibney, "Syngman Rhee: The Free Man's Burden," *Harper's Magazine*, 1 February 1954.
24. One notable success for Rhee was an admiring mention in Eleanor Roosevelt's column "My Day" in April 1945.
25. O. H. P. King, *Tail of the Paper Tiger* (Caldwell, ID: The Caxton Printers, 1961), 525.
26. For more on McCormick's background, see Richard Norton Smith, *The Colonel: The Life and Legend of Robert R. McCormick, 1880–1955* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2003).
27. It is not entirely clear when or how McCormick and Rhee became acquainted. The first letter from Rhee to McCormick in McCormick's personal papers, dated June 1946, indicated they had already known each other for some time before then: Rhee to McCormick, 28 June 1946, "Korea, 1946–1955 (Syngman Rhee)" Folder, Box 48, Papers of Colonel Robert R. McCormick, First Division Museum.
28. Frank Kelley and Cornelius Ryan, *Star-Spangled Mikado* (New York: R. M. McBride, 1947), 186–95; "MacArthur's Press Relations Deplored," *Editor & Publisher*, 1 April 1950. For an account of how this censorship system functioned, see North to Lockheart, 11 August 1950, Box 5, C/S, U.S. Army Chief of Information, Unclassified Decimal File 1949–1950, 000.7 to 000.74, NARA.
29. Charles J. Kelly, *Tex McCrary: Wars-Women-Politics: An Adventurous Life Across the American Century* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Pub. Inc., 2009), 82–94. The biography does not discuss the trip to Korea.
30. William Prochnau argued that Bigart's suspicion of the establishment stemmed from two incidents during World War II which had confirmed to him the "bullshit logic" of warfighters. While reporting on a bombing mission against Germany in February 1943, Bigart had been asked to man the guns on a B-17 as it was attacked by German fighters over the English Channel. After returning home, he learned that one of the other bombers carrying a fellow war reporter had been shot down by friendly fire and that he might have been the one responsible. On another bombing raid against Japan in 1945, Bigart witnessed the crew of the bomber learn of the Japanese surrender halfway through the flight. Hoping to avoid risking their lives and causing further unnecessary deaths, the crew waited for a mission abort order. Instead, they flew on and completed the mission, killing an unknown number of Japanese after the war was already over: William Prochnau, *Once Upon a Distant War* (New York: Vintage, 1996), 36–7.

31. Richard Kluger, *The Paper: The Life and Death of the New York Herald Tribune* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986), 364–71.
32. Hohenberg, *Foreign Correspondence: Great Reporters and Their Times*, 244; Homer Bigart, “A Month After the Atomic Bomb: Hiroshima Still Can’t Believe It,” *New York Herald Tribune*, 3 September 1945.
33. Langdon to Acheson, 26 November 1945, *FRUS* 1945, 6, 1134.
34. Neal Stanford, “Korea Policy Defended,” *Christian Science Monitor*, 11 September 1945; “Liberation in Korea,” *New York Times*, 11 September 1945.
35. Homer Bigart, “Hodge Backs Japanese Policing of Korea,” *New York Herald Tribune*, 12 September 1945.
36. “Remaking The Conquered Peoples: Japan and Germany Under Occupation,” *New York Times*, 23 September 1945. On 22 September, US Army General George S. Patton caused a similar scandal when he told reporters at a press conference that he did not see the need for denazification and that the Nazi question was “much like a Democratic and Republican election fight.” After Patton failed to adequately explain his remarks, General Eisenhower removed him from his position as governor of Bavaria: Raymond Daniell, “Paton Belittles Denazification,” *New York Times*, 22 September 1945.
37. John Walker to Time, 1 October 1945, Time Inc. Dispatches from Time magazine correspondents: First Series, 1942–1955, Houghton Library, Harvard College Library.
38. William L. Shirer, “Korea Tangle Called Example of Bungling U.S. Foreign Policy,” *New York Herald Tribune*, 16 September 1945.
39. George Silk to Time, 15 September 1945, Time Inc. Dispatches from Time magazine correspondents: First Series, 1942–1955, Houghton Library, Harvard College Library.
40. “Korean Powder Keg,” *Boston Globe*, 13 September 1945; “Korea and the Pledge to Give Her Independence,” *Baltimore Sun*, 13 September 1945.
41. “In Due Course,” *Washington Post*, 11 September 1945.
42. Kelley and Ryan, *Star-Spangled Mikado*, 186. Kelley described MacArthur’s censorship as one of the most disgraceful episodes of the war in an article for the *Herald Tribune*: Frank Kelley, “MacArthur’s Censorship Off for U.S. Press,” *New York Herald Tribune*, 7 October 1945.
43. “M’Arthur Sets Up Quota for Press,” *New York Times*, 13 October 1945; William J. Coughlin, *Conquered Press: The MacArthur Era in Japanese Journalism* (Palo Alto, CA: Pacific Books, 1952), 111–19.
44. Kelley and Ryan, *Star-Spangled Mikado*, 194.

45. Diary entry for 14 October 1946, Box 98, Mark Gayn Papers, Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto.
46. "W. H. Buntin Sells Newspaper Interest," *Reno Gazette-Journal*, 14 March 1942.
47. Richard E. Lauterbach, "A Failure of the American Press," *PM*, 11 October 1946.
48. Diary entry for 14 October 1946, Box 98, Mark Gayn Papers, Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto. According to Gayn, the supportive relationship between journalists and military officials was reciprocated and on at least one occasion an intervention by General Hodge saved William Buntin from being recalled by INS for his poor behavior.
49. AP, "Democracy Action 'Bursting' in Korea," *Christian Science Monitor*, 10 April 1946.
50. Millett, *The War for Korea, 1945-1950: A House Burning*, 60-1; Richard Johnston, "Radicals in Korea Hit Gen. A. V. Arnold," *New York Times*, 30 October 1945.
51. Harold Isaacs, "Do We Run Korea Badly? Well, Look How Reds Do," *Newsweek*, 24 September 1945.
52. Palmer Hoyt Jr., "Political Tugging in Korea," *Free World*, March 1946.
53. Correspondent databook entry for Richard Johnston, Box 55, New York Times Company Records. Foreign Desk Records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, NYPL.
54. "Richard Johnston Is Dead At Age 76," *New York Times*, 25 December 1986.
55. Richard Johnston, "Eager Koreans Help Us to Run Their Country," *New York Times*, 30 September 1945.
56. Richard Johnston, "Major Freedoms Restored in Korea," 20 September 1945, *New York Times*; Richard Johnston, "Korea's Gaiety Survives Bondage," *New York Times*, 21 October 1945.
57. Richard Johnston, "Party Rift Widens in Korea Dispute," *New York Times*, 18 January 1946.
58. Untitled report on Pak controversy, Box 1, General Correspondence 1943-46, USAFIK Commandant's Office, RG554, NARA. According to Bruce Cumings, *Stars & Stripes* reporter Sgt. Robert Cornwall accused Johnston of misrepresenting Pak's comments in an article in the English-language *Seoul Times* but there are no existent copies of the newspaper: Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War, Vol. 1: Liberation and the Emergence of Separate Regimes, 1945-1947*, 224-5.
59. Diary entry for 20 October 1946, Box 98, Mark Gayn Papers, Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto; for an example of this anti-leftist coverage, see "Korean Christians Cite Abuse by Reds," *New York Times*, 14 March 1946.

60. Diary entry for 24 October 1946, Box 98, Mark Gayn Papers, Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto.
61. Diary entry for 18 October 1946, Box 98, Mark Gayn Papers, Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto.
62. Richard Johnston, "Japan Looks Good After Korean Stay," *New York Times*, 30 September 1946.
63. Johnston to Hodge, 27 January 1947, Box 2, General Correspondence 1947, USAFIK Commandant's Office, RG554, NARA. The contents of this letter are discussed in Chap. 3.
64. Hodge to MacArthur, 22 November 1945, *FRUS* 1945, 6, 1133.
65. "Services Held for Former Man of Year," *Tustin News*, 3 January 1980.
66. During the Korean War, MacArthur claimed that there had not been a single security breach providing assistance to the enemy: MacArthur to CINFO, 28 September 1950, Box 5, C/S, U.S. Army Chief of Information, Unclassified Decimal File 1949–1950, 000.7 to 000.74, NARA.
67. Diary entry for 18 October 1946, Box 98, Mark Gayn Papers, Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto.
68. Mark Gayn letter, 16 June 1946, Box 4, Mark Gayn Papers, Mark Gayn Papers, Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto.
69. Mark Gayn, *Journey From The East* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1944), 180–90.
70. Gordon Walker, "Censorship: Pacific Wall," *Christian Science Monitor*, 10 October 1945.
71. Coughlin, *Conquered Press: The MacArthur Era in Japanese Journalism*, 113.
72. Erwin B. Canham, *Commitment to Freedom, the Story of the Christian Science Monitor* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1958), i–xx.
73. Canham, 52. In the 1930s, correspondents picked the *New York Times*, *Christian Science Monitor* and *Baltimore Sun* as the three most reliable and fair papers in the country: Leo C. Rosten, *The Washington Correspondents* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1937), 356.
74. Gayn's involvement in the *Amerasia* scandal was used by his critics to cast doubt on the legitimacy of his reporting: see, for instance, Westbrook Pegler, *The Cincinnati Enquirer*, 11 August 1950. For more on the background of the *Amerasia* case, see Harvey Klehr, *The Amerasia Spy Case: Prelude to McCarthyism* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).
75. Sally Gayn letter, 11 June 1946, Box 4, Mark Gayn Papers, Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto.
76. Walker and Gayn did not meet each other until Walker returned to Japan in early 1946, following an extended trip to Korea and China. During

- their first dinner together, they made an agreement to “join forces reпорtorially,” although it was not clear what this meant in practice: Mark Gayn letter, 16 June 1946, Box 4, Mark Gayn Papers, Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto.
77. Benis to USAFK, 29 November 1945, Box 1, General Correspondence 1943–46, USAFIK Commandant’s Office, RG554, NARA.
 78. Gordon Walker, “Americans Vie With Russians to Sell Democracy in Korea,” *Christian Science Monitor*, 29 October 1945.
 79. Gordon Walker, “U.S. Policy in Korea: Found Warped by Untutored AMG,” *Christian Science Monitor*, 13 November 1945.
 80. Gordon Walker, “Blunders May Provoke Civil War in Korea,” *Observer*, 18 November 1945.
 81. Langdon to Byrnes, 26 November 1945, *FRUS* 1945, 6, 1136.
 82. Gayn letter, 16 June 1946, Box 4, Mark Gayn Papers, Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto.
 83. Hodge to MacArthur, 1 January 1946, Box 1, General Correspondence 1943–46, USAFIK Commandant’s Office, RG554, NARA.
 84. Mark Gayn, *Japan Diary* (New York: William Sloane Associates, 1948), 450.
 85. Audrey Menefee, *Washington Post* columnist and former chief of the US propaganda monitoring service for the Far East, called for a detailed examination of the situation in Korea in response to Walker’s reporting: Audrey Menefee, “Solution for Korea,” *Washington Post*, 24 November 1945.
 86. Richard E. Lauterbach, “A Failure of the American Press,” *PM*, 11 October 1946.
 87. “Korean Independence,” *New York Times*, 29 December 1945. Similar views appeared even in more liberal newspapers: Rodney Gilbert, “Koreans and Their Faith in America,” *Christian Science Monitor*, 7 January 1946; “Korean Uncertainty,” *Washington Post*, 19 February 1946.
 88. For a discussion of the causes of the Autumn Harvest Uprising, see Millett, *The War for Korea, 1945–1950: A House Burning*, 86–91.
 89. Ralph Chapman, “Army Extends Martial Law in Korean Rioting,” *New York Herald Tribune*, 6 October 1946.
 90. Ralph Chapman, “Troop Curfew Set on Eve of Korea Holiday,” *New York Herald Tribune*, 11 October 1946; Ralph Chapman, “U.S. Army Rule Relaxed in Riot Zone of Korea,” *New York Herald Tribune*, 13 October 1946.
 91. Diary entry for 13 October 1946, Box 98, Mark Gayn Papers, Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto.
 92. Diary entry for 16 October 1946, Box 98, Mark Gayn Papers, Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto.

93. General Hodge's spokesmen also used briefings with journalists to reveal captured communist documents relating to the uprising, including one which outlined a scheme to establish a 500,000-man underground army in southern Korea: AP, "Korean Reds Accused," *New York Times*, 26 October 1946; UP, "U.S. Tanks Patrol Seoul After Riot," *New York Times*, 22 October 1946.
94. Charlotte Ebener, *No Facilities for Women* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1954), 54.
95. "Searchlight on Korea" series, Box 29, Philip Jaffe Papers, Rose Library Archives, Emory University.
96. "Korea: The Russians Came," *Time*, 28 January 1946. The story was written by a friend of Gayn's, although he agreed with the AMG official that the article "stank."
97. Diary entry for 18 October, Box 98, Mark Gayn Papers, Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto.
98. Foster Hailey, "Prominent Leftist Arrested in Korea," *New York Times*, 21 October 1946. This was the only story Hailey wrote during his time in Korea, although he later positively reviewed Gayn's published account of this period in the *Times*. He wrote that Gayn reminded him of an "old time police reporter" with a "slightly misanthropic view of his fellow man, who believed nothing he didn't see with his own eyes and only half of that": Foster Hailey, "Japan – Fact and Evaluation," *New York Times*, 5 December 1948.
99. Diary entry for 29 October, Box 98, Mark Gayn Papers, Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto.
100. Gayn, *Japan Diary*, 443.
101. Diary entry for 16 October, Box 98, Mark Gayn Papers, Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto.
102. Mark Gayn, "Korean Appeal for Allies to Act," *Chicago Sun*, 18 October 1946.
103. Diary entry for 18 October 1946, Box 98, Mark Gayn Papers, Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto.
104. Mark Gayn, "Korea Election May Be Voided," *Chicago Sun*, 11 November 1946. Nothing came of this attempt.
105. "Searchlight on Korea" series, Box 29, Philip Jaffe Papers, Rose Library Archives, Emory University.
106. Gayn claimed he had great difficulty getting the series out of Japan due to rigid military censorship: Gayn to Dimitman, 12 November 1946, Box 4, Mark Gayn Papers, Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto.
107. Gayn letter, 2 February 1947, Box 4, Mark Gayn Papers, Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto. While in Japan, Dimitman

- told Gayn's former colleagues that he had rejected the series because it was "too violent."
108. Mark Gayn, "In Korea," *New Republic*, 15 September 1947.
 109. The series was printed between 2 and 6 November 1947. For the first article, see Mark Gayn, "'Liberators' Turned Zones Into Military Bases," *PM*, 2 November 1947.
 110. Fromm to Mark and Sally Gayn, 3 August 1947, Box 4, Mark Gayn Papers, Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto.
 111. *Newsweek* published just one report during Charlotte Ebener's time in South Korea, a brief summary of the AMG's account of the October riots: "Korea: Master Plan," *Newsweek*, 4 November 1946. In her memoir, Ebener wrote that she was initially sceptical of the leftist groups in Korea and knew that the military government suspected Gayn of being a communist. However, she admired the way he persisted in investigating the causes of the riots instead of accepting the official line like other correspondents. She was forced to leave South Korea early when the military refused to give her permission to visit the island of Cheju, which had been the only region to elect a leftist candidate to the interim assembly: Ebener, *No Facilities for Women*, 65.
 112. "Korea: Mounting Chaos," *Time*, 7 October 1946.
 113. "Korea: Rx for Corns," *Time*, 14 October 1946. *Time's* editors had close contact with several senior officials in the Department of State, in particular Ed Pauley, President Truman's reparations commissioner, who had prepared a major report advocating Korean-led autonomy for southern Korea in the summer of 1946. State Department officials still believed that a young liberal leader could emerge in the south. Rhee, on the other hand, would push Korean politics far to the right and end any chance of a rapprochement with the Soviet-occupied north. Almost all of the discussion about Korea in *Time's* editorial correspondence for 1946 relates to private briefings by or about Department of State officials, including Pauley. For example, see Brecht to Welch, 30 May 1946, Time Inc. Dispatches from Time magazine correspondents: First Series, 1942–1955, Houghton Library, Harvard College Library.
 114. Hodge to Hearst, January 1948, Box 3, General Correspondence 1948, USAFIK Commandant's Office, RG554, NARA.
 115. Oliver, *Syngman Rhee and American Involvement in Korea; 1942–1960*, 19.
 116. Richard Johnston, "Rhee Calls Korea to Resist Division," *New York Times*, 21 October 1945.
 117. Richard Johnston, "Rhee, in Korea, Opposes Division; Urges Unity to Convince World," *New York Times*, 18 October 1945.
 118. Keith Wheeler, "Korea's Provisional President," *Boston Globe*, 1 December 1945.

119. Gordon Walker, "Exiled Koreans Cast as Leaders," *Christian Science Monitor*, 3 November 1945.
120. Goodfellow to Rhee, 4 September 1958, Box 1, Millard Preston Goodfellow Papers, Hoover Institution Archives.
121. Goodfellow to Rhee, 8 July 1946, Box 1, Millard Preston Goodfellow Papers, Hoover Institution Archives.
122. Goodfellow to Rhee, 1 November 1946, Box 1, Millard Preston Goodfellow Papers, Hoover Institution Archives.
123. Limb had followed Syngman Rhee to the United States in the 1910s and worked on and off as a Rhee lobbyist in Washington over the following decades. During World War II, Rhee bolstered Limb's credentials with a military commission to the rank of colonel in the practically non-existent provisional government army.
124. "Bringing Cause of Korea to Avenue of Americas," *New York Times*, 2 April 1946.
125. Louise Yim, *My Forty Year Fight for Korea* (New York: A. A. Wyn, 1951), 257–63.
126. Goodfellow to Rhee, 27 September 1946, Box 1, Millard Preston Goodfellow Papers, Hoover Institution Archives.
127. Hodge to Goodfellow, October 1946, Box 1, Millard Preston Goodfellow Papers, Hoover Institution Archives.
128. Will Hamlin (pseudonym for Richard D. Robinson), "Korea: An American Tragedy," *Nation*, 1 March 1947.
129. Richard Johnston, "Eager Koreans help US to run their country," *New York Times*, 29 September 1945.



CHAPTER 3

Occupation 1947–1948: Division and Independence

A year into the occupation of southern Korea, the United States faced a rapidly deteriorating political and economic situation. While the super-powers still officially supported the idea of a joint trusteeship, increasingly powerful rightist groups in the American-occupied zone made it clear that they would not accept any new period of international control over Korea. With the situation deadlocked, the focus shifted to Washington, where, after months of rising diplomatic tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union, it was finally decided to hand over the Korean problem to the United Nations (UN). By the end of 1947, the die had been cast for UN-supervised elections as a prelude to the establishment of an independent Korean state.

The growing complexity of the political situation in Korea was challenging to explain to the American public. In the wake of President Truman's declaration of the Truman Doctrine in March 1947, the negotiations with the Soviet Union over Korea's future emerged as a key Cold War flashpoint. Yet, the domestic political situation in Korea did not fit into the straightforward Cold War narrative of communist insurgents threatening a sovereign government. As many visitors to American-occupied Korea in the summer of 1947 discovered, both rightists and leftists were engaging in acts of violence, including sabotage and targeted assassinations.

An increasingly tangled web of relationships developed between the press and the different factions vying for control of southern Korea's

political development. During the early months of 1947, Syngman Rhee and General John Hodge battled for influence over policy-makers and the press in the United States. Although Hodge was initially more successful, Rhee strengthened his relationships with key anti-communist press outlets including *Time* and the Hearst papers. After the arrival of the United Nations in Korea at the end of 1947, liberal foreign correspondents made a desperate bid to halt the momentum towards independence.

By the time that elections were held, limited to only the American-occupied zone, the press was almost as polarized as the Korean population. While most American reporters put a positive spin on Korea's first-ever democratic elections, the potentially disastrous ramifications of the division of Korea were difficult to ignore. Many correspondents, particularly those with a liberal or leftist bent, began to fear that Korea was on the road to civil war.

POLITICAL DEADLOCK

In the wake of the failure to reach an agreement with the Soviet Union, the American Military Government (AMG) faced difficult questions over how to respond to the rising influence of Syngman Rhee and other rightist leaders.¹ Despite American attempts to encourage the emergence of a moderate and pro-trusteeship coalition as an alternative to Rhee and Koo, the Korean population had increasingly fallen under the rightists' sway during 1946. In November, pro-Rhee candidates won all but two of the seats in elections for the Interim Legislative Assembly. While the AMG prevented Rhee from seizing complete control of the Assembly by reserving half the seats for its own political appointees, this manoeuvre convinced Rhee that the AMG was more of an enemy than a friend in his campaign for Korean independence.

Both Rhee and Hodge recognized that some kind of intervention from the United States was needed to break the deadlock over the occupation's future. However, they faced an uphill struggle in generating interest in the Korean issue. The breakdown in negotiations between the United States and the Soviet Union during the summer of 1946 had taken Korea off the news agenda. In September, the *Times* had recalled its correspondent, Richard Johnston, leaving Seoul without a resident newspaper correspondent for the first time since the start of the occupation. When General MacArthur issued a report into the Autumn Harvest Uprising riots in mid-December, it received only a cursory press agency write-up in a few newspapers.² A scathing critique of the occupation by gossip columnist

Drew Pearson, in which he accused Hodge of gross incompetence and claimed that much of the Korean public was on the brink of starvation, triggered little political or editorial comment.³

Korea's lowly status as a news story stemmed, at least in part, from the lack of awareness of the occupation amongst both the policy-making and intellectual elite. In a letter to the *Times*, Robert T. Oliver wrote that responsible American officials regarded Korea as a "backwash among nations" that "can be left until some convenient time for reform of conditions there."⁴ As Richard Johnston awaited reassignment in the United States, he met with senior officials in Washington, including President Truman, to discuss Korea and was shocked by their "consistent lack of knowledge as to what the Korea question is all about or as to how it is to be solved."⁵ Both Oliver and Johnston also criticized the influence that communist propaganda had on many leftists and liberal Americans. Johnston wrote that he had encountered a "phalanx of 'liberal' journalists, detractors and Soviet apologists" in the United States who "grotesquely overemphasized" the communist sympathies of the Korean people.

Johnston's "phalanx" probably referred to radical communist newspapers such as the *Daily Worker*. Established in the 1920s as the newspaper of the American Communist Party, the *Worker* often published stories based on press releases and propaganda articles published in Soviet newspapers which increasingly portrayed the American occupation in southern Korea in negative terms.⁶ In October, the *Worker* carried an article by James S. Allen which argued that US attempts to install a "puppet regime" in Korea had led the AMG to encourage reactionary elements and repress "popular democratic forces."⁷ Although the *Daily Worker* had a relatively small circulation, its readership still included some of America's leading journalists and intellectuals—the kinds of people who Johnston would have met through his professional and social networks.

Yet, some members of the Rhee lobby did not share Johnston's pessimism. They were increasingly aware of the groundswell of anti-communism developing amongst the American Right. If sympathetic congressmen, officials and newsmen could be made aware of the policy vacuum in Korea and the danger posed by Soviet expansionism there, Rhee and his supporters believed they could turn Korea into an outlet for the frustration they felt towards the apparent impotence of US foreign policy. Between December 1946 and March 1947, the Korean Commission thus renewed and expanded its lobbying efforts, attempting to influence news coverage of Korea at a vital moment of Cold War escalation.

WASHINGTON LOBBY

The decisive change in the Korean Commission's lobbying strategy came in November 1946, when Rhee, frustrated with the AMG's response to the Interim Assembly elections, decided to return to the United States. Although Hodge had reservations about Rhee's purpose in travelling to the United States, he seemingly hoped that it would raise Korea's profile to the AMG's benefit.⁸ After setting off from Korea on December 3, Rhee stopped for several days in Tokyo for press interviews and a meeting with General Douglas MacArthur. Although MacArthur was reluctant to see him, Rhee's persistent efforts to organize a meeting, including delaying his travel by an extra day, forced the General to grant him an audience for a few minutes. This was enough, however, for Rhee to claim to have an inside scoop on MacArthur's thinking on Korea.⁹ Later that day, he met with the *Times*'s Lindesay Parrott to set out his new strategy in public for the first time. In a major break from previous nationalist demands for the immediate reunification of the whole of Korea under an independent government, Rhee now called for the establishment of an independent provisional government in the American-occupied zone only.¹⁰ Such an arrangement, Rhee argued, would simply mirror the Korean-led regime established in Soviet-occupied Korea. While Rhee was careful not to directly criticize Hodge, AMG officials worried that his call for transforming the Interim Legislative Assembly into an independent South Korean government would be interpreted by all sides as the true intent of US policy. In an attempt to counter Rhee's claims, General Hodge issued a lengthy press statement clarifying that the AMG would remain in southern Korea until a unified and democratic Korean regime was ready to take its place.¹¹

Hodge could not, however, stop Rhee from recruiting supporters to his cause once he was in Washington. For the first month of his stay in Washington, Rhee sought out friendly newsmen, State Department officials and members of Congress. According to Robert T. Oliver, Rhee encountered a large pool of both reporters and officials who shared his belief that the United States needed to do more to stand up to the Soviet Union in Korea.¹² Crucially, many also agreed with Rhee that Hodge had "acted undemocratically, unfairly and unwisely" over the elections issue. However, very few of these potential allies were people of influence. High-level policy-makers were bemused by Rhee's lobbying efforts. For instance,

when Oliver presented John Carter Vincent, the Director of the Office of Far Eastern Affairs, with a copy of their six-point program, Vincent curtly informed Oliver that the Americans already shared identical goals with the Koreans.¹³

The Rhee lobby also struggled to gain traction with the press. Without any significant Korean news developments to peg stories on, newspapers were generally unwilling to give Rhee and his supporters valuable column inches. Rhee and his allies debated whether they could stimulate interest in Korea by organizing a series of violent disturbances across the country. Although many of Rhee's supporters in Korea were keen on using uprisings to push Korea back into the global spotlight, this risked creating a negative backlash if they were perceived to be anti-American.¹⁴ As rumors of plots circulated throughout southern Korea, the AMG discovered evidence that some of Rhee's supporters were hoping to use the mass protests as a prelude to a coup d'état against the occupation authority.¹⁵ After Hodge issued a statement denouncing the Korean rightists for their scheming, Rhee jumped at the opportunity to issue his own statement accusing Hodge and the AMG of continuing "efforts to build up and foster the Korean communist party."¹⁶

Rhee's direct attack on Hodge marked the beginning of the second stage of Rhee's strategy to change US policy in Korea. Unable to get the State Department to accept his proposals directly, Rhee hoped that he could accomplish much the same result by orchestrating the removal of Hodge from Korea. With Hodge gone, Rhee believed that there would be no one left to stand in the way of the establishment of a southern Korean government. US officials suspected that Rhee was seeking to capitalize on the supposed feuding between Hodge and AMG governor Archer L. Lerch that Drew Pearson had identified as a major cause of the disastrous administration of Korea.¹⁷ Rhee developed this line of attack further, arguing that while he and Lerch agreed on the necessary program for creating a Korean democracy, Hodge's obsession with appeasing the Soviets was preventing it from happening.

The controversy over Rhee's comments prompted speculation that the United States was on the verge of a complete withdrawal from Korea and put pressure on policy-makers to publicly define and defend US policy.¹⁸ At the beginning of February, Secretary of War Robert Patterson ordered Hodge to return to Washington to brief a high-level State Department and War Department committee on the situation in Korea. Patterson also

expected Hodge to testify before Congress on the importance of funding a new Korean aid bill, in part as a riposte to a Joint Strategic Survey Committee report which argued that the United States should reduce its military commitment to Korea as soon as possible.¹⁹ Hodge's arrival in Washington and appearance in front of Congress received widespread press attention, but his call for an economic rehabilitation program as a way to undercut support for extremist elements in Korean society was largely ignored. Many newspapers sensationally focused on statements he made about the communist threat in North Korea—in particular, his claim that Soviets were building an army in their zone of occupation which could be used to invade southern Korea.²⁰

Hodge's testimony helped to instigate a change in focus of Korea coverage from problems with the AMG to the growing crisis in US–Soviet relations, a shift that became even more pronounced a few weeks later when President Truman proclaimed a new strategic approach to US foreign policy, the “Truman Doctrine.” Responding to a British request for US aid in fighting the communist insurgency in Greece, Truman declared that the United States would seek to resist communism anywhere it threatened to overthrow recognized governments. The speech was widely interpreted as the beginning of a global ideological and geostrategic confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union—with clear implications for the future of Korea.

Indeed, just a few days after Truman's speech, Rhee issued a press release claiming that Korea would be granted full independence within 60 days.²¹ While the State Department told the Associated Press (AP) that Rhee's claims were nothing more than “suppositions,” Secretary of State George Marshall fuelled further speculation when he publicly informed Soviet Foreign Minister Molotov that the United States was planning to take steps towards “establishing the eventual independence” of the American zone.²² Anticipating that the United States was about to break all ties with the Soviet Union, Rhee left the United States for Korea in early April. Yet, the relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union had not quite declined far enough for the Truman administration to give up on the Moscow agreement. American diplomats continued to push for a further round of talks, a request to which the Soviets finally acceded in late May, leaving Rhee once again facing the nightmarish prospect of the United States doing a deal with the Soviets which could exclude Korean rightists from power.

MEASURING SUCCESS

While historians generally agree that Rhee's lobbying in Washington put pressure on US policy-makers to better define US policy in Korea, it is far less clear whether he had a significant impact on press perceptions of the situation in Korea. Most stories relating to Rhee that appeared in mainstream newspapers were brief press agency news items. Perhaps the most significant aspect of this kind of coverage was the status it afforded Rhee as the leading spokesperson for the Korean people in the United States; the *Times* went as far as to describe Rhee as the "provisional president of Korea" —a title with no official standing—in some of its coverage.²³

By far the most positive and important assessment of Rhee to appear in the press during this period was an article in a March edition of *Time* which framed developments in Korea around a speech given by General John H. Hilldring, the newly appointed Assistant Secretary of State for Occupied Territories and one of the few State Departments officials that held Rhee in high regard. After sympathetically presenting Hilldring's case for supporting the development of the American-occupied zone of Korea, the article explained how Rhee was hoping to get Hodge's "heavy military hand lifted off the country's budding political life."²⁴ This favorable assessment of Rhee went against the views of *Time's* own Korea experts, who regarded him as a radical and supported Hodge's policy of limiting his influence over the Interim Legislative Assembly.²⁵ It also represented a significant change in editorial tone from just a few months before when Rhee had been cast as an elderly and out-of-touch reactionary. *Time's* editors were likely aware that their boss, Henry Luce, had reiterated his support for Rhee at a special executive dinner organized by him and Winthrop Aldrich, the president of Chase National Bank, in which Rhee and Louise Yim had been introduced to leading members of the East Coast establishment.²⁶ In any case, March 1947 represented the moment that Luce's press empire firmly endorsed Rhee's political goals—a crucial milestone in Rhee's drive to win American public support.²⁷

The greatest threat to Rhee's lobbying campaign comprised press reports based on information obtained from American critics inside southern Korea. When Tokyo-based correspondent Walter Simmons visited Korea in December 1946, he wrote an article highly sympathetic to the AMG which argued that the idea of a withdrawal from Korea was "incredibly naïve" given the scale of the Soviet threat.²⁸ Three months later, Simmons returned to Seoul to report that Rhee's US mission had not only caused major

embarrassment for the Korean command, but also actually hurt the chances of his nation becoming independent. Underlining the damage done to Rhee's credibility, Simmons wrote that Americans in Korea now saw him as an "ambitious and autocratic man who would like to be a dictator."²⁹

Simmons' reportage ran counter to the *Chicago Daily Tribune's* reputation as a staunch advocate of both isolationism and anti-communism—a combination which, in theory, made it a natural ally in Rhee's campaign for a rightist-oriented Korean regime to replace the US occupation government. Rhee had, in fact, written several times to the *Tribune's* publisher, Colonel Robert McCormick, asking him to dispatch correspondents to Korea to raise awareness of the situation there.³⁰ He seemingly failed to appreciate that Walter Simmons, the *Tribune's* East Asian correspondent, was intensely loyal to the American military governments in the Far East—in one instance, he asked for a meeting with MacArthur to ensure that none of his dispatches contained anything other than complete support for him and his policies.³¹

An even more scathing attack on Rhee appeared in the *Nation*, a leading leftist-liberal political magazine. An anonymous member of the occupation government—later revealed to be intelligence officer Richard D. Robinson—described in detail Rhee's outsized role in the January plot to overthrow the AMG, as well as allegations that Rhee had been using his influence in Korea and the United States to enrich himself and his American supporters. While these claims had first appeared in the left-wing press in Korea the previous summer, this was the first time that Rhee was accused of seeking power for personal profit in the mainstream US press, a claim which his supporters would dedicate much time trying to refute over the following years.

The *Nation* article did not limit its criticism to Rhee alone. Robinson castigated the American command for keeping Japanese collaborators in office and emasculating the Interim Legislative Assembly as soon as it showed signs of becoming a functioning democratic institution under the "progressive leadership" of its State Department-backed Chairman Kim Kyu-Sik. Rather than letting the military government gradually push Korea towards communism, Robinson argued that it was better for the United States to cut its losses and leave, even if this resulted in civil war.

Although Robinson's arguments were extreme, much of the serious analysis of Korea that appeared in the internationally-minded American press came to similar conclusions. Articles in *Harper's* and the *New York Herald Tribune* argued that a strong case could be made for the United

States and Soviet Union withdrawing and leaving the Koreans to decide on their own form of government—although the *Tribune* admitted that American withdrawal would almost certainly favor the communists.³²

For Hodge, the growing apathy over the US mission in Korea was deeply troubling. While back in the United States, he met with Preston Goodfellow and other prominent citizens to discuss ways of improving public awareness of the situation in Korea.³³ The most enthusiastic response came from Dr. Harold Fisher, a Stanford University scholar of Soviet and Asian affairs, who had helped train officers for occupation duty during World War II. Fisher hoped to establish an academic “Korean American Institute” to promote Korean affairs in the United States. While Hodge and Lerch gave their backing to the plan, Fisher’s plan was dependent on getting funding from a major philanthropic organization such as the Rockefeller Foundation.³⁴

Hodge also sought War Department support for the establishment of a US-based “Korean Office of Information” staffed by representatives of the AMG, with headquarters in Washington and field offices in New York and San Francisco, that would publicize the AMG’s activities and encourage the right kind of press stories about Korea.³⁵ He believed that such an agency could provide leading columnists with the “facts and background” to enable them to interpret spot news as well as supply human-interest features for weekly newspapers and women’s media outlets. Other proposals included organizing radio talks, film showings, exhibitions and public lectures describing the work of the AMG and the culture of Korea.

Ultimately, neither project made it past the drawing board. At a time of significant retrenchment in military spending and uncertainty over the future of Korea, the War Department had no desire to establish a grandiose Korea-specific public relations program. Indeed, over the summer of 1947 the Army moved to a position of advocating for total US withdrawal from Korea. Fisher similarly failed to find any support for his institute at the Rockefeller Foundation—which was focused on Europe and more strategic areas of Asia.³⁶

Although neither Rhee nor Hodge achieved a significant breakthrough in their efforts to influence public perceptions of Korea in the United States in early 1947, Rhee’s prominence in the United States undoubtedly increased the pressure on Hodge and the AMG to speed up the process of transition to a Korean-led government. Most critically for Rhee, his time in the United States solidified his standing with at least one of the most influential press outlets in the country.

RIGHTISTS THRIVE AMID CONFUSION

Syngman Rhee's return to Korea in April 1947 signaled the beginning of a new phase of the Korean crisis. Rhee and his rightist allies ratcheted up the pressure on the Americans to suspend negotiations with the Soviets and to declare full support for an independent Korean state through a series of demonstrations and violent attacks on leftists. By the end of July, US policy-makers were convinced that the deterioration in the political situation in Korea could only be halted through working with Rhee and establishing an independent Korean regime. However, US negotiators still clung onto the hope of a breakthrough with the Soviets.

Press coverage of Korea during this period was significantly more detailed than at any previous moment in the history of the occupation.³⁷ The Joint Commission was widely regarded as the last chance for a political solution to the Korea crisis. With public interest in Korea's future particularly acute in light of the burgeoning Cold War, the press focused much of its attention on the Soviet negotiation strategy. The brewing civil war between leftist and rightist Korean groups received only sporadic and partisan analysis. Much of it indirectly endorsed the rightists as principled, if aggressive, critics of any deal with the Soviets. Thus, in spite of his intransigence and undermining of the AMG, Rhee's political stature grew ever-stronger.

American newspaper coverage of Korea continued to rely on a small group of correspondents with close ties to the AMG. The press agencies followed the lead of AMG press officers in deciding which stories to publish, a cozy relationship that was reciprocated when Hodge fought to keep UP correspondent Stanley Rich in Korea in spite of problems caused by his alleged personal "peculiarities."³⁸ Another crucial weapon in Hodge's press armory was Richard Johnston, who had been reappointed to Korea following months of heavy lobbying by Rhee.³⁹ After getting reacquainted with his official friends in Seoul in early April, Johnston immediately resumed dispatching flattering accounts of the general's activities. When Hodge went on a tour of the American-occupied zone, Johnston wrote that 120,000 Koreans in the city of Kwangju had taken the day off to greet him.⁴⁰ AP meanwhile reported that the morale of soldiers Hodge encountered on the tour was excellent, a rebuke to allegations that US soldiers were suffering from military neglect in Korea.⁴¹

The AMG also benefitted from the growing passivity and risk aversion of news editors in the United States. Joe Fromm, Tokyo correspondent

for the conservative *World Report*, complained that almost everything he wrote was being watered down by his editors.⁴² Correspondents seeking to get critical articles into print had to take a rather subtler approach. In June, *Time* and *Life* correspondent Carl Mydans wrote an account of a visit to a Korean National Youth Movement camp that had worrying parallels to the Hitler Youth. Rather than explicitly describing the link, Mydans simply let the school's director incriminate himself: "I studied in Germany, 1930 to 1934. We base our instruction on the German youth movement, because the Germans are the only people who really know how to organize young men."⁴³

The publication of even these mildly provocative stories became increasingly unusual as the AMG successfully convinced newspaper editors to give their full support to the AMG through tours of Japan and Korea sponsored by the War Department.⁴⁴ According to Joe Fromm, as soon as the first group of representatives arrived in Tokyo, the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (SCAP) bombarded them with briefings about MacArthur's achievements and the irresponsible reporting of American journalists. Fromm was shocked by how quickly the editors fell under MacArthur's thrall: within 48 hours they were talking about the occupation with "the dogmatism of a Catholic priest discussing purgatory."⁴⁵ When they reached Korea, Hodge gave them further briefings on the achievements of the AMG and hinted at stories he wanted covered by the press—including a major story about the build-up of a large army in Soviet-occupied Korea.⁴⁶

The military regarded the tour as a spectacular success. Editors of the some of the most influential newspapers in the United States, including the *Chicago Sun*'s Eli Dimitman and the *Christian Science Monitor*'s Erwin Canham, were judged by the War Department to have become greatly more favorable to the Army and to have developed a much better understanding of the AMG's position.⁴⁷ Several of these editors, including Canham, went on to brief around 700 daily newspaper editors at a special session of the American Society of News Editors annual convention dedicated to Far Eastern problems and developments.

The tours also allowed occupation officials to rein in difficult and subversive correspondents through a direct appeal to their employers. SCAP officials regarded *Christian Science Monitor* correspondent Gordon Walker as one of the most active members of the leftist group of correspondents in Japan. After meeting with MacArthur, the *Monitor*'s editor told Walker to take a more moderate line on the occupation and to no longer associate

with the “communist” reporters in Tokyo—a group that supposedly included Fromm, as well as newer arrivals Hugh Deane and Robert “Pepper” Martin.⁴⁸ Armed with a letter from Walker attesting to his status as a reformed man, Canham convinced General Hodge to allow Walker back into the country for the first time since 1945.⁴⁹ When Walker returned to Korea to cover the Moscow agreement talks in May 1947, he held true to his word; his previously fierce denunciations of the AMG were nowhere to be found.

The AMG maintained significant influence over the way journalists framed their stories and much press coverage in this period reflected the AMG’s ambivalent attitude towards both the talks and the nationalists. Few Americans in Korea wanted to see the Soviets successfully negotiate a role in governing southern Korea; yet, at the same time, they could not endorse the violent insubordination of the rightists. Richard Johnston tried to make the rightists behavior understandable—noting that their criticism of the AMG stemmed from their belief that the Joint Commission would result in the installation of a “virtually Communist-dominated, Soviet-controlled government.”⁵⁰ Gordon Walker largely ignored the brewing conflict between leftists and rightists until his last dispatch from Korea at the start of August, when he suggested that the rightists were the main stumbling block for US policy in Korea but admitted that neither of the main political camps could be called friendly to the United States or to American ideas of democracy.⁵¹

It thus fell to other visitors to Korea, operating free of direct AMG pressure, to draw attention to the worsening political situation in Korea over the summer of 1947. In May, Roger Baldwin, president of the American Civil Liberties Union, toured Japan and Korea at the invitation of Douglas MacArthur.⁵² A veteran campaigner for civil liberties issues in the United States, Baldwin was horrified by the scale and degree of repression he witnessed in Korea. In a press conference after the trip, Baldwin declared that American-occupied Korea had become a “police state.”⁵³ In an interview with the *Times*, he declared that Korea’s problems primarily stemmed from the failure of the AMG to adequately democratize the country and to protect the civil liberties of Korean citizens.⁵⁴ While he recognized that the rightists were part of the problem, he had a warm personal relationship with Rhee, who he regarded as a genuine democrat and liberal, and mentioned only in passing the threat his faction posed to Korea’s political stability.⁵⁵

Just a few weeks after the Baldwin interview, the *Times* ran another interview with a recent returnee from Korea, activist and Rhee critic Yong-jeung Kim.⁵⁶ Kim was a California-born Korean nationalist who, in 1943, had founded the Korean Affairs Institute, a small organization based in Washington, DC that published a monthly newsletter called *Voice of Korea*. While Kim had initially been friendly with Rhee, the purges against the Left in the first year of the occupation had soured the relationship. Several of Kim's closest friends and supporters had become victims of rightist persecution after returning to Korea to organize a moderate leftist party. Kim had cut his visit to Korea short after the assassination of his mentor, the popular leftist Lyuh Woon Hyung, just a few hours after they had met together in Seoul.⁵⁷ In the interview, Kim identified many of the same problems as Baldwin but was far more explicit in his criticism of the growing influence of both the communists and "right-wing extremists" such as Rhee and Koo. He warned that any future election could hand power to these two political opportunists who sought "personal power and position regardless of the nation's interest."⁵⁸

Both Kim and Baldwin saw themselves as operating within the policy-making process rather than explicitly criticizing it. Both wrote to Hodge to thank him for his assistance and to offer advice on how to reverse the damage in southern Korea.⁵⁹ While Baldwin focused on the importance of embedding democracy in Korean society, Kim discussed the command's public relations problem. He advised the Americans to deny Koreans with dubious political views the right to visit the United States, since the American public had become confused by the status of people such as Louise Yim, Rhee's quasi-diplomatic envoy to the United States. There is no evidence that the AMG or US policy-makers took these recommendations seriously. Indeed, US advisers in Korea regarded Baldwin as a "misguided liberal" whose ability to conjure up a press controversy on civil liberties issues greatly limited the occupation's capacity to control Rhee and his supporters.⁶⁰

For the American public, it was increasingly difficult to work out what was really going on, especially as the Soviets used the Joint Commission to issue their own propaganda attacks on the government in American-occupied Korea.⁶¹ To add to the confusion, the US military also began strongly advocating for a complete withdrawal of all forces from Korea. In September, Hanson Baldwin, the *Times*' military affairs editor, told Robert T. Oliver that he should drop Rhee and give up on his connections with Korean nationalist groups since the US government was in the process of

giving up on its Korean commitment.⁶² The drift in US policy once again left both the press and the public unsure about Korea's place on the foreign policy agenda.

PICKING CHAMPIONS

As the failure of the talks between the Soviets and Americans became starkly obvious in the autumn of 1947, the State Department concluded that the best chance of saving Korea from communist takeover was to hand over the issue to the UN with the recommendation that the south be allowed to carry out elections to establish its own independent government under UN auspices.⁶³ Although the Soviet Union objected to taking Korea to the UN, US dominance in the General Assembly ensured that it got its way in a decisive vote in mid-November.

The breakdown in Soviet–U.S. relations at the UN turned mainstream press outlets more hawkish on Korea. Editorials and columnists united in condemnation of Soviet attempts to block the UN from taking responsibility for Korea's future. While Rhee's anti-communism had once made him an extremist, his views now matched the emerging anti-communist consensus. He was increasingly recognized as an astute observer of Soviet scheming; one editorial in the *Washington Post* praised Rhee for being "quick to see the gimmick" in a Soviet proposal to withdraw troops from Korea.⁶⁴

In September, the populist red-baiting Hearst chain dispatched correspondent Ray Richards to Korea with the mission to support Syngman Rhee in his bid to become post-occupation Korea's first leader. A China-based correspondent for the *Shanghai Star* during the 1930s, Richards had become the Washington correspondent of the Hearst-owned *Los Angeles Examiner* in 1941.⁶⁵ In Washington, he developed a close friendship with one of the country's most notorious anti-communist politicians, J. Parnell Thomas, the chairman of the House Committee on Un-American Activities.⁶⁶ By 1947, the owner of the Hearst chain, William Randolph Hearst, was convinced that war with the Soviets was inevitable and sought to use his influence to push for a more aggressively anti-communist foreign policy.⁶⁷ Richards was thus dispatched to Korea to act, in the words of General Hodge, as the "personal press agent of Syngman Rhee in the Hearst paper's fight against communism."⁶⁸

In his dispatches from Seoul, Richards portrayed Rhee as a determined Korean patriot who was caught in a desperate struggle against State

Department backed “liberals” who were, in fact, nothing more than “fellow travellers and fifth columnists and Trojan horses like Henry Wallace.”⁶⁹ Richards believed that Rhee was the only true proponent of American-style democracy in Korea and sought to convince his readers that Rhee wanted free elections as soon as possible, so that his country could experience the kind of government that he had learned to love as a Ph.D. student at Princeton. Although Richards implied that Hodge shared these views, his dispatches were, in fact, a constant source of irritation for the AMG. In a letter to Hearst, Hodge warned that Rhee had become power mad and was using Richards to spread false stories and rumors to discredit the command and satisfy his own “God complex.”⁷⁰ True to his informal style of press management, however, Hodge never sent the letter and, instead, asked Major General Floyd Parks, the head of public relations for the Department of the Army, to pass on the essence of the message to his contacts at the Hearst organization.⁷¹

Another important, albeit indirect, endorsement for Rhee came from a more surprising source. In the summer of 1947, after months of solicitations from Rhee and other members of the Korean Commission, the *Chicago Daily Tribune*’s Colonel McCormick visited Korea as part of a tour of the Far East. Although he was wary of being used by Rhee as part of his campaign against Hodge, he was nonetheless impressed by the rightists’ demand for Korean independence.⁷² In an editorial published in the *Tribune* and broadcast over the Mutual Broadcasting System, McCormick claimed that the United States had no choice but to let the Koreans in the south set up their own government.⁷³ He noted, however, that the current US administration was seeking to establish a “very leftist” government in the American-occupied zone of Korea. Although McCormick did not explicitly call for the United States to support Rhee, he argued that the only Koreans with any talent for administration were the handful of former US exiles—a group within which Rhee was the leading political figure.

Enthusiasm for Rhee amongst conservatives was not balanced by concerted support for more moderate candidates in the liberal press. Few observers believed that the State Department’s favored “middle of the road” candidate Kim Kyu-Sik could win out against either the rightists or the leftists. Following a visit to Korea in early December, *New York Post* correspondent Robert P. Martin wrote that moderate leaders were practically non-existent, since it was both safer and more productive for Koreans to be on the political extremes.⁷⁴ Most liberal correspondents also shied

away from directly attacking Rhee, most likely due to his perceived importance to the United States and southern Korea's political future.

Much more stinging criticism of Rhee appeared in newspapers associated with the far left but they, too, struggled to find an alternative candidate worth backing. The assassination of Lyuh Woon Hyung in July 1947 had robbed southern Korea of the last figure who could have bridged the political divide.⁷⁵ As the leader of the leftist Korean provisional government in the weeks between the Japanese surrender and the start of the US occupation, Lyuh had symbolized the great lost hope of an independent Korea. His death marked the beginning of a wave of political violence which forced virtually the entire Korean Left underground.

The only American journalist in Korea to write about these developments in any significant detail was Hugh Deane, a Tokyo-based reporter associated with a variety of left-leaning magazines and union newspapers. Deane had developed an interest in left-wing politics while living in China in the late 1930s on a Harvard exchange program, where he had met the American correspondents covering Mao Tse-Tung's communist revolutionary movement. He returned to China in 1940 as a correspondent for the *Christian Science Monitor* and wrote a ten-part series documenting the persecution of leftists and other dissidents by Chiang Kai-Shek's Kuomintang regime.⁷⁶ Deane's self-confessed tendency to write a lot of "hot rhetoric" often got him into trouble with his editors, even at the liberal *Monitor*. After wartime stints working in the Office of War Information in Washington and as an intelligence officer in MacArthur's Pacific command, Deane became a freelance writer in Tokyo with a passionate interest in the occupation government's battles with organized labor.

In July 1947, just days before Lyuh's murder, Deane arrived in southern Korea to investigate reports of the widespread repression of leftist politicians and union members in the American-occupied zone. In a series of articles for the *China Weekly Review* and the *Nation*, Deane savaged the AMG for its tolerance of Rhee's political machine and its deployment of "terrorist youth associations," and even the US-trained Korean police, to intimidate and arrest leftists. Like his liberal colleagues, he was deeply pessimistic about southern Korea's future. With the backing of a powerful alliance of "landlords, merchants, collaborators, adventurers and ultranationalist fanatics," Deane believed that Rhee had positioned himself as the overwhelming favorite to win any elections in the south.⁷⁷

Much of what Deane saw matched the contents of a scathingly critical report by Stewart Meacham, an American Labor Department official who had been sent to investigate the conditions for organized labor in Korea in

late 1946. All such allegations were roundly rejected by the AMG. In a letter to MacArthur, Hodge claimed that the basic premises of Meacham's argument were false and based on an "idealistic humanitarian approach" which failed to recognize the reality of the communist threat in Korea.⁷⁸ In a detailed rebuttal to Meacham's claims, Hodge argued that the Left were responsible for a far greater share of political violence up until the middle of 1947, and that problems with the police were a product of their oriental psychology and the legacy of Japanese colonial rule. Hodge advised MacArthur that he did not need to read Meacham's report, since it simply followed the "Roger Baldwin-Mark Gayn-Hugh Deane" line.⁷⁹ This monolithic treatment of all critics of the occupation made it easy for US officials to dismiss their arguments as nothing more than ideological bluster.

UN INTERVENTION

In November 1947, the UN General Assembly passed a resolution establishing the United Nations Temporary Commission on Korea (UNTCOK) with a mandate to supervise free and open elections, to assist in the withdrawal of all occupying forces and to guide the new Korean nation to full independence. The arrival of UNTCOK in Seoul in January 1948 provided the last opportunity for Rhee's opponents to block the elections that virtually all observers believed would usher in Syngman Rhee as the south's leader. Since UNTCOK had the ability, at least in theory, to advise the General Assembly that the political environment was not sufficiently stable for national elections to be held, leftists hoped to convince the commission's representatives that UN-sponsored elections without communist support would permanently divide the country in two. Furthermore, any election that did take place would be so distorted by the mounting violence and repression in the south that it would be impossible to claim a fair result.

The first attempts to influence the delegates began before they had even arrived in Korea. In Tokyo, Gordon Walker and Joe Fromm approached the Canadian and Australian delegates to brief them on the situation in Korea. According to reports received by General Hodge, Walker presented a picture of "enlightenment in North Korea and reaction in the South" and successfully convinced the Australian delegate, S. H. Jackson, that there were serious problems in the American-occupied zone.⁸⁰ Once in Korea, Jackson continued to meet with Walker and demand that UNTCOK pay more attention to the repressive behavior of the police in the American-occupied zone.

For American diplomats and the AMG, UNTCOK's skepticism towards the police regime in the south was a source of significant frustration. The Americans had expected the UN to quickly organize elections in the American-occupied zone. Instead, three UNTCOK delegates, including Jackson, threatened to derail the process entirely. However, their public impact was limited. While UNTCOK's ambivalence on Korea received widespread coverage, most correspondents in Seoul continued to closely align their dispatches with the official position of the AMG, which regarded communist violence as a significantly greater problem than police abuses.⁸¹ Gordon Walker was the lone correspondent to explicitly ignore the AMG's attempts to talk up the threat of communist violence and pay significant attention to the UN commission's concern about the police state in the American-occupied zone.⁸² Although Hodge wrote to the *Monitor* to complain about Walker's work, the newspaper stood its ground and argued that he was fully within his rights to consult with anyone and to write about topics he considered important.⁸³

Ultimately, UNTCOK and the UN were forced to accept that elections in southern Korea should go ahead. Jackson continued to cause problems, however, by looking for evidence of police abuses that would render Korea unsafe for an election. The AMG used every means at its disposal to gather insights into his plans, including tapping journalists for information. Richard Johnston told AMG officials that Jackson was struggling to find anything wrong in Korea because "both Koreans and Americans have been too well rehearsed" and that he was sure "plain-clothes police were around the corner to take care of anyone who spilled the beans."⁸⁴ Although Jackson did not find the evidence he wanted, he managed to aggravate the United States even further by giving his support to a north-south conference in Pyongyang as an alternative all-Korean political process.

To the shock of US officials and the southern Korean press, the conference was attended by both of Rhee's main non-communist rivals. Rhee's rightist ally Kim Koo had turned on the idea of UN elections in January following months of simmering tensions with Rhee. Most troubling, however, was the defection of former Interim Legislative Assembly chairman and leading moderate Kim Kyu-Sik. In Pyongyang, the two Kim's agreed to a series of resolutions which condemned the UN elections and that called for both the United States and the Soviet Union to withdraw their forces and leave the organization of a government to the Koreans. Upon their return to Seoul in early May, they discovered that Rhee had declared his full support for the UN's election program and unleashed an extensive

publicity campaign for his party, the National Society for the Rapid Realization of Korean Independence. Kyu-Sik's anti-election stand effectively destroyed his political credibility as a centrist both in Korea and in the eyes of the American press.⁸⁵ The *Washington Post* wrote that, "if there is any essential difference between Dr Kim's approach and what the communists have been preaching—that south Korea cannot hold out against the north—it is hard to see."⁸⁶ The Pyongyang conference thus effectively eliminated the two remaining political rivals to Syngman Rhee. He went into the May 1948 elections as the dominant and most legitimate political force in Korea.

RHEE'S TRIUMPH

On May 10, 1948, Koreans turned out in large numbers for the first general election in Korea's history. News of the election made it into the front pages of dozens of American newspapers and even cinema newsreels, although the quality of this coverage was fairly poor.⁸⁷ A post-election analysis by AP found that poor communications and the constant churn of the rumor mill meant that false stories, including grossly exaggerated accounts of communist attacks on voting stations, regularly made it onto the press wires.⁸⁸ Much of the conservative press consequently framed the elections as a triumph against communist terrorism, a narrative endorsed by Robert T. Oliver in an editorial for the *Baltimore Sun*.⁸⁹

Elsewhere, the election was generally praised as a triumph for democracy and a rejection of communism. Much of the press celebrated the apparent procedural effectiveness of the electoral process. Gordon Walker wrote that "more than 90 per cent of the registered voters in South Korea—with all the freedoms of a secret balloting booth—elected a new National Assembly."⁹⁰ The *New York Times* noted that the turnout surpassed that of many long-established democracies.⁹¹ However, the focus on turnout masked other troubling developments. Several correspondents witnessed egregious corruption in Rhee's own electoral district, where his only opponent, Seoul Chief Detective Choi Nung-Chin, had been disqualified just days before the election due to alleged irregularities in his application form.⁹² Hugh Deane, who knew the American-born Choi from childhood, only managed to get him registered following an intervention from the AMG.⁹³ Deane reported, however, that Choi's supporters were attacked by police and stopped from campaigning.⁹⁴ Rhee's ability to get away with this kind of low visibility electoral repression set a crucial

precedent for his approach to future elections. While UNTCOK caused some consternation by initially refusing to verify the results of the election, there was no decisive evidence of electoral corruption.⁹⁵

Despite his party winning only 55 seats in the 208-seat Assembly, it was clear that Rhee also had the support of the majority of the 85 elected “independents.” Rhee’s traditional supporters in the press were cautiously optimistic about the idea of a Rhee-led government and highlighted Rhee’s American background and anti-communist values as positive traits. In an analysis for the *Times*, Richard Johnston described Rhee as a rightist who nonetheless sought to establish a “representative democracy based on universal suffrage patterned closely after the American system.”⁹⁶ Johnston also suggested that Rhee could be quite radical once in office, an argument also taken up in an article in *Time*:

Although...Dr. Rhee has been branded a “reactionary” by Korean Communists and a “rightist” by some U.S. journalists, his program would be too radical for most U.S. citizens. He has proposed: 1) nationalization of heavy industry, mines, forests, utilities, banks and transportation; 2) redistribution among small farmers of large estates and confiscated Japanese lands; 3) a planned economy; 4) a soak-the-rich tax program with total exemptions for poorer classes.⁹⁷

The idea of Rhee as a radical liberal had been heavily pushed by the Korean Commission in the months running up to the election. In a letter to Robert T. Oliver in early March, Rhee had declared that his regime would be far more radical and less reactionary than journalists claimed; “When we have our government in hand all those who talk about Korean fascists, reactionaries and extreme rightists will be amazed to see far we can go in liberalizing our nation. The land reform bill will be about the first act and many more liberal movements will take one after another.”⁹⁸

Oliver instantly recognized the potential of this public relations strategy. In the months before the election, he tried to convince senior State Department officials to delay the planned sale of a substantial amount of farmland, previously owned by the Japanese, so that the new Korean government could take the credit for implementing land reform.⁹⁹ In his own writings and exchanges with American journalists, Oliver presented Rhee as a reformist-minded leader who could defeat communism through policy achievements rather than repression.

Nonetheless, amongst liberal and leftists, pessimism over South Korea’s future was rife. The *Washington Post* argued that although Rhee was not an extremist, his fierce nationalism would make him a difficult man for the

Americans work with.¹⁰⁰ Perhaps the most significant skeptic was the *Herald Tribune's* new Japan correspondent, Allen Raymond, who had become a regular visitor to Korea after taking up his position in Tokyo in November 1947. A classic Cold War liberal, as a young journalist in New York Raymond had helped establish the New York Newspaper Guild, one of the first labor unions for journalists, only to sever the relationship because of the Guild's insistence on turning the reporter into an "instrument of class warfare."¹⁰¹ After serving as the *New York Times's* London Bureau chief before World War II, he had moved to the *Tribune* to cover the war as a roving correspondent in South-east Asia and Europe. In Tokyo, he was regarded by military authorities as an honest and valuable correspondent.¹⁰² Although he insightfully explored topics rarely covered by other correspondents, his reporting from Korea generally privileged the AMG's position.¹⁰³ In a feature article after the end of the occupation, he argued that the AMG had stopped a communist revolution, introduced land reform, greatly improved education and kept the country from starving: "Whatever remains of civilization in Korea", he concluded, "is there by the grace of the American Army and the American people."¹⁰⁴

By contrast, Raymond found little to admire in Korean politics. Like most of the reporters based in South Korea, Raymond was contemptuous of the Korean people and believed that they lacked the political maturity to govern themselves through parliamentary compromise or to protect the rights of minorities. He had a special contempt for Syngman Rhee and his close supporters. In April 1948, he wrote that an independent Korean government would very likely upset all the good work done by the Americans:

It seems very unlikely today that anything like democratic self-government along parliamentary lines of the West will emerge from the current strife between North and South Korea, regardless of the elections to be held May 10 under United Nations auspices. South Korea is obviously in the hands of Rightist groups bent on a rule as arbitrary as that of Generalissimo Francisco Franco's Spain.¹⁰⁵

The belief that the ROK regime would prove to be a disaster for both Korea and the United States was even more prominent amongst those journalists who had been critical of the AMG in the past. The *Nation* suggested that the elections had alienated a large section of the Korean population that supported Koo and Kyu-Sik and the reunification of Korea.¹⁰⁶ Many on the left warned that Korea was going to end up in a state of civil war like Greece or northern China.¹⁰⁷

CONCLUSION

Between the end of 1946 and the summer of 1948, southern Korea lurched from one political crisis to the next. Within this chaotic environment, the AMG and Korean rightist leaders became increasingly practiced at using repression to stifle opposition and dissent. But both General Hodge and Syngman Rhee realized that the crisis could only be decisively solved through an intervention from Washington. Both hoped to use the press to bring Korea to the attention of the political elite. Although this did not directly lead to any significant policy changes, Rhee used this opportunity to cement his relationship with right-wing press outlets. By the end of 1947, he had laid the first tentative foundations of a press following in the United States.

The end of the occupation of Korea was a deeply symbolic moment in the United States. For the American Right, the establishment of an independent state in southern Korea was a sign that the United States was at last actively resisting Soviet expansionism. For the Left, the creation of South Korea appeared to confirm that the West and the communist world were falling into a protracted and potentially catastrophic state of conflict. However, South Korea occupied a curious position in this new Cold War environment. While the new South Korean government would be completely dependent on the beneficence of the US government for its survival, it still had no major constituency of support in the United States, aside from the capricious support of a small number of right-wing newspapers. Although Syngman Rhee had won the struggle for leadership of an independent South Korea, its future relationship with the United States was far from assured.

NOTES

1. Bunce to Atcheson, 23 January 1947, Box 2, General Correspondence 1947, USAFIK Commandant's Office, RG554, NARA.
2. AP, "September Trouble in Korea Described," *New York Times*, 15 December 1946.
3. Drew Pearson, "The Washington Merry Go-Round," 3 December 1946.
4. Robert T. Oliver, Letter "Report on Korea," *New York Times*, 10 November 1946.
5. Johnston to Hodge, 27 January 1947, Box 2, General Correspondence 1947, USAFIK Commandant's Office, RG554, NARA. Johnston requested the meeting with the President so that he could deliver a historic

- Korean scroll as a gift from Rhee, although the Korean Desk at the State Department recommended that he not accept it: R. D. Muir to Woodward, 3 December 1946, Box 1453, Official File 471 Korea, Harry S. Truman Presidential Library.
6. Goodfellow to Hodge, 6 September 1946, Box 1, Millard Preston Goodfellow Papers, Hoover Institution Archives.
 7. "Our Korean Colony?," *Daily Worker*, 18 October 1946.
 8. There are conflicting accounts as to how Hodge felt about Rhee's trip to the United States. While Oliver claimed Hodge urged Rhee not to leave, Hodge told Preston Goodfellow that he thought Rhee's publicity campaign could bring Korea to the attention of the United States and "build up sympathy enough to get our people to demand action." AMG intelligence officer Richard D. Robinson claimed that Hodge wanted Rhee out of the country so that the initiative for developing the Interim Legislative Assembly would pass to a less polarizing Korean political figure. Since the American military provided Rhee with transport from Korea to the United States, his trip must have had some level of official endorsement: Hodge to Goodfellow, 28 January 1947, Box 1, Millard Preston Goodfellow Papers, Hoover Institution Archives; Will Hamlin [Richard D. Robinson], "Korea: An American Tragedy," *Nation*, 1 March 1946; Oliver, *Syngman Rhee and American Involvement in Korea; 1942–1960*, 55.
 9. According to Hodge, Rhee used the meeting with MacArthur to falsely claim to the press that Tokyo was not happy with the American occupation in Korea: Hodge to Goodfellow, 28 January 1947, Box 1, Millard Preston Goodfellow Papers, Hoover Institution Archives.
 10. Lindesay Parrott, "Korean Now Urges Partition," *New York Times*, 5 December 1946.
 11. Langdon to Acheson, 4 January 1947, *FRUS* 1947, 6, 567.
 12. Oliver, 56.
 13. Vincent to Hilldring, 27 January 1947, *FRUS* 1947, 6, 603.
 14. Langdon to Marshall, 17 January 1947, *FRUS* 1947, 6, 599.
 15. Hodge to Goodfellow, 28 January 1947, Box 1, Millard Preston Goodfellow Papers, Hoover Institution Archives.
 16. "Korean Assails Hodge," *New York Times*, 24 January 1947.
 17. Lerch to Hodge, 16 December 1946, Box 2, General Correspondence 1947, USAFIK Commandant's Office, RG554, NARA.
 18. UP, "Plan to Quit Korea is Denied by Lerch," *New York Times*, 8 February 1947.
 19. For more on the bureaucratic divisions over Korea policy, see Millett, *The War for Korea, 1945–1950: A House Burning*, 109–10.
 20. Sidney Shalett, "Hodge says Soviet is Arming Koreans and Flouting Pact," *New York Times*, 25 February 1947; "Korea- Danger Spot," *New York Times*, 26 February 1947; "Hodge Less Gloomy in Korean Outlook," *New York Times*, 4 March 1947.

21. It is not clear why Rhee published this statement. While Rhee may have been hoping to force the State Department's hand, Oliver claimed he was not consulted on the statement before its publication and thus it was most likely an attempt to boost Rhee's prestige back in Korea: Oliver, *Syngman Rhee and American Involvement in Korea; 1942-1960*, 64-5.
22. AP, "Korean Shift Predicted," *New York Times*, 22 March 1947; C. L. Sulzberger, "U.S. to Act in Korea Now, Marshall Advises Molotov," *New York Times*, 11 April 1947.
23. "Korean Leader Urges Soviet and U.S. To Go," *New York Times*, 29 January 1947.
24. "Digging In," *Time*, 17 March 1947.
25. RTE to Hulburt, 7 March 1947, Time Inc. Dispatches from Time magazine correspondents: First Series, 1942-1955, Houghton Library, Harvard College Library; RTE to Hulburt, Jr., 6 March 1947, Time Inc. Dispatches from Time magazine correspondents: First Series, 1942-1955, Houghton Library, Harvard College Library.
26. Rhee to Luce, 1 March 1947, Box 1, Henry Luce Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress. A brief account of the dinner was given by Louise Yim in her memoir: Yim, *My Forty Year Fight for Korea*, 266-7.
27. Luce's business-oriented magazine *Fortune* ran a lengthy article calling for a long-term US commitment to Korea in June 1947: "Korea: The U.S. Gets to Work," *Fortune*, June 1947.
28. Walter Simmons, "Finds Rule by U.S. Fails to Win Over Koreans," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 30 December 1946.
29. Walter Simmons, "See Freedom in Korea Injured by Acts," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 22 March 1947.
30. Rhee to McCormick, 28 June 1946, "Korea, 1946-1955, (Syngman Rhee)" Folder, Box 48, Papers of Colonel Robert R. McCormick, First Division Museum.
31. LEB memo, 20 January 1948, Box 63, RG5, Douglas MacArthur Papers, MacArthur Memorial Archives.
32. Harold Sugg, "Watch Korea," *Harper's*, January 1947; Archibald T. Steel, "Search for a Middle Road in Korea," *New York Herald Tribune*, 2 April 1947.
33. Fisher to Evans, 25 March 1947, Box 2, General Correspondence 1947, USAFIK Commandant's Office, RG554, NARA; Hodge to Fisher, 3 May 1947, Box 2, General Correspondence 1947, USAFIK Commandant's Office, RG554, NARA.
34. Lerch to Hodge, 18 July 1947, Box 2, General Correspondence 1947, USAFIK Commandant's Office, RG554, NARA.
35. Hodge to Army, 14 April 1947, Box 2, General Correspondence 1947, USAFIK Commandant's Office, RG554, NARA.

36. Fisher to Hodge, 19 April 1948, Box 3, General Correspondence 1947, USAFIK Commandant's Office, RG554, NARA.
37. The amount of material coming out of Korea compelled AP to ask correspondent Roy Roberts to reduce the size of his dispatches: Turnblad to Roberts, 20 May 1947, Korea, Foreign Bureau Correspondence 1946–1947, General Files, AP Corporate Archives.
38. In a letter to UP's Far East representative, Hodge argued that Rich had a good nose for news and expressed a degree of paternal concern for his career: Hodge to Vaughn, 24 January 1948, Box 3, General Correspondence 1948, USAFIK Commandant's Office, RG554, NARA.
39. Rhee lobbied the *Times* to send Johnston back to Korea, although it is unclear if this influenced the newspaper's decision: Johnston to Hodge, 27 January 1947, Box 2, General Correspondence 1947, USAFIK Commandant's Office, RG554, NARA.
40. Richard Johnston, "More Aid to Korea Pledged by Hodge," *New York Times*, 15 April 1947; Richard Johnston, "Koreans Jubilant on Greeting Hodge," *New York Times*, 24 April 1947.
41. AP, "Morale Better in Korea," *New York Times*, 29 April 1947.
42. Fromm to Mark and Sally Gayn, 3 August 1947, Box 4, Mark Gayn Papers, Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto.
43. Carl Mydans, "A Scout Is Militant," *Time*, 30 June 1947. Mark Gayn also wrote about the Korean National Youth in an article for *PM* in November 1947 based on his 1946 reporting trip: Mark Gayn, "Jap-Trained Police 'Pacify' South Korea," *PM*, 6 November 1947.
44. Planning for the junket began in response to what the Army felt was "unwarranted criticisms of conditions and policies in Korea," as well as morale problems in the Philippines and foreign criticism of US occupation policies. While the Army believed that editors on such tours secured "sound fundamental knowledge and write intelligently and objectively on occupation," General MacArthur disagreed and called for certain newspapers to be excluded based on their history of publishing articles critical of the occupation. A minor controversy ensued when MacArthur's memo was described in detail by Drew Pearson in his 3 December 1946 column. No newspapers were ultimately excluded: Army to MacArthur, 1 November 1946, Box 158, RG9, Douglas MacArthur Papers, MacArthur Memorial Archives; Army to MacArthur, 9 December 1946, Box 158, RG9, Douglas MacArthur Papers, MacArthur Memorial Archives; Drew Pearson, "The Washington Merry Go-Round," 3 December 1946.
45. Fromm to Mark and Sally Gayn, 14 February 1947, Box 4, Mark Gayn Papers, Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto.
46. Brines to Gould, 12 February 1947, Korea, Foreign Bureau Records 1946–7, General Files, AP Corporate Archives.

47. War to MacArthur, 12 April 1947, Box 158, RG9, Douglas MacArthur Papers, MacArthur Memorial Archives. Canham later wrote a positive account of his experiences in Korea for a magazine: Erwin D. Canham, "Between Two Worlds," *The Rotarian*, June 1947.
48. Fromm to Mark and Sally Gayn, 14 February 1947, Box 4, Mark Gayn Papers, Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto.
49. Hodge to Parks, 8 March 1948, Box 3, General Correspondence 1948, USAFIK Commandant's Office, RG554, NARA.
50. Richard Johnston, "Korean Fighting Is Expected Soon," *New York Times*, 26 July 1947.
51. Gordon Walker, "Koreans Dread Trusteeship, Blame U.S. for Blocking Independence," *Christian Science Monitor*, 2 August 1947.
52. For more on the background of this trip see Samuel Walker, *In Defense of American Liberties: A History of the ACLU* (Carbondale, IL: SIU Press, 1999), 205.
53. "'Korea Is Police State,' Roger Baldwin Reports," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 23 June 1947.
54. "Democracy is Seen as Gaining in Japan," *New York Times*, 27 June 1947.
55. Baldwin to Villard, 13 November 1947, Folder 22, Box 1167, American Civil Liberties Union Records, Princeton University.
56. Baldwin wrote to Kim to inform him that their views were "almost identical": Baldwin to Kim, 12 August 1947, Box 1, Yong-jeung Kim Papers, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University in the City of New York; "Danger of Chaos is Seen," *New York Times*, 30 July 1947; Yong-jeung Kim, Letter "Conditions in Korea," *New York Times*, 12 August 1947.
57. Marn J. Cha, *Koreans in Central California (1903–1957): A Study of Settlement and Transnational Politics* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2010), 101.
58. Kim found himself under public attack from Robert T. Oliver, who in a letter to the *Times* argued that Kim was simply lashing out at Rhee because of a decades-long personal feud: Robert T. Oliver, Letter "Program for Korea," *New York Times*, 15 August 1947.
59. Kim to Hodge, 4 August 1947, Box 1, Yong-jeung Kim Papers, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University in the City of New York; Baldwin to Hodge, 28 May 1947, Box 2, General Correspondence 1947, USAFIK Commandant's Office, RG554, NARA.
60. Jacobs to Marshall, 12 August 1947, *FRUS* 1947, 6, 750.
61. Jacobs to Marshall, 22 August 1947, *FRUS* 1947, 6, 762.
62. Oliver, *Syngman Rhee and American Involvement in Korea; 1942–1960*, 90.
63. Interim Directive to General of the Army Douglas MacArthur, 24 July 1947, *FRUS* 1947, 6, 714–31; Report by the Ad Hoc Committee on Korea, 4 August 1947, *FRUS* 1947, 6, 738–41.

64. "Sham in Korea," *Washington Post*, 5 October 1947.
65. "INS Honors Two Writers Killed in Korea," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, 4 February 1951.
66. Greg Robinson, *Larry and Guyo Tajiri and Japanese American Journalism in the World War II Era* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 147.
67. Ian Mugridge, *View from Xanadu: William Randolph Hearst and United States Foreign Policy* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995), 142.
68. Hodge to Hearst, January 1948, Box 3, General Correspondence 1948, USAFIK Commandant's Office, RG554, NARA; Col. B. C. Limb to Hearst, "Korean Leader Thanks Hearst Newspapers," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, 29 September 1947.
69. Ray Richards, "Fate and Ballots Made Korean President," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, 7 October 1947.
70. Hodge to Hearst, January 1948, Box 3, General Correspondence 1948, USAFIK Commandant's Office, RG554, NARA.
71. Hodge to Parks, 17 January 1948, Box 3, General Correspondence 1948, USAFIK Commandant's Office, RG554, NARA.
72. McCormick to Simmons, 3 September 1947, Travel Folder, Box 31, Papers of Colonel Robert R. McCormick, First Division Museum.
73. Col. Robert McCormick, "Journey to Korea," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 16 November 1947.
74. Robert P. Martin, "Korean Police Denounced as Terrorists," *New York Post*, 3 December 1947. Martin was the *Post's* China correspondent until 1949 and regarded as a member of the leftist clique by authorities in Tokyo. Attempts by SCAP to stop him reporting from Japan in February 1947 caused an outcry amongst the Tokyo press corps: Fromm to Mark and Sally Gayn, 14 February 1947, Box 4, Mark Gayn Papers, Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto.
75. Lyuh was assassinated by a North Korean with ties to right-wing nationalists. In his write-up of the assassination, however, Richard Johnston hinted that the murder was orchestrated by communist elements unhappy with Lyuh's failure to toe the party line: Richard Johnston, "Lyuh, Leftist Chief is Killed in Korea," *New York Times*, 20 July 1947.
76. Stephen R. MacKinnon and Oris Friesen, eds., *China Reporting: An Oral History of American Journalism in the 1930's and 1940's* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1987), 104–5.
77. Hugh Deane, "Moderates Hard Hit in U.S. Korea Zone," *China Weekly Review*, 4 October 1947.
78. Hodge to MacArthur, 8 January 1948, Box 3, General Correspondence 1948, USAFIK Commandant's Office, RG554, NARA.

79. Hodge to MacArthur, 9 January 1948, Box 3, General Correspondence 1948, USAFIK Commandant's Office, RG554, NARA.
80. Hodge to MacArthur, 22 March 1948, Box 3, General Correspondence 1948, USAFIK Commandant's Office, RG554, NARA.
81. According to Mark Gayn, UP's Stanley Rich and AP's Roy Roberts were told to be "more patriotic" at a meeting with the occupation's G2 commander, Colonel Walter F. Choinski: Diary Entry for 20 March 1948, Box 98, Mark Gayn Papers, Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto.
82. Gordon Walker, "Slight Outbreaks in Korea Fail to Shake UN Decision," *Christian Science Monitor*, 9 February 1948; Gordon Walker, "UN Inquiry: Answer Inside Jails?," *Christian Science Monitor*, 23 January 1948.
83. Hodge to Canham, 8 March 1948, Box 3, General Correspondence 1948, USAFIK Commandant's Office, RG554, NARA; Gratke to Hodge, 7 April 1948, Box 3, General Correspondence 1948, USAFIK Commandant's Office, RG554, NARA.
84. Jacobs to Marshall, 27 April 1948, *FRUS* 1948, 6, 1183.
85. Correspondents disagreed on whether Kyu-Sik and Koo opposed the UN elections after they returned from Pyongyang. Richard Johnston wrote that Kyu-Sik was noticeably disillusioned by what he saw in North Korea and would not oppose elections in just the south while UP's correspondent claimed that he was still fiercely against them. AMG sources suggest that UP's version was more accurate.
86. "Korea's Leaders," *Washington Post*, 9 May 1948.
87. Hodge to Carty, 28 June 1948, Box 3, General Correspondence 1948, USAFIK Commandant's Office, RG554, NARA.
88. Turnblad to Brines, 13 May 1948, Korea, Foreign Bureau Correspondence 1946–1947, General Files, AP Corporate Archives.
89. "Korea Tries Freedom," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 23 May 1948; Robert T. Oliver, "Korea Battles Communist Flood," *Baltimore Sun*, 10 May 1948.
90. Gordon Walker, "U.S. Policy in Korea Faces Test as Rightists Win Election," *Christian Science Monitor*, 26 May 1948.
91. "Korea Votes," *New York Times*, 11 May 1948.
92. *Life* reporter Carl Mydans wrote about the incident in his dispatches back to the United States but the story was not used: Carl Mydans Picture Captions for Korea, 10 May 1948, LIFE Picture Collection Picture Captions, Time Corporate Archives.
93. In his memoir, Deane claimed he was almost denied entry when Hodge saw a pile of his clippings from 1947. A reprieve was granted only when a

- former AP colleague and AMG official, James Stewart, suggested that his exclusion would be unwise: Deane, *The Korean War: 1945–1953*, 29.
94. Deane, *The Korean War: 1945–1953*, 67–70.
 95. Walter Simmons, "U.N. Chief Calls Korea Election 'Too Efficient'," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 14 May 1948.
 96. Richard Johnston, "Election in South Korea is a Vote Against Russia," *New York Times*, 15 May 1948.
 97. "Problem in Division," *Time*, 24 May 1948.
 98. Rhee to Oliver, 20 March 1948, quoted in Oliver, *Syngman Rhee and American Involvement in Korea; 1942–1960*, 152.
 99. The Americans ultimately decided to press ahead with reforms before the elections: Oliver, 156.
 100. "Rhee's Responsibility," *Washington Post*, 13 June 1948.
 101. UP, "Radio Is Called Big But Faulty Aid of Religion," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 3 September 1937.
 102. Baker to MacArthur, 19 February 1948, Box 63, RG 5, Douglas MacArthur Papers, MacArthur Memorial Archives.
 103. Allen Raymond, "Army in Korea Denies Political Prisoners Exist," *New York Herald Tribune*, 14 January 1948.
 104. Allen Raymond, "Korea...Tiger by the Tail," *New York Herald Tribune*, 16 January 1949.
 105. Allen Raymond, "Farm Reform Is Sped by U.S. in South Korea," *New York Herald Tribune*, 5 May 1948.
 106. Stewart Maxwell, "Blunder in Korea," *Nation*, May 1948.
 107. Diary Entry, 20 March 1948, Box 98, Mark Gayn Papers, Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto; Deane, *The Korean War: 1945–1953*, 61.



The ROK Problem 1948–1950

On August 15, 1948, dignitaries from around East Asia gathered in Seoul to celebrate the official establishment of the Republic of Korea (ROK). At an elaborate ceremony at the National Capitol, General Douglas MacArthur reflected on the unfinished nature of the ROK and the country's political future. MacArthur declared that the border between North and South Korea—"one of the greatest tragedies of contemporary history"—must be torn down. In a speech partly written by his US adviser Robert T. Oliver and modelled on the rhetorical style of a US presidential address, Syngman Rhee adopted a more restrained tone. He set out the basic principles on which the new country would be founded: trust and faith in democracy, protection of civil rights and respect for liberalism.¹ The bombastic pageantry and high rhetoric of the event reflected the desire of the new ROK government and its international backers to convince the world of its democratic legitimacy.

This chapter shows how, like the occupation authorities before them, both the Rhee regime and the Truman administration struggled to sell a positive image of South Korea to the United States. While the ROK regime maintained close relationships with the press agency journalists based in Seoul, more liberal journalists railed against the ROK as an authoritarian police state which stood little chance of long-term survival. The collapse of the nationalist Chinese position in the Chinese civil war in 1949 turned Korea into a highly partisan political issue. The Republican Party blocked Truman's aid bills for Korea, arguing that the United States

could not throw more aid dollars down Asian “ratholes.” By the start of 1950, both the political and economic failures of the South Korean regime were being widely discussed in the American press.

The growing controversy over the authoritarianism of the ROK regime reflected both changes in the press corps in South Korea and the context in which they were reporting. The removal of military controls on journalists enabled more liberal correspondents to enter South Korea and criticize the regime. The Rhee government, keen to demonstrate its democratic credentials, did little to stop this critical reporting, and during the Yosu uprising actively enabled it. As support for rightist-led anti-communist regimes in Asia became more politically controversial in the United States, correspondents found that the sphere of legitimate controversy expanded. However, criticism of the regime never became sufficient to create a major political controversy.

A DEMOCRATIC SOUTH KOREA?

In the news outlets which reported on it, Syngman Rhee’s presidential inauguration address was warmly welcomed. In the *New York Times*, Richard Johnston provided a detailed breakdown of a copy of Oliver’s original draft of the speech, concluding that Rhee had made clear his fundamental commitment to the “cause of freedom and democracy.”² Amongst the small group of Rhee supporters in the American press, South Korean independence was regarded, as the *Times* put it, as a “great step forward toward a democracy.”³ The fiercely pro-Rhee *Washington Daily Star* carried a long editorial by George Fox Mott, a former inspector general for US Forces In Korea (USFIK), that praised South Korea’s rebirth as a democracy and Syngman Rhee’s Wilsonian democratic liberalism.⁴ In his last press statement before heading back to the United States, the AMG’s commander, General Hodge, told journalists that Korean democracy appeared to be working; “The assembly that they have elected will take nothing lying down. It is showing independence of thought. That is as much like democracy as anything that I have seen.”⁵

The ROK’s constitution certainly offered many of the features of a modern democratic state—including the separation of powers between three branches of government, the protection of citizens’ rights and a two-term limit for the presidency.⁶ Although Associated Press (AP) worried about the increased difficulty of “impartial and sound reporting” following the end of the occupation government, editors believed that the

ROK would roughly conform to the democratic norms they were used to back home.⁷ The only note of caution came from the *Chicago Daily Tribune's* Tokyo correspondent Walter Simmons, a long-standing critic of Rhee's dictatorial tendencies.⁸ After consulting with legal experts in Tokyo, Simmons claimed that the Korean constitution suffered by comparison with that of the United States, especially in its "failure to guarantee specific civil rights."⁹ The constitution did not grant citizens the right to trial by jury, while other key rights, including the right to a speedy trial and freedom of speech, could be restricted for unspecified reasons. The president also held a noticeably broader range of powers than was normal in other democratic states—including, crucially, the ability to propose constitutional amendments.

For most of the press, however, the establishment of the ROK passed by with little discussion. With the world's attention glued on Europe following the Soviet blockade of West Berlin, South Korea only mattered insofar as it was a potential target for Soviet aggression. Just weeks after the ROK's establishment, the Soviet Union announced that its own zone of occupation would become an independent state known as the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). With the division of Korea formalized, the two Koreas now squared off against each other over the 38th parallel. Richard Johnston emphasized the existential danger posed by the North Korean communists, writing that the DPRK's leader, Kim Il Sung, was a Soviet puppet with ambitions to destroy the Republic of Korea and unify Korea under communist control.¹⁰

Many American policy experts wondered whether the United States had any business continuing to support South Korea in this grim context. The ROK was almost entirely dependent on American economic, diplomatic and military aid, yet provided the United States with very little political or strategic benefit. In late 1947, George Kennan, the Director of the State Department's Policy Planning Staff, had made the case for abandoning Korea:

As to Korea, there is no longer any real hope of a genuinely peaceful and free democratic development in that country. Its political life in the coming period is bound to be dominated by political immaturity, intolerance and violence. Where such conditions prevail, the communists are in their element. Therefore, we cannot count on native Korean forces to help us hold the line against Soviet expansion. Since the territory is not of decisive strategic importance to us, our main task is to extricate ourselves without too great a loss of prestige.¹¹

In the autumn of 1948, such an outcome did not seem implausible. With the communist threat looking increasingly overwhelming, few Americans had the desire to make a major commitment to South Korea. In spite of the growing criticism of President Truman's handling of the Cold War, Korea was virtually ignored by the Republican Party in the run-up to the November 1948 presidential elections. Republican candidate Thomas Dewey refused to attack Truman on specific foreign policy issues and provided few clues as to how he would change US strategy in the Far East.¹² With the future of US foreign policy looking so uncertain, Washington's most influential press columnists, Joseph and Stewart Alsop, argued that Korea had effectively been lost already.¹³

THE REBELLION TEST

When a communist-inspired military mutiny broke out in two remote Korean towns in October 1948, the press treated it as a crucial test of the ROK's political and military strength. The crisis began when around 40 soldiers operating as a communist cell within a newly formed Republic of Korea Army (ROKA) regiment seized control of their regimental headquarters in the coastal town of Yosu. After seizing large quantities of weapons and ammunition, the soldiers called for a general uprising and executed around 500 loyalist police officers, government officials and rightist militia members. Several hundred rebels then captured a train and set off for the nearby city of Suncheon. Following a brief battle with the police garrison, the rebels captured the city and began massacring both loyalists and other civilians.

When news of the uprising in Yosu and Suncheon broke on 20 October, Rhee and American officers planned an operation to pacify the towns with 6000 Korean police troops led by US advisers. The two sides disagreed over whether to allow the press to cover the operation. Fearing that negative coverage could damage the credibility of the ROK regime, Major General John Coulter tried to prevent reporters from gaining access to the Yosu peninsula. Syngman Rhee, however, believed that the operation was an opportunity to show to the world that the ROK could handle internal security threats and invited four Tokyo-based correspondents to witness the operation as his personal guests.¹⁴

The Yosu rebellion was a watershed moment in press coverage of South Korea. For six months, a major insurgency on the island of Cheju-do had received little attention from American journalists. Apart from a brief US

Army-chaperoned visit to the island's capital city in late April, correspondents had been blocked from investigating conditions themselves, as rumors swirled that South Korean forces were engaged in a brutal pacification campaign against the civilian population of the island.¹⁵ Rhee's offer to embed American journalists with South Korean units thus represented the first opportunity to judge the ROK's pacification strategies for themselves.

While the operation was ultimately successful, the embedded correspondents were shocked by the brutality they witnessed. AP's Tokyo correspondent Tom Lambert's matter-of-fact report observed that "loyal forces have recaptured the city and begun executing communists and communist-sympathizers. Twenty-two were shot a few hours ago and their bodies are lying at the edge of the plaza."¹⁶ Carl Mydans, the only magazine journalist in the group, wrote a more detailed account of the brutal force used by government troops:

The national army, aided by a few police who had fled to the hills and come back, repaid brutality with brutality. We watched from the sidelines of a huge playground with the women and children of Suncheon while all of their men and boys were screened for loyalty. Four young men stripped to their shorts were on their knees begging. One had his hands up in a symbol of prayer. Suddenly these suppliant hands were crushed into his mouth and nose as a rifle butt smashed his teeth. Behind them stood men with clubs ... who beat the kneeling group until the beaters, grinning, had to pause for breath.¹⁷

In dispatches back to *Life*, Mydans added more disturbing details which were not used in the final story. He explained that the young men had been taken to a local primary school and "shot with almost the same rapidity and lack of trial as that used by the rebels.... This was Korean against Korean and brother against brother. The city was sick and its fear infected us with fear."¹⁸

For all the horrors witnessed by correspondents on the frontline, most of the coverage of the Yosu uprising proved beneficial for the Rhee regime, since it emphasized the brutality of the communist rebels above that of government forces. Moreover, as the *Herald Tribune's* Allen Raymond explained at the end of his dispatch, all four of the correspondents reporting from Suncheon had been "urged strongly to point out that if the American troops are taken from the area in the discernible future, the whole country is sure to be conquered by organized communists."¹⁹

Correspondents who remained in Seoul during the operation also reported sympathetically towards the ROK government. The *Times*' Richard Johnston faithfully relayed press releases issued by the ROK that emphasized the professionalism and discipline of government forces.²⁰ The *Christian Science Monitor*'s Gordon Walker asked whether it was now time for the United States to rethink its reluctance to provide the ROK with sufficient military resources to defend itself. Walter Simmons of the *Chicago Daily Tribune* even suggested that most of the blame for the revolt rested with a US military adviser who had refused to screen the constabulary for communist sympathizers.²¹

In the United States, the Yosu-Sunchon rebellion was widely regarded as confirmation of the danger that both Russia and communism more generally posed to South Korea and other Asian nations. The *Christian Science Monitor* suggested that the uprising was a Russian-orchestrated test of South Korean stability.²² The *Herald Tribune* saw Allen Raymond's dispatches as unimpeachable evidence that "Red imperialism in Asia often is ruthless and despicable and as thoroughly evil as evil ever has been anywhere."²³

Yet, not all journalists saw the uprising in such black and white terms. For *Chicago Daily News* correspondent Keyes Beech, the Yosu uprising was a deeply unsettling experience. In his memoir, Beech recalled being deeply disturbed by the casual cruelty of virtually all the Koreans he had encountered and the arbitrariness of the political divisions.²⁴ In Sunchon, he witnessed hundreds of citizens being interviewed by the police with every question punctuated with a blow to the head or back with a rifle butt or the edge of a sword. One old woman he encountered on a road near Sunchon kept with her the flags of both the DPRK and the ROK. One was always kept hidden, depending on which side was in control of the village. For most Koreans, the distinction between communism and the Rhee regime was irrelevant—they had to side with whoever had the most guns.

SELLING THE ROK

The Rhee regime possessed many of the same strengths and weaknesses as its predecessor in terms of its relationship with the press. Amongst the most significant advantages, Rhee inherited a foreign press corps that was largely servile to his authority and supportive of South Korea as a bastion of anti-communism. Seoul-based journalists continued to faithfully report on Korean affairs through official press briefings and handouts.²⁵ Rhee

also counted on the *Times*' Richard Johnston as a friend and political ally—even occasionally turning to him for political advice in his dealings with American diplomats.²⁶

Yet, like his American predecessors, Rhee could not easily overcome the sheer lack of interest in Korean news from editors in the United States. Although AP planned to provide more direct coverage of Korean activities produced by Korean reporters, AP's Tokyo bureau chief recognized that in reality “week after week, carefully worked up stories return as two paragraph clips.”²⁷ When Rhee's US press adviser Robert T. Oliver asked Richard Johnston why he did not report more on the economic and social conditions in Korea, Johnston told him that if he wrote such stories his “editor would not print them, and if he did, no one would read them.”²⁸ Oliver believed that only the most sensational and critical coverage of the Rhee government made it into print in the United States. In his memoir, he described an incident in which he was talking with Keyes Beech, Richard Johnston and a press agency stringer on a street in Seoul, when two policemen chased a young boy and emptied a bucket of water onto his head in a bid to quieten him following his arrest. Oliver alleged that without checking any of the details of the story, Beech immediately rushed to the nearby press room to write a report that emphasized the brutality of the two policemen inflicting the “water treatment” on a small Korean boy.

Unlike Hodge, Rhee did not have the power to keep critical journalists out of Korea or to wield substantial influence over newspaper editors back in the United States. After the Yosu uprising, Rhee asked Oliver to hire an American public relations firm to create favorable press coverage for distribution by the major press agencies.²⁹ Oliver found, however, that such services were far beyond the budget of his new lobbying organization, the Korean Pacific Press. Rhee instead approached other Washington friends for assistance, ultimately recruiting former newspaperman Jay Jerome Williams as a publicity adviser to the new Korean Embassy in Washington. Rhee quickly realized, however, that rumors of a Korean propaganda agency in the United States could upset many Americans, including representatives of the Economic Co-operation Authority (ECA), the successor to the US Army's economic rehabilitation program in Korea.³⁰ The ECA was in the midst of negotiations with Rhee over the level of aid funding for Korea and desperately wanted to avoid accusations that this money was being used to fund public relations activities in the United States. Thus, in January 1949, Rhee warned Oliver that he needed to keep the public relations program “careful and slow.”³¹

The program that did eventually emerge was neither effective nor influential. Oliver and Williams struggled to get published anywhere beyond the religious and special interest journals that had always been sympathetic to the Korean cause. Perhaps their most significant achievement was the publication of a run of pamphlets called "Facts in Korea" which explained the basic history of Korea from a pro-Rhee standpoint. More might have been achieved if not for the ambiguity over whether the embassy or the Korean Pacific Press (KPP) was in charge of South Korea's public relations activities in the United States. Moreover, Oliver struggled to work with both Williams and the new Korean Ambassador to the United States, Chang Myon.

The impotence of the Rhee lobby's publicity efforts ensured that the US government continued to play a major role in shaping public perceptions of South Korea. Although Truman was wary of Rhee's status as a political reactionary, he, and members of his administration, publicly claimed that South Korea had a great deal of democratic potential. While justifying negotiations over the future of the US economic program in South Korea in late 1948, ECA director Paul G. Hoffman called South Korea a budding "bastion of democracy."³² President Truman adopted a similar theme in a message to Congress in June 1949 following a request for \$150 million in aid appropriations for South Korea. He argued that, through its successful practice of democracy, South Korea would "stand as a beacon to the people of northern Asia in resisting the control of the communist forces which have over-run them."³³

The administration's efforts were undermined, however, by the increasing politicization of US Far East policy. In the wake of Dewey's shock defeat in the 1948 election, the Republican Party became more obstructionist and partisan. Republican congressmen publicly blamed Truman for the disastrous series of defeats suffered by Chiang Kai-Shek's forces in the Chinese Civil War.³⁴ Many Republicans were increasingly worried that the administration would recognize the new communist regime and threatened to block the \$150 million aid bill for Korea if the administration refused to take a strong position against the communists in China.³⁵ When the House Foreign Affairs Committee met to discuss the bill in June, Congressman Lawrence H. Smith questioned how Korea would be any more resistant to communism's advance than China. Walter Judd, a significant figure in the China lobby, warned that Korea would be the "first of the ratholes" the United States would start pouring money into if it did not plug up the "basic rathole in China itself."³⁶

The debate over the Korean aid bill dragged on throughout the summer and autumn of 1949. While many of the nation's biggest newspapers, including the *New York Times*, the *New York Herald Tribune*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, the *New York Sun* and the *Washington Evening Star* editorialized in favor of aid for Korea, they recognized that there were basic flaws with US Far East policy. Worries over South Korea's stability also grew in the wake of the assassination of Rhee's former nationalist Kim Koo and reports of heavy fighting along the border with the DPRK. When Mao Tse-Tung's forces captured Beijing at the end of September, the entire US program in the Far East began to look like it might be on the verge of collapse.

CRITICAL PRESS VOICES

While the debate over aid for Korea galvanized the Republican Party, the sharpest critiques of the Rhee regime continued to come from liberals and leftists. Arguably the most influential of these sceptics was Owen Lattimore, a leading expert on Asian affairs and adviser to the State Department. Lattimore had become an ardent critic of Chiang Kai-Shek while working as an adviser to the Kuomintang during World War II. In an article in the left-wing *Daily Compass* in July 1949, Lattimore argued that there were worrying similarities between the US missions to Korea and China. In a startlingly forthright conclusion that would later be used by Senator Joseph McCarthy as evidence that Lattimore was a communist agent, he called for the United States to simply let Syngman Rhee's unpopular government collapse.³⁷

Lattimore's views reflected a widespread belief amongst American leftists that the United States was supporting reactionary governments as part of a global strategy to push back against Soviet expansionism. Rhee was an obvious target for this kind of conspiracy, since he had spent much of his first year as president calling for the United States to bolster his meagre military capacity rather than carrying out desperately needed economic reforms. While Rhee claimed these weapons would be used to defend the ROK from attack by the DPRK, many American observers suspected that Rhee was trying to build his own invasion force. Rhee's leftist critics could thus paint him, somewhat contradictorily, as both a power-hungry tyrant and puppet of American imperialistic scheming.

By the late 1940s, however, the leftist press in the United States was teetering on the edge of oblivion. Growing public paranoia over the threat

of internal subversion by American communists made newspaper owners and advertisers increasingly fearful of being associated with the Left. In 1948, *Chicago Sun* publisher Marshall Field shut down *PM*, one of the last remaining leftist papers with a broad readership. Although it was ultimately revived as the *Daily Compass*, it had nothing like the resources of its commercial rivals and coverage of foreign affairs issues, particularly on niche topics such as Korea, became irregular.³⁸ In Tokyo, the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (SCAP) refused entry for left-wing foreign correspondents such as *Nation* correspondent Andrew Roth.³⁹ In 1950, Hugh Deane, one of the last remaining leftist American reporters based in Japan, returned to the United States to face a decade of blacklisting and destitution.

In spite of the Left's declining fortunes, many of the criticisms of the Rhee regime made by leftists were shared by Americans based in South Korea. While visiting Seoul in late 1949, Keyes Beech wrote a damning critique of Rhee's belligerent nationalism:

As for Syngman Rhee, who at 75 is by general consensus the only man who can hold the republic together, he publicly proclaims the threat of invasion from the north, while privately talking of invading himself. As some observers see it, Rhee may actually move north if he fails to get more United States military aid, because he will have nothing to lose in that case. Warnings of communist moves against the republic apparently seem the best method he can think of to induce American aid.⁴⁰

Just as troubling was South Korea's shift towards a police state:

Meanwhile, the aged president, forced further and further to the right, keeps putting more and more people in jail. Latest reliable count showed 36,000 persons incarcerated, a third of whom are political prisoners. 16,000 more than South Korean jails were built to house. A couple of dozen newspapermen, allegedly members of the South Korean Labor Party, a communist-front organization, are among the prisoners. At present writing, it seems, anybody who disagrees with Rhee is a communist.

Beech's friend and colleague Allen Raymond argued that South Korea had become a "tight little dictatorship run as a police state" as a result of the low-level civil war with the north.⁴¹ He claimed that Rhee had used the Yosu rebellion as an excuse to jail tens of thousands of alleged conspirators and issue a series of laws heavily curbing civil liberties. As a result of the

National Security Law, Rhee was able to arrest anyone believed to have an association with the communist party, including ten members of the National Assembly. In Raymond's judgement, in the fight for Korea's future, Russia had every advantage: "Once the American props are withdrawn, South Korea will fall beneath the weight of communist Asia. And this correspondent has yet to meet an American in Korea who is willing to fight for it."

Of all the Seoul-dated critics of the Rhee government, the most surprising and influential was the *Times*' Richard Johnston, whose reports underwent a subtle shift over the course of 1949. After nine months of dispatches focusing on the communist threat to the stability of South Korea, Johnston increasingly hinted that the future of liberal democracy in South Korea was under threat from its own social and military institutions. In an article in May, he reported that liberal Koreans were alarmed by the rise of a social movement, on course to becoming a state religion, that had "all the trappings of ultranationalistic jingoism."⁴² Johnston caused consternation in Washington when he reported on the expanding influence of the ROK's Army in the wake of the withdrawal of US military forces. Following conversations with US military advisers, he warned that "there is a grave danger that Korea might become a military state with accompanying loss of the freedoms, limited as they are."⁴³ The precise reasons for Johnston's disenchantment with the ROK are not clear. Robert T. Oliver's wife claimed that his attitude to the Rhee government changed after he brought his family to live with him in South Korea.⁴⁴ Although she did not elaborate on this further, it is possible that he stopped being co-operative in order to make life more comfortable for them, perhaps because his pro-Rhee views made them the subject of ridicule in the American community in Seoul.

Johnston returned to New York in December to deliver a pessimistic briefing to the newspaper's editorial staff. According to Robert T. Oliver, Johnston told his colleagues that the general political situation was extremely unstable and disorganized, that the economic situation was weak, and that the United States was wholly unable to keep Russia from occupying Korea.⁴⁵ His final assessment was that the United States should not make any effort to keep Korea out of communist hands. Although many *Times* staff remained supportive of South Korea, including military editor Hanson Baldwin and editorial writer Robert Aura Smith, the paper decided to withdraw Johnston.

Johnston was briefly replaced by the paper's veteran China correspondent Walter Sullivan, who had been evacuated to Seoul after the fall of Beijing to the communists in late September. During his few months in South Korea, he produced some of the most penetrating stories ever written about the Rhee government. He found evidence that government authorities actively endorsed the routine use of torture and violence by the security services. Indeed, he observed that the practice of torture was so widespread amongst the Korean police and military authorities that it threatened to push the general population towards communism.⁴⁶ Moreover, the government hid evidence of crimes committed against citizens. He cited a report about a Korean assemblyman who had tried to publicize the shooting of the son of a farmer during an armed rice collection by the police, only for Korean reporters to be told by the Government Information Office to not publish any account of the case or to challenge the official story.

In stark contrast to Johnston's humble roots, Sullivan was a product of two of America's most elite educational institutions, Groton and Yale.⁴⁷ At Yale, Sullivan had worked on the *Yale Literary Magazine* alongside future national security adviser McGeorge Bundy and Central Intelligence agency (CIA) Counterintelligence Chief James Jesus Angleton.⁴⁸ Sullivan's intellectual and liberal sensibilities and his intimate awareness of the failings of the Kuomintang encouraged him to go beyond the normal foreign correspondent beats. In February 1950, Sullivan made a detailed survey of the impact of the government's conflict with communist guerrillas in isolated rural areas. In the most dramatic of these reports, Sullivan described how "large sections of South Korea are darkened today by a cloud of terror that is probably unparalleled in the world."⁴⁹ He blamed both the guerrillas and the government for the violence, noting that, "If a peasant cooperates with one side or the other he faces the threat of violent death at the hands of the opposition. If he does not cooperate he is regarded with suspicion and is endangered."

In the spring of 1950, Sullivan also came close to becoming the first mainstream American journalist to be allowed to report from inside North Korea.⁵⁰ According to Bruce Cumings, Sullivan received an invitation to visit the DPRK from the North Korean Interior Ministry after sending a request through a courier in South Korea.⁵¹ Sullivan told the communists that he wanted to carry out an extended reporting trip of several months similar in ambition to Edgar Snow's famous visit to the Chinese communist headquarters in Bao'an in 1936.⁵² In early April, he left South Korea

for Hong Kong, where he was told he could catch a Soviet freighter to the DPRK. However, his North Korean contacts disappeared without providing him with any further instructions. He was still in Hong Kong when the DPRK launched its invasion of the ROK at the end of June.

AMBIVALENCE

Throughout the first year and a half of the ROK's existence, the Korean National Assembly had vied with Syngman Rhee for supremacy over the country's political system. As Rhee grew impatient with the Assembly's blocking of his legislative agenda, he increasingly relied on intimidation and repression to force the Assembly into line. Rhee regularly turned to the National Security Law, passed in late 1948, to put pressure on intransigent members of the Assembly. Thirteen assemblymen were arrested in June 1949, ostensibly for their links with a banned pro-communist party. As the economic situation deteriorated in late 1949, members of the Assembly became increasingly vocal in their criticism of the Rhee government.

The breakdown in relations between the National Assembly and Rhee came into full view in the spring of 1950. In early January, US "Ambassador-at-large" Philip Jessup visited South Korea as part of a three-month fact-finding trip to the Far East on behalf of Dean Acheson. In a speech to the Korean Chamber of Commerce, Jessup urged the Koreans not to sit back and hope that the United States would cope with the situation alone. Instead, he argued that South Korea's defense against communism depended on a strong economy and a "fundamental policy of political freedom."⁵³ Just a few days later, the US House of Representatives voted to reject the administration's Korean aid bill. As the first major foreign policy initiative of the Truman administration to be blocked by Congress, the news was received with shock in both the United States and South Korea. Although Congress had expressed little interest in South Korea's democratic problems, opposition members of the Korean National Assembly drew a direct link between Jessup's speech and the Congressional vote, and launched a scathing public attack on their own government for its lack of democratic legitimacy and failure to keep a "clean house."⁵⁴

Tensions escalated once again in March when the 13 assemblymen arrested in the previous June were found guilty of treason and given long jail sentences. At the same time, the Assembly attempted to pass a constitutional amendment which would have heavily restricted the powers of the

president. Aware of his waning influence over the Assembly, Rhee called for the introduction of a bicameral parliament and indicated that legislative elections due to be held in May should be postponed.⁵⁵

These tensions alarmed American diplomats. A breakdown in the country's political system threatened to disrupt efforts to put the country's runaway inflation under control, which, in turn, would make Congress less likely to fund further appropriations for aid to the ROK.⁵⁶ American officials rebuked Rhee for his attempts to undermine the National Assembly and, in early April, Dean Acheson threatened the ROK government with an ultimatum: if it did not help resolve the inflation problem and cancel the postponement of the general elections, the US government would abandon its effort to pass a new Korean aid bill.⁵⁷

Acheson's intervention in the Korean crisis coincided with several other significant and controversial statements on US Korea policy. Upon his return to the United States at the end of March, Philip Jessup briefed the press, albeit without direct attribution, that the government of South Korea was dictatorial and incompetent.⁵⁸ Most dramatically, in response to being called in front of the Tydings subcommittee investigating Senator McCarthy's accusations of communist infiltration of the highest levels of government, State Department adviser Owen Lattimore published a memorandum declaring that South Korea was "more of a liability than asset to the interests and policy of the United States."⁵⁹ At the beginning of May, Senator John Connally, the Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, told *U.S. News and World Report* that the United States would likely have to abandon South Korea following a communist invasion.⁶⁰

This wave of criticism from the political establishment kept South Korea's democratic failings in the limelight. In the first months of 1950, Sullivan had been almost alone in discussing the poor state of South Korean democracy; now, US-based editors and correspondents piled in with commentary.⁶¹ According to the *Christian Science Monitor*, Korean authorities had been decisively told that "the existence and growth of democratic institutions are a prerequisite for continuing American aid."⁶² The *Baltimore Sun* observed that the South Korean government "has been operating a terrific deficit, internal disorders are rife, Communists are constantly stirring up various turmoils and the police, still operating in some respects much as they did under the Japanese, are being called terrorists." In a starkly pragmatic examination of the case for remaining in Korea, it

concluded that the United States had been locked into supporting the Korean government by its “rash promise” to re-establish a free and independent Korea. Although the country had strategic value, it suggested that the US foreign policy establishment might be on the verge of deciding that South Korea was no longer worth supporting.⁶³

A particularly lively debate over the repressiveness of the Korean government appeared in the editorial and letters pages of the *Washington Post*, which had long served as a forum for public debate on foreign policy issues, in part because the *Post* carried little in the way of its own foreign affairs reporting. In the wake of the sentencing of the 13 assemblymen, the Korean Affairs Institute’s Yong-jeung Kim wrote to the *Post* denouncing the Rhee regime for orchestrating something akin to a communist show-trial. In the harshest criticism he ever expressed of the ROK regime, he claimed that, in the name of anti-communism, Rhee had deprived the press of its freedom and allowed his police to “arrest, imprison, torture and kill anyone at will.” He warned that if the United States continued to support “bloodthirsty opportunists” like Syngman Rhee, the United States would contribute to the communization of Korea and the whole Far East.⁶⁴ Korean Commission official Henry Chung fired back at Kim with a point-by-point critique of Kim’s claims. Kim responded by quoting extracts of reports by Walter Sullivan and the United Nations Commission on Korea that illustrated the repressiveness of the Rhee government.⁶⁵

The *Post*’s editorial writers, perhaps influenced by the activist liberal stewardship of publisher Phil Graham, issued their own harshly worded critique of the Rhee regime at the end of May.⁶⁶ Although Rhee had given in to American demands to cancel the postponement of the May elections, the *Post* argued the elections would be illusory anyway after the regime’s violent persecution of the opposition. Reports of multiple pro-Rhee candidates standing for a single seat and the inadequacy of United Nations observer teams were further reasons to doubt the credibility of the election result. With the United States’ moral commitment to Korea fast running out, the *Post* warned that only a clear improvement in the effectiveness of the government could justify continued US aid.⁶⁷ The strident nature of the editorial caused one former occupation official to complain about the “general tone” of the paper’s editorials on Korea.⁶⁸ The former official argued that Rhee was clearly the people’s choice and had been exceedingly patient and tolerant with communist “traitors.”

OPTIMISM RETURNS

While Rhee succumbed to international pressure to hold the elections on schedule, he still found new ways of provoking American ire. When diplomats got wind of a Korean plan to reassign all police chiefs just before the elections, political adviser Harold Noble called for Rhee to delay the change until after the election because of its potential impact on foreign public opinion.⁶⁹ In the run-up to the elections, nonetheless, police arrested hundreds of candidates alleged to be communist sympathizers.

While a few visiting newspaper correspondents were anguished by these developments, most reporting focused on the scrupulousness with which the Koreans had followed political procedure. The *Herald Tribune's* new Tokyo correspondent Marguerite Higgins wrote that, in light of the semi-war with the north, the “the orderliness and freedom of this election day were- with few exceptions—a tribute to the stability of the government” as well as the ROKA’s campaign against communist guerrillas. After touring a dozen voting places in Seoul, Higgins saw no evidence of fraud and heard no complaints from UN observers.⁷⁰ In a similarly upbeat assessment on the eve of the election, AP praised the quietness of the campaign and declared that there had only been a few instances of strong-arm tactics.⁷¹ It quoted, apparently without irony, an unnamed American observer who claimed that “South Korea has taken to democracy because it was presented on a silver platter along with liberation from the Japanese.” Now, he claimed, “she is doing her best to earn it and to help hold back the tide of communism.”

When the results were announced, they did not clearly fit any narrative.⁷² Fewer than 30 assembly members kept their seats, while a majority of the newly elected candidates did not belong to any party or claim any political affiliation. The *Times* suggested that the result was a significant defeat for Rhee and a sign that South Korea was not even close to being a dictatorship.⁷³ Yet, in another editorial two days later, the *Times* admitted that Rhee had conducted “an intensive police campaign against anti-Government candidates.”⁷⁴ It cited a report by correspondent Burton Crane which suggested that the Korean public had voted for candidates who had been victims of Korean police persecution as a protest against the authoritarian nature of the ruling regime.⁷⁵

One correspondent took strong exception to criticisms of the authoritarian nature of the Rhee government. Despite having previously criticized Rhee for his apparent desire to be a dictator, Walter Simmons, the

hyper-patriotic correspondent for the conservative *Chicago Daily Tribune*, accused other Tokyo-based reporters in South Korea of making the charge of dictatorship without spending adequate time in the country.⁷⁶ Simmons praised Rhee as a hard-working and dynamic executive with no patience for those responsible for the poor administration of his country. He quoted an American observer who suggested that the charges of dictatorship made on the floor of the National Assembly by political opponents were, in fact, a sign of the rude health of South Korean democracy.

Even those correspondents who criticized the regime for its authoritarian tendencies praised the ROK's progress in other areas. Burton Crane described the ROK's planned land reforms as "one of the most revolutionary economic experiments of all time."⁷⁷ In an article which mostly highlighted the ROK's economic and military progress in recent months, *Time*'s Frank Gibney argued that there were positives to be found in the country's turbulent political environment:

Shrewd, immovable Syngman Rhee has played an important role in taking a new nation through its difficult infancy. Rhee, however, is justly accused of dictatorial tendencies, and has repeatedly violated the constitution to suit his own convenience. The press does not dare to criticize him, but the ram-bunctious National Assembly delights in doing so. One of the major campaign issues in this week's election was a proposal for constitutional revision which would strip the President of much of his power.⁷⁸

Like many American correspondents before him, Gibney rationalized the ROK's political failings by suggesting that "democracy comes slowly to a tradition-bound, largely rural people with a background of centuries of absolute rule." But he also made an unusual and intriguing comparison between the situation in the ROK and that in North Korea:

South Korea's occasional similarities to a police state fade in comparison to the situation north of the 38th parallel. North Korea is, for all practical purposes, a Russian colony. Even the Chinese Communists have no representation in North Korea, and Mao Tse-tung's visage is conspicuous by its absence. Said a refugee North Korean major recently: 'Russia, not Korea, is held up as the motherland. We don't even study Korean history in the schools there.'

South of the 38th parallel Koreans are flexing their muscles in a new nationalism. During 40 years of Japanese rule, the life of a conquered people had led the Koreans into venality, stealth and the habits of petty crookery.

Said a Korean expatriate: 'I was amazed when I returned to my country in 1945. Living under the Japanese had made my people servile and corrupt. I wanted to leave again.' But almost two years of independence have made South Koreans a proud people again.

As historian Charles Kraus has argued, the belief that North Korea was nothing more than a Russian satellite was widespread amongst Americans in the late 1940s.⁷⁹ But the flip side of this was the growing sense that, despite its faults, South Korea was becoming a genuine and legitimate manifestation of Korean nationalism.

CONCLUSION

American coverage of South Korea between 1948 and 1950 was the most penetrating of any period covered in this book. For the liberal press, the establishment of the ROK represented a remarkable change from the occupation era. Although Rhee inherited Hodge's close relationships with the Seoul press corps, visiting correspondents were given the freedom to write about the ROK government in very critical ways. Liberal correspondents such as Keyes Beech, Allen Raymond and Walter Sullivan took full advantage of this opportunity to highlight Rhee's brutal police state, anti-democratic methods and ineffectual rule.

Liberal criticism of the Rhee government coincided with a broader political controversy over American support for anti-communist regimes in East Asia, especially in the wake of Chiang Kai-Shek's defeat in the Chinese Civil War. To an extent, these controversies reinforced one another and created the space for correspondents and editorial writers to write about the problem of authoritarianism in some of the most influential newspapers in the United States. However, authoritarianism never became the central issue in the controversy over the Rhee regime. The threat of communism was perceived to be too great and the Korean people too politically backward for liberal democracy to function effectively in South Korea. Moreover, there were reasons for optimism. The ambiguous outcome of the May 1950 election suggested that the regime had some respect for procedural aspects of the democratic process. Meanwhile, the Rhee government could also claim progress in fighting inflation, planning land reform, developing the ROKA and even inculcating the first stirrings of a sense of nationhood.

NOTES

1. Rhee only delivered the first half of the speech Oliver wrote for him. While Oliver claimed that Rhee then opted to give extemporaneous thanks to the many allies and friends who had helped him over the previous decades, other accounts suggest that Rhee delivered a radically altered version of the second half of the speech. He ignored sections that called for a peaceful resolution to the problem of the division of the peninsula and for Koreans of all backgrounds to come together to build their new country, instead warning the Korean public that subversion or disobedience of the government would not be tolerated. Few American correspondents were aware of these changes, however, as only Oliver's original was printed in the official program: Syngman Rhee, Re-Establishment of Korean Nation Speech, 15 August 1948 quoted in KPP, *Korea's Fight for Freedom* (Washington, DC: Korean Pacific Press, 1951), 8–10; Oliver, *Syngman Rhee and American Involvement in Korea; 1942–1960*, 187. For a detailed analysis of the changes to the speech and the rhetoric concepts behind it, see David A. Frank and Woo-Soo Park, Syngman Rhee, Robert T. Oliver, and the Symbolic Construction of the Republic of Korea during the Global Cold War, *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 48, No. 2 (2018), 207–226.
2. Richard Johnston, "Korea Set Up as Republic; MacArthur Predicts 'Unity'," *New York Times*, 15 August 1948.
3. "A Nation Is Reborn," *New York Times*, 15 August 1948.
4. George Fox Mott, "Korea is Reborn a Democracy Today," *Sunday Star*, 15 August 1948.
5. "Democracy in Korea Praised by Hodge," *New York Times*, 29 August 1948.
6. "The Korean Constitution," *New York Times*, 14 July 1948; "Korea's First Constitution," *Buffalo Evening News*, 15 July 1948.
7. Brines to Gould, 18 August 1948, Seoul Bureau, Foreign Bureau Records 1946–7, General Files, AP Corporate Archives.
8. Walter Simmons, "See Freedom in Korea Injured by Acts," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 22 March 1947.
9. Walter Simmons, "Faults Found in Constitution of South Korea," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 11 September 1948.
10. Richard Johnston, "North Korea Gets Full Puppet Rule," *New York Times*, 11 September 1948.
11. Report by the Policy Planning Staff, 6 November 1947, *FRUS* 1947, 1, 327.
12. Robert A. Divine, "The Cold War and the Election of 1948," *The Journal of American History* 59, no. 1 (1972), 90–110.

13. Joseph and Stewart Alsop, "U.S. Decision Virtually Gives Korea to Russia," *New York Herald Tribune*, 1 September 1948.
14. Carl Mydans Life story notes, 24 October 1948, Life Picture Collection Archives; Keyes Beech, *Tokyo and Points East* (1st ed.) (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1954), 139–41; Brines to Beale, 3 January 1949, Tokyo Bureau, Foreign Bureau Records 1949, General Files, AP Corporate Archives.
15. Allen Raymond, "Police Brutality Held Cause of Cheju Civil War," *New York Herald Tribune*, 30 April 1948.
16. Tom Lambert, "Korean Roads Strewn with Revolt's Victims," *Los Angeles Times*, 26 October 1948.
17. Carl Mydans, "Revolt in Korea," *Life*, 15 November 1948.
18. Carl Mydans Life story notes, 24 October 1948, Life Picture Collection Archives.
19. Allen Raymond, "560 Slain by Korean Mutineers," *New York Herald Tribune*, 26 October 1948.
20. Richard Johnston, "Korea Insurgents Continue to Resist," *New York Times*, 24 October 1948.
21. Gordon Walker, "South Korean Revolt Hints Prospect of Setting Up Full South Korean Army," *Christian Science Monitor*, 30 October 1948; Walter Simmons, "Korean Revolt Looks Like Long Guerrilla War," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 25 October 1948.
22. "Showdown in Korea," *Christian Science Monitor*, 22 October 1948.
23. "Peaceful Heaven," *New York Herald Tribune*, 27 October 1948.
24. Beech, 139–41.
25. AP's Tokyo bureau chief Russell Brines wrote to AP in September 1948 to complain that "we are enmeshed in a heavy volume of routine, as a relay and news distribution point and through our necessary devotion to hand-out news": Brines to Mickelson, 3 September 1948, Tokyo Bureau, Foreign Bureau Records 1948, General Files, AP Corporate Archives. See also King, *Tail of the Paper Tiger*, 526.
26. Jacobs to Marshall, 18 August 1948, *FRUS* 1948, 7, 1282.
27. Brines to Gould, 18 August 1948, Seoul Bureau, Foreign Bureau Records 1948, General Files, AP Corporate Archives; Brines to Mickelson, 3 September 1948, Tokyo Bureau, Foreign Bureau Records 1948, General Files, AP Corporate Archives.
28. Oliver, *Syngman Rhee and American Involvement in Korea; 1942–1960*, 481.
29. Oliver, 208.
30. Rhee to Goodfellow, 2 February 1949, Box 1, Preston Goodfellow Papers, Hoover Institution Archives.
31. Oliver, 215–17.

32. Chicago Tribune Service, "Hoffman Seeks Aid for Korea," *Spokesman Review*, 21 December 1948.
33. Harry Truman, "Special Message to the Congress Regarding Continuation of Economic Assistance to Korea," 7 June 1949, Public Papers: Truman, 1949, 276–8.
34. Ronald J. Caridi, *The Korean War and American Politics: The Republican Party as a Case Study* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1968), 8.
35. William S. White, "Vote Aid or Korea Will Fall in 3 Months, Acheson Says," *New York Times*, 2 July 1949.
36. "Aid to Korea," in *CQ Almanac 1949* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly, 1950).
37. Owen Lattimore, "South Korea – Another China," *Daily Compass*, 17 July 1949.
38. The *Daily Compass* relied on the financial support of progressive philanthropist Anita McCormick Blaine, a relative of Colonel Robert McCormick, the owner of the *Chicago Daily Tribune*. At the end of 1949, Blaine also helped establish another weekly newspaper, the *National Guardian*, which had strong links with Henry Wallace's Progressive Party.
39. Message to CINCFE, 22 January 1950, Box 65, RG9, Douglas MacArthur Papers, MacArthur Memorial Archives.
40. Keyes Beech, "Korean Capital Friendlier to Americans Now," *Boston Globe*, 26 September 1949.
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57. While Acheson's first draft of his aide-mémoire made reference only to the inflation issue, Ambassador Muccio requested that Rhee's threat to suspend elections also be included: Muccio to Acheson, 31 March 1950, *FRUS* 1950, 7, 39-40.
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60. "World Policy and Bipartisanship," *U.S. News and World Report*, 5 May 1950. While State Department officials privately complained about Connally's "attitude of defeatism," Dean Acheson declined to offer any public statement of support to the ROK in a press conference the next day: Rusk to Webb, 2 May 1950, *FRUS* 1950, 7, 64-65.
61. In a story about Philip Jessup's visit to South Korea in January, Sullivan had noted that 15 members of the opposition could not attend the session due either to being in jail or on bail under the national security law. Sullivan

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 74. "Setback for Rhee," *New York Times*, 4 June 1950.
 75. Burton Crane, "Independents Win Korean Elections," *New York Times*, 1 June 1950.
 76. Walter Simmons, "Flames of Zeal Burn in Korea's President at 75," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 15 June 1950.
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War 1950–1951

When the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) launched its invasion of the Republic of Korea (ROK) in June 1950, it was one of the biggest international news stories since World War II. As an egregious violation of international law and the post-war spirit of global co-operation, the attack was condemned by virtually every nation outside the communist bloc. When President Truman ordered American soldiers into combat in Korea, he did so under the auspices of a United Nations (UN) “police action.” Over the following months, the front line shifted up and down the Korean peninsula, laying waste to both countries and radically altering both global geopolitics and the nature of the US–ROK relationship.

Despite the tremendous amount of scholarship on the Korean War, no study has ever explored American public perceptions of the ROK in this period in any depth. It has usually been argued that the press and the public rapidly fell into line behind the Truman administration on the necessity of the war to deter and punish communist militarism.¹ Within this context, few Americans ever demonstrated much interest in Korea itself; a situation perfectly captured by *Time* in July 1950 when a reporter asked the father of one of the first American casualties of the war what his son had died fighting for, he replied “against some kind of government.”²

Yet, this is far from the whole story. As Marilyn Young has argued, significant numbers of Americans were both interested in and deeply alarmed by the war.³ This chapter shows how doubts about the Rhee regime were raised in the press in both explicit and implicit ways. During the first weeks

of the conflict, newspaper editorials, columnists and reporters questioned whether the regime was too corrupt and unpopular to survive the invasion. Through the first six months of the conflict, reports from war correspondents in the field described South Korean security forces committing brutal mass executions of alleged communists.

Although this coverage was substantial, it never became significant enough to derail public support for the war. Crucially, the press immediately interpreted the invasion as a Cold War crisis—a narrative that was bolstered, but not created, by the Truman administration’s public messaging strategy. Once the ROK proved that it had the durability to survive the opening stages of the war, the press immediately moved its focus to the larger military and strategic aspects of the war. For war correspondents covering Korea, atrocities committed by the regime were generally regarded as a sad but inevitable feature of this kind of conflict. Moreover, by 1951, journalists both in South Korea and the United States increasingly accepted the pro-ROK narrative offered by Syngman Rhee’s public relations officials.

FINDING A NARRATIVE

When news broke of the DPRK’s invasion of the ROK on 25 June 1950, the American press reacted with both puzzlement and anxiety. After years of escalating tensions with the Soviet Union, many Americans had anticipated that the Soviets would make an aggressive move against the free world. However, such an attack had been expected in Europe rather than Asia. It was unclear why the Soviets, acting through their North Korean client regime, had initiated a major conflict in an area of low strategic importance.

The mainstream press did not doubt that South Korea was an innocent victim of communist aggression. After the communist-run *Daily Worker* claimed that the North Korean invasion was a response to an attack from the ROK, the *Christian Science Monitor* accused it of parroting the standard line of aggressor nations seeking to charge their victims with responsibility for violence.⁴ In early July, the *New York Times*’ foreign editor refused to reprint a story from the previous month on the jailing of 13 people by the ROK government for opposing an attack on the DPRK. When the *Manchester Guardian* printed a letter quoting the story, an editor told publisher Arthur Hayes Sulzberger that they had to be “more patriotic than news-minded” and not mention the story again.⁵

The call for patriotism reflected the broad consensus amongst American journalists that the assault on South Korea was a major crisis for US foreign policy. With its obvious parallels to both the Japanese surprise attack on Pearl Harbor and Hitler's strategy of annexing small European countries in the late 1930s, the communist invasion appeared to be a direct challenge to the post-war international system, designed by the United States and its allies to deter exactly this kind of military adventurism. As a creation of the United Nations, the ROK was symbolic of the international community's efforts to resolve political problems through legal and diplomatic mechanisms rather than violent confrontation. In the first days of the war, the press repeatedly emphasized these facts and portrayed the Rhee regime as dedicated to both democracy and international co-operation. In its first article examining the South Korean political situation after the invasion, Associated Press (AP) reminded readers that South Koreans had twice voted in UN-supervised elections and even offered to accept assemblymen from North Korea under the same conditions.⁶ In the *New York Times*, Richard Johnston praised the country's recent history of representative elections and "enthusiasm for self-government."⁷

Just days after the start of the invasion, President Truman ordered troops to Korea in what he vaguely defined as an UN-led international "police action." Although Truman's decision received almost unanimous endorsement from the mainstream American press, at least some of Rhee's critics continued to ask awkward questions about the regime the United States had now committed itself to saving.⁸ In *U.S. News and World Report*, Joe Fromm savaged Rhee for his dictatorial tendencies: "He lived in a sumptuous palace, ringed with armed guards. A rigid rightist, he fought not only Communist elements but also more moderate leaders. His secret police became a feared and reviled body. They had been trained by the Japanese and behaved in much the same old way."⁹ The *Chicago Daily News's* Ernie Hill, one of a small circle of liberal critics of the Rhee regime based in the United States, argued that the UN was downplaying Rhee in its war aims because of his terrible public image in Asia.¹⁰ According to Hill, "Asiatic and Arab countries are much better informed about President Rhee's dictatorial record, his liquidation of opposition and his threat to launch a war himself than are most people in this country."¹¹

The most vehement criticisms of the Rhee regime appeared in the American communist media, most notably the *Daily Worker*, which depicted the invasion of the ROK as a "war of liberation" against a reactionary, unpopular and militarily aggressive government.¹² Although the *Worker's*

attempts to cast the ROK as the instigator of the war made little headway elsewhere, many liberals shared its belief that the South Korean people were on the verge of rising up against Rhee's autocratic rule.¹³ The total collapse of the ROK's Army in the first week of the war was interpreted by some as an indication that the regime did not have the loyalty of ordinary Koreans.¹⁴ A small but influential group of journalists working for liberal magazines such as the *New Republic* and the *Nation* argued that few South Koreans were willing to fight for such a "corrupt" and "politically rotten" police state, particularly when Rhee's policies were contrasted with the "hopeful" political program put forward by the North Korean communists.¹⁵

Although no mainstream journalists joined the *Daily Worker* in praising the DPRK, there were scattered calls for the United States to depose Rhee and replace his regime with a US-sponsored trusteeship or military government. *Hartford Courant* reporter and former AMG official Siegbert Kaufmann argued that the United States needed to go back to trusteeship so that new elections could be held in a neutral political environment.¹⁶ In a letter to the *Washington Post*, Rhee critic Yong-jeung Kim argued that that his government had been discredited in the May elections and was now incapable of rallying public support.¹⁷ In order to encourage the ROK population to stand up to the communists, he argued it was necessary for the United States to take over the civil administration of the ROK for the duration of the conflict.

Such attacks on the Rhee government dissipated through the course of July as it became increasingly clear that the ROK had survived the initial onslaught of the North Korean invasion. At a press briefing on July 15, Secretary of State Dean Acheson indicated that there had been no popular uprising in South Korea and that the South Korean military had successfully regrouped and begun fighting effectively.¹⁸ Editorials writers and columnists looked to factors other than the government's weakness to explain the collapse of the South Korean Army—with many jumping on reports that the United States had failed to adequately prepare the ROK to defend itself from communist attack.¹⁹

The good news out of South Korea coincided with increasingly pro-ROK rhetoric from the US political establishment. On July 19, President Truman gave his first strong affirmation of support for the ROK regime in a "fire side chat" broadcast on national radio.²⁰ Truman angrily denounced the DPRK's invasion as a "direct challenge to the efforts of the free nations to build the kind of world in which men can live in freedom and peace" and praised the Korean defenders for their "brave fight for their liberty."

The strongest public defense of the Rhee government was mounted by John Foster Dulles, President Truman's recently appointed envoy to Japan. A leading figure in the foreign policy establishment, Dulles was widely regarded as the main foreign policy spokesman for the moderate wing of the Republican Party. Just days before the onset of the war, Dulles had visited South Korea on a diplomatic goodwill mission where he had reassured the Koreans of the US commitment to the future of their country. After returning to the United States at the end of June, Dulles made a series of public speeches praising the regime. In front of a crowd of several hundred thousand gathered in Washington for Independence Day celebrations, he declared that Korean society was "so wholesome that it could not be overthrown from within." A few weeks later, Dulles was solicited by the *New York Times* for a magazine article outlining his thoughts on the Rhee government.²¹ Dulles wrote that he admired the country's "healthy society" where vigorous electoral competition and the independence of most elected representatives from Rhee's party machine proved the reality of political freedom.²² Korea's democracy was so strong, Dulles argued, that it had become a matter of urgency for the communists to destroy it.

With both senior administration officials and Republican leaders united behind the ROK, Rhee's critics lost their best chance of framing public debate over the Korean War around the stability and legitimacy of the Rhee government. Although criticism of the Rhee regime did re-emerge in the mainstream press during the course of the war, it never fundamentally challenged the American policy of support for the ROK.

Perhaps the best summary of the mainstream view of the ROK regime was provided by Pulitzer Prize-winning war reporter Marguerite Higgins in her 1951 memoir. She wrote that the ROK undoubtedly had much to learn about making democracy work, when measured by Western standards: "The police had been trained by Japanese masters and were brutal in the extreme. In the general elections in 1950 there were numerous charges of police pressure, and I am sure some of them were true."²³ Higgins drew a sharp distinction, however, between the rough and tumble nature of politics in South Korea and the horrifying totalitarianism she had witnessed as a reporter in Eastern Europe during the late 1940s. Thus, while the margin of individual freedom may have been increasing too slowly in South Korea to suit most Americans, it was at least improving—unlike in communist Poland.

WAR CORRESPONDENTS AND SOUTH KOREAN ATROCITIES

Higgins was one of around 200 American war correspondents who reported from Korea during the summer of 1950. Between the start of the war in June and the imposition of mandatory censorship in December, the dispatches of American correspondents were not subject to military censorship. Although US military authorities and the press came to blows several times over the extent of permissible criticism of US military performance, the press nonetheless possessed an unusual degree of freedom to write about the war.²⁴ In the view of Bruce Cumings, coverage from this period of the war was “fascinating and instructive, revealing its essential nature, its *civil* nature” (*italics in original*).²⁵

Other scholars have been much less impressed by the quality of American coverage. Much criticism has focused on the perceived failure of journalists to report on how the war impacted on the civilian population. This issue became particularly sensitive after an AP investigation in 1999 discovered evidence of an alleged massacre of hundreds of Korean civilians by American soldiers near the village of No Gun Ri in July 1950.²⁶ Following interviews with eyewitnesses and examination of US government archives, AP published a sensational report suggesting that the soldiers at No Gun Ri had been following orders from senior military commanders to shoot civilians suspected of being communist insurgents.²⁷ While the details of what happened at No Gun Ri are still heavily contested, the lack of contemporary coverage of these atrocities was brought into the spotlight.²⁸

In the wake of the No Gun Ri revelations, increased attention has also been paid to allegations of mass executions carried out by South Korean forces. Over 100,000 people may have been executed in the early stages of the war—many of them members of the Bodo League, an organization created by the Rhee government in 1949 with the official purpose of rehabilitating leftists but, in practice, used as a mechanism for monitoring critics of the regime.²⁹ While no correspondents captured the full scale of this systematic repression, Philip Knightley argued that reporters from the United Kingdom and Australia did much more to bring these atrocities to the attention of the public.³⁰ Most American correspondents, he suggested, had merely got “on side” with the military’s view of how the war should be reported.³¹

The distinction Knightley drew between different nationalities of correspondents was not entirely fair. On many occasions during the first six

months of the war, American reporters wrote about the extrajudicial killing and abuse of prisoners by South Korean forces.³² The first significant atrocity report appeared roughly two weeks into the war when UP correspondent Rutherford Poats was travelling with an Australian United Nations military observer and witnessed South Korean soldiers breaking the backs of suspected communist guerrillas with their rifle butts:

SOMEWHERE IN KOREA, 10 July, 1950—The South Koreans deal out quick punishment to suspected Communist guerrillas behind their lines. They break their backs, then execute them. United Nations Military Observer R. J. Rankin of Australia and I discovered this today when we came upon two open trucks parked in front of a grove overlooking a river.

Some 40 persons were crouched on all fours in the back of one of the trucks. A Korean policeman stood in the middle of this mass and crashed the butt of his American rifle into the back of one after another of the kneeling men. Their backs broke with a sickening crunch which could be heard 100 yards away. Rankin hunted up an English-speaking policeman and asked an explanation. ‘Guerrillas,’ said the policeman with a gesture at their backs.

He indicated that the prisoners would be taken to nearby woods and executed. But it seemed unlikely that many would live long enough for the formal execution.³³

Although Poats did not give the location of the incident in his report, Australian records place Rankin in the vicinity of Taejon around that date.³⁴ Poats was likely describing a small part of the Taejon massacre, the systematic execution of between 3000 and 7000 suspected communists and inmates of Taejon prison.³⁵ Although no further coverage relating specifically to Taejon appeared in the American press, the brutal treatment of civilians at the hands of South Korean forces was commented on in more general terms. In a dispatch for the *Chicago Daily News* a few days after Poats’ report, Keyes Beech wrote that, between the South Korean Army firing squads and American troops inclined to shoot any Korean on sight, it was a very bad time to be a Korean.³⁶ In August, *Time*’s John Osborne wrote a first-hand account of the brutality of the fighting with the subheading the “ugly story of an ugly war.” Osborne described how South Korean police and marines “murder to save themselves the trouble of escorting prisoners to the rear; they murder civilians simply to get them out of the way or to avoid the trouble of searching and cross-examining them. And they extort information—information our forces need and require of the South Korean interrogators—by means so brutal that they cannot be described.”³⁷

More atrocity stories emerged in November and December as South Korean forces purged Seoul of communist collaborators. The *New York Times*' Charles Grutzner wrote a harrowing account of the execution of 27 suspected collaborators in a cemetery outside the city.³⁸ Grutzner humanized the victims, focusing in particular on a "Kiisang girl" who had been the mistress of the Seoul communist police chief during the North Korean occupation. Grutzner described the callous brutality of the South Korean officials who had failed to remove her eight-month-old child strapped to her back before lifting her, hands bound, onto a truck waiting to transport her to the execution site.

A few days after Grutzner's story appeared in the press, ROK military authorities issued a ban on correspondents attending mass executions.³⁹ But this did not bring a total halt to reporting on the executions. As Koreans prepared to flee Seoul ahead of its capture by communist forces in mid-December, UP's Peter Kalischer reported that two Catholic priests had tried and failed to gain an audience with Syngman Rhee in order to bring a halt to mass executions which had claimed the lives of at least 800 men, women and children in just five days. Kalischer provided an extensive analysis of the background to the executions and why they had not previously received attention:

A wave of disgust and anger swept through American and British troops who either have witnessed or heard the firing squads in action in the Seoul area during the last two days. The executions have been going on almost since the liberation of Seoul in September. United States military authorities were reluctant to interfere because it was doubtful if they have authority since the executions are being carried out under sentences imposed by Korean courts against Korean civilians. It was believed women and children were executed as members of the families of condemned men and that military police shooting them had no authority from government officials. They were not brought to public notice until American and British units happened to move into an area bordering the execution ground about a mile north of the city. British troops said they would not permit any more shootings in their area.⁴⁰

The reports of these executions shocked and horrified many Americans. When a reader incorrectly complained that the *Daily News* had referred to the Poats incident as an example of "speedy justice" and not as an extrajudicial killing, the *Daily News* responded that it was shocked by the atrocious brutality ascribed to America's ally.⁴¹ *Time* wrote that the South

Korean approach to executions had “disgraced the Korean government and disgusted its allies.”⁴² Yet, no outcry appeared comparable to that in Britain, where the atrocity issue was raised in both Houses of Parliament and in a session of Cabinet.⁴³ Although a handful of American readers wrote to newspapers to criticize the lack of public response, others felt that atrocities were an inevitable part of war, especially when the other side was engaging in equally heinous acts.⁴⁴ In a letter to the *Chicago Daily News*, a reader suggested that these kinds of atrocities were simply the “facts of war” which were now being revealed for the first time because of MacArthur’s decision not to impose censorship.⁴⁵ The *Washington Post* argued that it was the nature of modern warfare for ordinary people to be the chief victims.⁴⁶ Korea was particularly ripe for this kind of conflict because of the fraternal relationship between the two sides.

Some observers rationalized the brutality of the war through its Asian context. In a letter responding to Poats’ account of the treatment of suspected communists, Telford Taylor, the former Chief Counsel to the Nuremberg War Crimes Tribunal, explained that individual lives were not valued so highly in Eastern mores and warned Americans to not rush to condemn either Korean side for committing atrocities.⁴⁷ *Time*’s John Osborne argued that wars “alien to the American tradition and shocking to the American mind” were inevitable in Asia. In a revival of orientaling stereotypes common both during World War II and the post-war occupation period, many correspondents believed that the Koreans were an inherently cold and cruel people.⁴⁸ *New Yorker* correspondent E. J. Kahn wrote that “most Koreans, whether in or out of the Army, are uncommonly indifferent to suffering especially other people’s and accept as normal what Americans would consider outright brutality.”⁴⁹

This kind of thinking even affected those who regarded themselves as sympathetic towards the Korean people. The *New York Times*’ military affairs editor Hanson Baldwin, one of the few reporters to remain friendly with Robert T. Oliver after December 1949, warned of the damage being done to perceptions of the United States by the strategic bombing of civilian areas, pointedly asking if readers would “not be equally indignant against Americans if our women and children were slain by American bombs?”⁵⁰ Yet, just a few paragraphs later, he described Koreans as one of the “simple, primitive and sometimes barbaric peoples” targeted by communist propaganda.

These insidious racial and cultural prejudices interconnected with the basic reality of how Americans perceived the war. Only a minority was

interested in stories about South Korean civilians or their abusive government at a time when American soldiers were dying in large numbers on the front line. The public wanted dramatic, stirring and moving accounts of the lives and deaths of American men at arms—indeed, the performance of war reporters was judged almost exclusively on their ability to help readers understand how American forces were faring in the struggle against communism.⁵¹ This pressure was much less intense for European and Australian reporters due to the relatively small number of troops deployed by their governments and the rather defensive attitude of their military public relations officials, who often kept correspondents at a far remove for much of the war.⁵²

Irrespective of nationality, all correspondents in Korea faced extraordinary challenges in their capacity to do even routine reporting. The constant movement of the front line, coupled with the limited access to reliable transportation, made travelling around Korea extraordinarily dangerous and time consuming. With only sporadic access to teletype and telephone circuits, it could take hours for a reporter to deliver one short story to their editors in Tokyo. Moreover, not a single American correspondent spoke Korean and only a handful had anything more than token knowledge of the social and political situation in the country.⁵³

The reporters who witnessed and wrote about atrocities were generally those who were not so tightly bounded by these difficult working conditions. Rutherford Poats serendipitously witnessed a mass execution because his role as a rewrite man kept him far behind the front line and he happened to be travelling with a UN observer. Keyes Beech was almost alone amongst war correspondents in having both access to his own jeep, borrowed from the US Army during the evacuation of Seoul, and pre-existing close relationships with Koreans. As a famed correspondent for the prestigious *Chicago Daily News*, Beech also had much greater editorial freedom than most reporters, an advantage shared by the *New York Times*' Charles Grutzner and *Time*'s John Osborne.⁵⁴

Sensitivity to atrocities was also highly influenced by the political and professional perspectives of reporters. Poats had more exposure to Korean affairs than most correspondents, as a result of his previous experience at the offices of the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (SCAP) supervising the production of cultural awareness pamphlets for American soldiers in the Far East.⁵⁵ Grutzner was a former communist party member known for his deeply researched investigative reporting into organized crime in New York. As a correspondent in South Korea, he explored topics

which few other correspondents ever discussed, including American attacks on Korean refugee columns, and looting and violence against Koreans in Seoul by US servicemen.⁵⁶ By contrast, the *Herald Tribune*'s famed war correspondent Marguerite Higgins did not regard mass executions of communists as particularly disturbing. To her, Rhee seemed to be a “man of autocratic temperament but sincere democratic convictions. He believed in the democratic way for the Korean people, but every so often he has taken undemocratic short cuts to achieve immediate aims.”⁵⁷ In her dispatches from Korea, Higgins emphasized the regime's perspective on the atrocity problem. Following an interview with South Korean police chief Kim Tau Sun, she explained that many communists had been caught trying to attack UN command posts while masquerading as South Korean civilians.⁵⁸ UN soldiers faced a nightmarish situation where white-garbed farmers to their rear in daytime transformed into gun-toting guerrillas at night (Fig. 5.1).



Fig. 5.1 Refugees in Korea, August 1950. Source: United States Army. Harry S. Truman Library and Museum

Despite having the largest staff of any news organization in Korea, AP published relatively little on South Korean atrocities.⁵⁹ In part, this reflected AP's position as the most prestigious and professionally respected of the American press agencies, which made it sensitive to accusations of sensationalism and leftist bias. Yet, in spite of this reputation for objectivity, much of AP's South Korean coverage was also handled by two fervently pro-Rhee journalists, Seoul bureau chief Oliver King and his assistant Bill Shinn, an American-educated Korean who had been hired by AP in early 1950. Both King and Shinn were admirers of Rhee. In his memoirs, King repeatedly spoke of his support for Rhee's stand against communism and the unfairness of much of the criticism of his regime. His devotion to Rhee's cause led him to return to South Korea to work as a public relations adviser after the war.⁶⁰ While Shinn was clearly not unaware of the brutality of the South Korean regime—in November, he wrote one of AP's only accounts of a South Korean mass execution—he did not regard these killings as an indictment of the regime.⁶¹ Following the United Nations offensive into North Korea, Shinn was the lone reporter invited to cover Rhee's trip to Pyongyang, where he remembered being deeply moved by the sight of 50,000 citizens waving ROK flags to greet the South Korean leader.⁶²

Shinn was not alone in his failure to draw broader links between mass executions and the repressiveness of the Rhee regime. No correspondent explicitly questioned whether the Rhee regime deserved saving. While the government clearly had its flaws, virtually all Americans believed that the international community's intervention against communism was fundamentally justified, especially when the other side had been engaging in brutal massacres of their own.

Correspondents were also pressured by American authorities and their editors back home to focus on positive aspects of the ROK. While there is no evidence that US authorities actively suppressed atrocity stories, the Americans were keen to paint the ROK in as positive a light as possible. In August 1950, Secretary of State Dean Acheson asked the US Ambassador in Korea to use every opportunity to stress positive aspects of the ROK and to not let correspondents fall for the communist propaganda line that the ROK was a reactionary government which had not done anything for its people.⁶³ Acheson suggested that the ambassador brief correspondents with factual information detailing the government's achievements in public education, its successful organization of two general elections and the existence of a representative National Assembly. In response to Charles

Grutzner's execution story in November, Acheson asked the embassy to put pressure on the regime to change the way it carried out executions to avoid further sensational press coverage.⁶⁴

In at least one instance, a correspondent was removed from Korea after arguing with his editors over the reporting of mass executions. John Colless, a Reuters-Australian Associated Press correspondent, became obsessed with South Korean atrocity stories and claimed that a British officer had told him that "these people here have no democratic rights and liberties, and I am no longer prepared to encourage my men to risk their lives to champion a cause which, to say the least, is highly doubtful."⁶⁵ When Colless admonished a company executive for not publishing more of his reports, he was withdrawn to Japan.⁶⁶

Amongst all the American foreign correspondents who served in South Korea during the first year of the war, only one, George Barrett of the *New York Times*, wrote about the civilian experience of the conflict in detail. In a series of articles in the spring of 1951, Barrett conveyed a powerful sense of the horror of the war and the experience of being governed by the Rhee regime.⁶⁷ In striking opposition to American claims about defending "free Korea," Barrett suggested that most Koreans perceived little difference between being ruled by Syngman Rhee or the North Korean leader, Kim Il Sung.⁶⁸

Barrett's biography provides few clues as to why he dedicated so much effort to reporting these otherwise ignored aspects of the war. Unlike many of his fellow *Times* correspondents, he never attended university and did not have a notably liberal background. After working as a seaman on tankers following high school, he had joined the *Times* as a copyboy and later worked as an assistant to military editor Hanson Baldwin.⁶⁹ When World War II broke out in 1941, he enlisted in the Army and wrote for military newspapers. The almost literary quality of his dispatches from Italy for *Yank* magazine nonetheless hinted at a curious and sympathetic intellect.⁷⁰ After the war, he returned to the *Times* as a diplomatic correspondent and was sent to replace Charles Grutzner in Korea at the beginning of 1951.⁷¹ Although his dispatches from Korea won him accolades from other reporters, he spent much of the rest of his career working as an overnight rewrite man and teaching journalism at Columbia Journalism School.⁷²

Barrett's arrival in Korea coincided with a significant moment of change in Korean War journalism. The number of newspaper correspondents in South Korea rapidly shrank following the evacuation of US forces from

North Korea in December 1950.⁷³ Correspondents also faced tough new censorship regulations which made it extremely difficult to publish analytical articles on military and political topics. At least one article by Barrett, on the massacre of Korean civilians in the village of Kochang by the ROK Army, was censored by MacArthur's Press Advisory Commission in Tokyo.⁷⁴

While it is fair to say that American war journalists in Korea were circumscribed in what they could write about South Korean atrocities, a substantial number nonetheless brought attention to the issue in their dispatches back to the United States. The individual biographies of correspondents, and their intellectual and professional constraints, greatly impacted the extent and form of this coverage. But reportage was also heavily shaped by the deeper ideological and social assumptions of American society, which, as Philip Knightley has argued, were very rarely challenged by correspondents.⁷⁵

ON THE DEFENSIVE

One further aspect of coverage of the Rhee regime in this period has been almost totally ignored by historians—the rapid improvement in its media management capabilities. As shown in Chap. 4, for the first two years of its existence the ROK regime had unsuccessfully sought to win the support of the American public through the public relations activities of its diplomats and the Korea Pacific Press, its lobbying organization based in Washington, DC and led by Robert T. Oliver. This situation fundamentally changed in the wake of the DPRK's invasion of the ROK. Although the regime had little influence over journalists during the dramatic first months of the war, new strategies were deployed to generate more positive press coverage. By 1951, this included the careful targeting of key American reporters and newspapers to align them with the South Korean cause.

The onset of the war presented both great challenges and opportunities to the ROK government. As the ROK's future looked increasingly assured by the end of July, Rhee hoped to use the conflict to secure international support for a UN campaign to liberate the DPRK from communist rule. Worried that the American press could turn against South Korea if the war came to a rapid end, Rhee asked Robert T. Oliver to establish contacts with friendly news organizations and influential individuals who could help make the ROK's case to the American public.⁷⁶ Ever the pragmatist,

Oliver responded that the most urgent public relations issues were to sell the ROK to the world as a democratic success, to demonstrate that South Korean morale was good and that there was a case to be made for Korea being reunified.⁷⁷ Only once these issues had been achieved, argued Oliver, could the Allies be persuaded to support a policy of reunification.

The debate over reunification made little headway until the dramatic collapse of the North Korean position following the UN command's daring amphibious assault on the port of Inchon in mid-September. Within a week, UN forces had recaptured Seoul and much of the rest of the ROK. On September 28, MacArthur joined Rhee in the pockmarked but otherwise intact National Assembly building in Seoul for a ceremony to mark the recapture of the capital, during which Rhee declared that he would seek national reconciliation with no further unlawful arrests or executions.⁷⁸ As UN forces surged into North Korea in the first weeks of October, the UN faced a serious dilemma—what to do with areas of the country liberated from communist rule.

Rhee made clear that he expected immediate Korean reunification under ROK rule and sent ROK officials across the 38th parallel to begin administering liberated areas. The United Nations vocally opposed these plans. US allies, in particular Australia, objected to the DPRK falling under ROK control without international supervision, fearing that Rhee planned to subject liberated areas to brutal political retribution and authoritarian rule.⁷⁹ After a series of emergency meetings in early October, the General Assembly announced the establishment of a new commission—the United Nations Commission for the Reunification and Rehabilitation of Korea (UNCURK)—to take responsibility for the administration and reunification of occupied areas. Just as Oliver and Rhee had feared, many foreign governments and newspapers strongly endorsed the UN's stand, especially in light of reports of the mass execution of civilians by South Korean forces.⁸⁰

While the backlash against Rhee in the United States was significantly weaker than elsewhere, many internationally minded newspapers shared the UN's unease about the annexation of the DPRK. The *Washington Post* condemned Rhee for sending civil governors into North Korea in defiance of the declarations of the UN interim commission.⁸¹ Although the *Post* argued that no one could question Rhee's legal authority in the south, it declared that the UN had to protect the interests of North Koreans, ideally through the organization of general elections. The *Baltimore Sun* warned that the Rhee regime had to avoid any hint of high-handedness if

it were to avoid giving more weight to the communist propaganda campaign against it.⁸² At the start of November, Charles Grutzner's account of the execution of 27 alleged communists, widely syndicated through a special AP report, prompted even greater concern over the possibility of large-scale retribution against the civilian population of North Korea.⁸³

Many of Rhee's traditional press allies came to his defense in these crucial months. The *New York Times* gave prominent placement to an interview with Maurice Williams, a leading expert on Asia and friend of Rhee, who suggested that Rhee would receive 80% of the votes cast in an all-Korean free election.⁸⁴ Rhee's press sympathizers, most notably columnist David Lawrence, accused his US-based political enemies of spreading false propaganda regarding the regime's unsavory nature.⁸⁵ In a detailed profile of Rhee, based on briefings from State Department officials, *Time* suggested that Rhee had become a natural target for communist propaganda and a liberal smear campaign of the kind which had been used to turn Americans against Chiang Kai-Shek.⁸⁶ Although *Time* admitted that Rhee was often arbitrary and sometimes ran roughshod over the civil rights of his opponents, it argued he was democratically elected and had kept South Korea together during the most difficult of circumstances. In its conclusion, the article suggested the war had provided Rhee, the "father of his country," the opportunity to finally make it whole.

On November 7, in an episode of the DuMont television network's news debate show *Court of Current Issues*, Robert T. Oliver and writer and loyal Rhee supporter Geraldine Fitch squared off against former Korea occupation adviser Stewart Meacham, in a discussion over North Korea's fate.⁸⁷ Although there is no surviving record of the debate itself, Fitch later wrote that she supported Rhee taking control of the north on the basis that the ROK was a democratic government which had already set aside 100 seats in its National Assembly for representatives from the north. Meacham, on the other hand, believed that South Korea was a tyrannical police state with close parallels to Fascist Germany.⁸⁸ Such polarized views of the Rhee regime created a strong demand for hard facts and information. Desmond Fitzgerald, a well-connected lawyer and recruit to the fledgling Central Intelligence Agency, wrote to columnist Joseph Alsop following his long visit to the battlefield to ask for his views on the accomplishments of the Rhee regime.⁸⁹ Although Fitzgerald thought the criticisms of the Rhee government sounded like communist propaganda, he was struck by the "cache of honesty" possessed by many of Rhee's critics.

Following the Chinese intervention into the war in November, the debate over the future of the DPRK faded.⁹⁰ With UN forces caught in a headlong retreat in the face of a vast Chinese mobilization, the American commitment to South Korea was once again questioned. American strategists doubted the wisdom of keeping the bulk of the USA's effective military force tied up in Korea.⁹¹ According to public opinion polls, almost two thirds of Americans wanted the United States to withdraw from Korea.⁹² To make matters even worse, rumors began to spread that the ROK government was engaging in the systematic mass execution of suspected communists in advance of another communist invasion of the ROK.⁹³

Rhee's first instinct was to deny that the executions were brutal or unfair. He believed that American reporters in Seoul were turning to communist whisper campaigns for stories as a result of the dearth of information about combat operations.⁹⁴ In a rather tone-deaf first statement to the press, he criticized journalists for publishing "erroneous reports" that children had been amongst the victims and, in a comment which was widely interpreted as a sign of the ROK's abandonment of judicial fairness, indicated that he wanted the process of trials and executions to be sped up.⁹⁵ In a meeting with foreign correspondents the next day, Rhee doubled down on his criticism of the press and explained that the execution process was legal, fair and overseen by prison doctors and prosecutors.⁹⁶ He added that he had personally visited the prison facilities and had urged for trials to be sped up to avoid long period of uncomfortable confinement for prisoners. While the US Ambassador endorsed Rhee's arguments in private, UNCURK put heavy pressure on Rhee to rein in the executions.⁹⁷ As a result, on December 21, the ROK government announced that the executions of all political prisoners were to be suspended and sentences reviewed with a view to mitigating punishments.⁹⁸ On December 28, Rhee issued a presidential decree which commuted all life sentences to 15 years and halved all sentences over ten years. Although it is not clear if this brought a permanent end to political executions, the regime's public climb-down placated its severest critics. No more South Korean atrocity stories appeared in any significant number for the rest of the war.

The crisis over the mass executions was a stark reminder of the tensions between Rhee and his press advisers. Rhee was rarely willing to restrain his rhetoric or actions for the good of public relations. He remained convinced that his critics could be hounded out of existence, as he told Oliver in one letter, "you have to be able to guide the public opinion in America.

Some of our friends should counteract unfriendly stories and if you keep on pounding on anyone who says something unfavorable, people will think it over twice before they make bad remarks again.”⁹⁹

Oliver and the staff at the Korean Pacific Press (KPP) shied away from such aggressive tactics. One of the only major American papers that did not cover the atrocity issue was the *Christian Science Monitor*, a development that Rhee’s American press advisers chalked up to the “good work that our friends have done in clearing up their viewpoint”—a particularly remarkable feat in light of the *Monitor*’s tradition of liberal humanitarianism.¹⁰⁰ Robert T. Oliver dedicated much of his time to doing publicity for the ROK regimes by giving talks, making radio broadcasts and, most crucially, meeting with newspaper editorial staff. After one such meeting, *New York Times* editorial writer Robert Aura Smith told Oliver that he was going write an editorial pointing out that the abandonment of Seoul was a major tragedy for Korea.¹⁰¹

These meetings were not always easy. Liberal editors at newspapers such as the *Christian Science Monitor* and the *Providence Journal* interrogated Oliver on topics such as land reform, the arrests of assemblymen, the extent of popular support in Korea for Syngman Rhee, the integrity of ROK officials and ROK plans for ending the war.¹⁰² Following these interviews, Oliver warned Rhee that these were the issues on which he was being judged and that he should not press too hard for an invasion of North Korea.

Although Rhee made virtually no effort to rein in his controversial statements, Oliver still found that these meetings achieved results. As thirst grew for factual information about Korea, Oliver’s newspaper contacts often came to the Korean Pacific Press. Robert T. Oliver’s wife wrote that the greatest value of the KPP was to be instructive and educational—as long as the facts were right.¹⁰³ Most of this information took the form of general background briefings on subject of controversy such as land reform, or developments which demonstrated South Korea’s “dramatic self-help and determination,” such as a program of open air schools for refugees.¹⁰⁴ Oliver and other members of the Korean lobby in Washington wrote hundreds of letters to American newspapers seeking to persuade readers that the ROK was worth their support. In one notable letter, published in the *New York Times*, Hyunki J. Lew, the acting bishop of Seoul’s Methodist Church, argued that while their government was not perfect, it was doing as good a job as could be expected after only two years of existence.¹⁰⁵

Perhaps the most important targets of the Rhee lobby were foreign correspondents reporting from the ROK. In January 1951, Rhee hired Wayne

Geissinger to act as his media adviser in South Korea. A lawyer by profession, Geissinger had served as a US Army officer in Asia during World War II and then as a political adviser to the AMG during the first years of the occupation.¹⁰⁶ Geissinger carried out a variety of public relations tasks for the Rhee government, including helping newspaper correspondents write more “constructive” stories about ROK issues.¹⁰⁷ This involved giving key journalists background material and clearly explaining the Korean viewpoint.¹⁰⁸ Oliver and Rhee expressed extreme satisfaction with Geissinger’s work; indeed, by May 1951, George Barrett was regarded as the only difficult foreign correspondent left in South Korea.¹⁰⁹

CONCLUSION

The Korean War was both a major challenge and an opportunity for the Rhee regime. At first, the sudden collapse of the ROK Army (ROKA) appeared to confirm many of the claims about the weakness of South Korea that been made in the winter and spring of 1950. The arrival of hundreds of journalists into the chaotic wartime political environment exposed the regime to vastly more scrutiny, just as its ability to manage negative press coverage was at its lowest ebb. Yet, the survival of the ROK through the summer of 1950 proved that pre-war claims about the ROK’s internal weakness had been far off the mark. Instead, the ROK became a symbol of resilience in the face of military conquest.

The onset of the Korean War thus marked the start of a long-term shift in American perceptions of the ROK. A grand narrative began to emerge of the ROK as, first and foremost, an ally in the war against communism. This, combined with assumptions about the nature of war in the “Orient,” prevented journalists from questioning US support for the regime, even after they had witnessed brutal mistreatment of Korean civilians. By 1951, virtually the entire press corps in South Korea accepted the idea that Korea was, in the words of correspondent Frank Gibney, “a war that had to be fought.”¹¹⁰

Bruce Cumings has suggested that the reporting and then forgetting of atrocities represented the construction of a false narrative of the war.¹¹¹ While ascribing truth and falsity to particular narratives is too pejorative, it is fair to say that the press chose to support a narrative in which the ROK’s more unsavory characteristics were disconnected from the fundamental nature of the war. Without broader context, stories about atrocities and ROK abuses simply faded from the collective memory of the public and the press.

NOTES

1. Susan Brewer, *Why America Fights* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 151.
2. "The 8 O'Clock Broadcast," *Time*, 17 July 1950.
3. Marilyn Young, "Hard Sell: The Korean War," in *Selling War in a Media Age*, ed. Kenneth Osgood and Andrew K. Frank (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2010), 113–39.
4. "Right Attack Repelled In Korea," *Daily Worker*, 27 June 1950; "Finding the Aggressor," *Christian Science Monitor*, 29 June 1950.
5. Sulzberger to James, 7 July 1950, Box 192, New York Times Company Records. Arthur Hays Sulzberger Papers, Manuscripts and Archives Division, NYPL.
6. AP, "South Korea Free Only Two Years," *Los Angeles Times*, 25 June 1950.
7. Richard Johnston, "Misfortune Beset Regime in Seoul," *New York Times*, 27 June 1950.
8. Only two major newspapers opposed the war, the isolationist *Chicago Daily Tribune* and the *Daily Worker*. AP, "Reds Back Combat with Propaganda," *Hartford Courant*, 26 July 1950.
9. "Syngman Rhee, Symbol of Korea's Plight, Faces Crisis in Homeland after His 50-Year Fight for Liberation," *U.S. News and World Report*, 7 July 1950.
10. Hill's interlocutors included Stewart Meacham, the Labor Department adviser who had denounced the occupation government for conniving with Syngman Rhee in 1947, Roger Baldwin, the head of the ACLU, and Ernest A. Gross, a US diplomat who was then the acting head of the American delegation to the UN: Hill to Kim, 27 February 1951, Box 1, Yong-jeung Kim Papers, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University in the City of New York.
11. Ernie Hill, "Rhee played down in U.N. war aims," *Chicago Daily News*, 17 July 1950.
12. "Liberation Forces at Gates of Seoul as Rhee Support Fades," *Daily Worker*, 27 June 1950. The *Daily Worker* was the official newspaper of the American Communist Party.
13. The possibility that the ROK had attacked first was taken more seriously in Europe, where American investigative journalist Izzy Stone was working as a foreign correspondent. Skeptical French newspaper reports inspired Stone to publish a contrarian account of the Korean War which suggested that the conflict may have been planned by the ROK and the United States. Although the book had very little impact when it was published, these allegations were given new life by Bruce Cumings in the

- 1980s: Isidor Feinstein Stone, *The Hidden History of the Korean War* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1952).
14. Richard L. Strout, "Success of U.S. Line Pinned to Verve of South Koreans," *Christian Science Monitor*, 28 June 1950.
 15. "The Shape of Things," *Nation*, 22 July 1950. For an overview of how political opinion journals wrote about Rhee during the first six months of the war, see Dane J. Cash, "The Forgotten Debate: American Political Opinion Journals and the Korean War, 1950–1953" (Unpublished Ph.D. Diss.: Boston University, 2012), 21–6.
 16. Siegbert Kaufmann, "Korea's political problems," *Hartford Courant*, 29 June 1950.
 17. Yong-jeung Kim, Letter "Korea Under the UN," *Washington Post*, 5 July 1950.
 18. Paul W. Ward, "South Koreans Keep Up Fight," *Baltimore Sun*, 16 July 1950.
 19. "The 'Will to Fight'," *New York Times*, 8 July 1950; Carl W. McCardle, "Was It Another Pearl Harbor?," *Boston Globe*, 6 July 1950.
 20. Harry S. Truman, *Public Papers of the Presidents, 1950–1953*, 19 July 1950. This address was President Truman's first major statement on the war.
 21. Dulles to McWilliams, 18 July 1950, Box 285, John Foster Dulles Papers, Mudd Manuscript Library, Princeton University.
 22. John Foster Dulles, "To Save Humanity From the Deep Abyss," *New York Times*, 30 July 1950. Dulles sent a memo containing many of the same observations to Dean Acheson at the end of June, which formed the basis of a statement to the press on 1 July: Dulles to Acheson, 29 June 1950, *FRUS* 1950, 7, 237; Press Release No. 705, 1 July 1950, Box 301, John Foster Dulles Papers, Mudd Manuscript Library, Princeton University.
 23. Higgins, *War in Korea: The Report of a Woman Combat Correspondent*, 163.
 24. For a full account of the clash between US authorities and the press, see Casey, *Selling the Korean War: Propaganda, Politics, and Public Opinion in the United States, 1950–1953*, 41–66.
 25. Cumings, *The Korean War: A History*, 78.
 26. Tirman, *The Deaths of Others: The Fate of Civilians in America's Wars*, 115–16.
 27. For the full account of this story, see Hanley, Mendoza and Choe, *The Bridge at No Gun Ri: A Hidden Nightmare from the Korean War*.
 28. The US government claimed that there had been no high-level order to shoot on civilians at No Gun Ri following its own investigation: Office of the Inspector General, *No Gun Ri Review* (Washington, DC: Department

- of the Army, 2001). Military historian Robert Bateman also revealed that one of AP's main witnesses had lied about being at No Gun Ri and alleged that the AP investigation had misrepresented much of the evidence: Robert L. Bateman, *No Gun Ri: A Military History of the Korean War Incident* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2002). On the other hand, historian Sahr Conway-Lanz later discovered a letter by US Ambassador John Muccio suggesting that the policy of shooting on civilians had been endorsed at the highest levels: Sahr Conway-Lanz, "Beyond No Gun Ri: Refugees and the United States Military in the Korean War," *Diplomatic History* 29, no. 1 (2005), 49–81.
29. The number of South Koreans who were killed by ROK forces during this period remains highly contentious. In 1968, former US diplomat Gregory Henderson claimed that South Korean forces executed tens of thousands—and probably over 100,000—suspected communists during the early stages of the war but did not provide substantive evidence. In 2008, the findings of the South Korean Truth and Reconciliation Commission suggested that Henderson's numbers were plausible based on excavations at execution sites, eyewitness accounts and photographic records found in US government archives: Henderson, *The Politics of the Vortex*, 167; Do Khiem and Kim Sung-soo, "Crimes, Concealment and South Korea's Truth and Reconciliation Commission," *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus* 6, no. 8 (2008). For an account of ROK atrocities during the liberation phase of the war, see Callum MacDonald, "'So Terrible a Liberation'—The UN Occupation of North Korea," *Bulletin Of Concerned Asian Scholars* 23, no. 2 (1991), 3–19.
 30. Knightley, *The First Casualty: The War Correspondent as Hero and Myth-Maker from the Crimea to Iraq*, 374–6. British reporters who witnessed and wrote about the brutality of South Korean executions included the *Picture Post*'s James Cameron and the London *Times*' Louis Heren. The *Daily Telegraph*'s Reginald Thompson published a sympathetic and disturbing account of the impact of the war on Korean civilians in his book *Cry Korea*, although his actual dispatches from Korea were remarkably conventional and made no mention of South Korean atrocities. *Melbourne Herald* correspondent Alan Dower reportedly intervened in the execution of a group of Korean women and children by threatening to kill the jail's governor. When United Nations officials pleaded with him not to publish the story, he agreed on the proviso that no further executions occurred: James Cameron, *Point of Departure* (London: Panther Books, 1967); Reginald Thompson, *Cry Korea: The Korean War: A Reporter's Notebook* (London: Reportage Press, 2009).
 31. Knightley, *The First Casualty: The War Correspondent as Hero and Myth-Maker from the Crimea to Iraq*, 389.

32. Marilyn Young wrote about several of these dispatches, albeit not in the context of a study of American journalism. Young, "Hard Sell: The Korean War," 127–30.
33. Rutherford Poats, "Rifle butts break backs of guerrillas," *Chicago Daily News*, 10 July 1950. The story appeared amidst a flurry of reports about communist atrocities against American troops, which were generally given much greater prominence by newspapers. Nonetheless, at least two other UP articles about atrocities referenced Poats' story: UP, "Korean Reds Who Executed Yanks Are Promised Trials," *Tuscaloosa News*, 11 July 1950; UP, "End Atrocities, U.N. Appeals to Both Sides," *Gazette and Daily*, 13 July 1950.
34. Stewart Lone and Gavin McCormack, *Korea Since 1850* (New York: St Martin Press, 1993), 121.
35. Communist correspondent Alan Winnington claimed that Korean Military Advisory Group officials had supervised the execution of around 7000 people near Taejon in a story for the British *Daily Worker* in August 1950. Although the allegations were dismissed as communist propaganda at the time, recent studies have indicated that US military authorities were at least aware of the massacre: Alan Winnington, "U.S. Belsen in Korea," *Daily Worker* (UK), 9 August 1950; Bruce Cumings, "The South Korean Massacre at Taejon: New Evidence on US Responsibility and Coverup," *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus* 6, no. 7 (2008).
36. Keyes Beech, "1,200 Red Spies Shot in S. Korea," *Chicago Daily News*, 13 July 1950.
37. John Osborne, "The Ugly War," *Time*, 21 August 1950.
38. Charles Grutzner, "27 Executed in Seoul Cemetery for Collaboration With Red Foe," *New York Times*, 3 November 1950. Grutzner may also have made a reference to the alleged American massacre of Korean civilians at No Gun Ri when he claimed that a senior officer had criticized the "panicky" shooting of civilians by one US regiment: Charles Grutzner, "Stranded Enemy Soldiers Merge With Refugee Crowds in Korea," *New York Times*, 30 September 1950; Sweeney, *The Military and the Press: An Uneasy Truce*, 132.
39. The order was mentioned at the end of an account of a mass execution witnessed by AP's Bill Shinn, who suggested that it could be the last story of its kind: Bill Shinn, "Writer Sees 20 Koreans Put to Death by Squad," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 7 November 1950. The *Tribune* called for the Army to revoke the order in an editorial a few days later: "Mass Executions in Korea," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 9 November 1950.
40. Peter Kalischer, "2 U.S. Priests Protest as S. Koreans Kill Prisoners by Hundreds," *Washington Post*, 17 December 1950. Another UP story on the same topic appeared the next day: UP, "British Troops Bar Executions," *New York Times*, 18 December 1950.

41. Charles B. Marshall, Letter "Holds War Reports Reflect Lack of Censorship, Not Inaccuracy," *Chicago Daily News*, 19 July 1950.
42. "A Matter of Convenience," *Time*, 25 December 1950.
43. Ernest Bevin to Sir Oliver Franks, 27 October 1950, No. 68. DBPO, Series II, Vol. 4, Korea, June 1950–April 1951.
44. Marius Livingston, Letter "Korean Executions Protested," *New York Times*, 28 December 1950; Allen Neave, Letter "Korean Massacres," *Washington Post*, 21 December 1950; Dewitt Mackenzie, "Mass Execution Reminds War Demands Are Harsh," *Spokane Daily Chronicle*, 13 November 1950. This was similar to the view presented by Dean Rusk, US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia, in a meeting with the British Ambassador in late October: "Under war conditions, particularly where extremely bitter fighting has taken place, there might be instances of atrocities committed by members of any of the armed forces engaged.... it is not easy to curb troops who find their comrades tied together and shot": Memorandum of Conversation, Assistant Sec of State (Rusk), 28 October 1950, *FRUS* 1950, 7, 1004–5.
45. Richard B. Joyce, Letter "Holds War Reports Reflect Lack of Censorship, Not Inaccuracy," *Chicago Daily News*, 19 July 1950.
46. "Terror In Korea," *Washington Post*, 20 December 1950.
47. Telford Taylor, Letter "Atrocities in Korea," *New York Times*, 16 July 1950.
48. For more on how the concept of Asian brutality became a mainstay of World War II propaganda, see John Dower, *War without Mercy: Pacific War* (New York: Pantheon, 1987).
49. E. J. Kahn, *The Peculiar War: Impressions of a Reporter In Korea* (New York: Random House, 1951), 116.
50. Hanson Baldwin, "Spirit as a War Factor," *New York Times*, 21 August 1950.
51. In the first months of the war, AP was praised for "keeping dramatic frontline reactions in focus," although some editors asked for even more human-oriented coverage in the style of Ernie Pyle, a World War II reporter famous for his folksy American soldier-centric stories: Gould to Brines, 17 July 1950, Korean War Coverage Reaction, August 1950, Subject Files, General Files, AP Corporate Archives; Sutton to Gould, 21 July 1950, Korean War Coverage Reaction, August 1950, Subject Files, General Files, AP Corporate Archives.
52. Louis Heren, *Memories of Times Past* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1988), 138. Around 40,000 British, 26,000 Canadian and 17,000 Australian troops served in Korea, compared with roughly 1.8 million Americans. For more details, see Gordon L. Rottman, *Korean War Order of Battle: United States, United Nations, and Communist Ground, Naval, and Air Forces, 1950–1953* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2002).

53. Frank Gibney, "The First Three Months of War: A Journalist's Reminiscences of Korea," *The Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 2, no. 1 (1993), 104. See also King, *Tail of the Paper Tiger*, 100.
54. Beech's credibility as a reporter was regularly used to promote the *Chicago Daily News'* war coverage: "Beech lauded by U.S. aide from Japan," *Chicago Daily News*, 14 July 1950. The *Times* rarely edited the dispatches of its correspondents in this period: James Reston, *Deadline: A Memoir* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1992), 223. Osborne was highly respected by his colleagues and notorious for demanding that his editors print his stories verbatim or not print them at all: Gottfried to Osborne, 12 August 1950, Journalism File, Box 2, John Osborne Papers, Library of Congress.
55. Rutherford Poats Oral History by W. Haven North, 13 January 1999, United States Foreign Assistance Oral History Program Foreign Assistance, Oral History Collection Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, Library of Congress.
56. Charles Grutzner, "Stranded Enemy Soldiers Merge with Refugee Crowds in Korea," *New York Times*, 30 September 1950; Charles Grutzner, "A Few G.I.'s Abuse Koreans in Seoul," *New York Times*, 20 December 1950. This latter story, along with a report on a new kind of fighter jet being used in Korea, led to Grutzner being called in front of a Senate inquiry in 1955 to defend himself from accusations that he had aided the communists: Allen Drury, "Times Man Accused of Aid to Reds in Copy, Denies It," *New York Times*, 1 July 1955.
57. Higgins, *War in Korea: The Report of a Woman Combat Correspondent*, 193.
58. Marguerite Higgins, "Reply to spies in South Korea: Firing squads," *New York Herald Tribune*, 14 July 1950.
59. For a full list of reporters assigned to Korea by each press agency, see "News Services Had 129 Men in Korea," *Editor & Publisher*, 22 August 1953.
60. King, *Tail of the Paper Tiger*, 532–3.
61. Bill Shinn, "Writer Sees 20 Koreans Put to Death by Squad," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 7 November 1950; Bill Shinn, *The Forgotten War Remembered, Korea: 1950–1953* (Elizabeth, NJ: Hollym International, 1995), 136–9.
62. Shinn, 147.
63. Acheson to Muccio, 22 August 1950, *FRUS* 1950, 7, 630–1.
64. Acheson to American Embassy Seoul, 8 November 1950, Box 4299, Decimal File 1950–1954, 795B.00/1-2350 to 795B.00/12-3150, RG59, NARA.

65. Paul Colless, "U.N. Intervenes in S. Korean Atrocities," *Canberra Times*, 18 December 1950.
66. Peter Gifford, "Aspects of Australian Journalism and the Cold War, 1945–1956" (Unpublished Ph.D. Diss.: Murdoch University, 1997), 165.
67. Barrett was the first reporter to ever describe the effects of a napalm strike on a village: George Barrett, "Radio Hams in U.S. Discuss Girls, So Shelling of Seoul Is Held Up," *New York Times*, 9 February 1951.
68. George Barrett, "Keeping Alive Is Main Concern Of Koreans Disillusioned by War," *New York Times*, 21 February 1951.
69. Eric Pace, "George Barrett of the Times, Cited for War Coverage, Dies," *New York Times*, 22 November 1984.
70. George Barrett, "Night Patrol In Italy," *Yank*, 16 March 1945.
71. George Barrett file, Box 4, New York Times Company Records. Foreign Desk Records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, NYPL.
72. Gay Talese, *The Kingdom and the Power* (New York: Random House, 2007), 249.
73. Prominent reporters who left during this period included Homer Bigart, Marguerite Higgins, Hal Boyle, Don Whitehead and Tom Lambert. January 1951 also saw the final departure of the *New York Times*' veteran Korea correspondent Richard Johnston. While having Christmas dinner with the Rhees, a shaken and bitter Johnston told them that he had asked the newspaper for long-term leave and that he hoped to be on the plane delivering the first atom bomb: Francesca Rhee Diary Entry for 25 December 1950, Personal Papers of Syngman Rhee and Francesca Rhee, Syngman Rhee Papers, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars.
74. George Barrett file, Box 4, New York Times Company Records. Foreign Desk Records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, NYPL. A version of the report was still published by the *Times*: George Barrett, "Village Massacre Stirs South Korea," *New York Times*, 11 April 1951.
75. Knightley, *The First Casualty: The War Correspondent as Hero and Myth-Maker from the Crimea to Iraq*, 389.
76. Rhee to Oliver, 20 July 1950 quoted in Oliver, *Syngman Rhee and American Involvement in Korea; 1942–1960*, 301.
77. Oliver to Rhee, 25 July 1950 quoted in Oliver, 302.
78. In private, Rhee did not appear so magnanimous. Just before setting off for Seoul, he told UP President Hugh Baillie that he planned to remove all trace of the communists from South Korea: "I can handle the Communists. The Reds can bury their guns and burn their uniforms, but we know how to find them. With bulldozers we will dig huge excavations and trenches, and fill them with Communists. Then cover them over. And they will really be underground." Baillie, a hawkish anti-communist and loyal supporter of Douglas MacArthur, later wrote that Rhee may have

- been a terrorist but he was “our terrorist”: Hugh Baillie, *High Tension: The Recollections of Hugh Baillie* (London: Laurie, 1960), 267–8.
79. Walter Sullivan, “Australia Raises Rhee Issue in UN,” *New York Times*, 4 October 1950.
 80. Communist press outlets across the world published propagandistic accounts of South Korean and American atrocities in Korea, many authored by British *Daily Worker* correspondent Alan Winnington, who reported the war from the North Korean side. Although most governments and mainstream newspapers treated these stories with skepticism, they were given plausibility by an eyewitness account of mass executions in the London *Times* at the end of October and reports by James Cameron for *The Picture Post*, one of which was blocked from publication by the paper’s publisher as a result of its sensational content. The full text of Cameron’s article was published by the British *Daily Worker* on 1 November: “Seoul After Victory,” *Times* (London), 25 October 1950; James Cameron, “We Follow the Road to Hell,” *Picture Post*, 16 September 1950; “Picture Post Editor is sacked,” *Daily Worker* (UK), 1 November 1950. For more on British anxieties over the impact of these stories on public opinion, see Memorandum of Conversation, Assistant Sec of State (Rusk), 28 October 1950, *FRUS* 1950, 7, 1004–5.
 81. “Rhee’s Governors,” *Washington Post*, 19 October 1950.
 82. “Time for Harmony on the Future of North Korea,” *Baltimore Sun*, 23 October 1950.
 83. AP, “Execution of S. Koreans Draws Blast from Reporter,” *Washington Post*, 4 November 1950. Grutzner was criticized for failing to include basic background facts about the executions—such as what crimes they had been accused of and whether they had received trials prior to their executions: Charles Maines, Letter “Korean Executions,” *Washington Post*, 7 November 1950.
 84. “American Says Rhee Would Win Election,” *New York Times*, 10 October 1950.
 85. “What’s Ahead in Korea: A Telephone Interview with Syngman Rhee,” *U.S. News and World Report*, 27 October 1950. *U.S. News and World Report*’s publisher David Lawrence was also an influential conservative syndicated columnist and wrote about the campaign against Rhee in a column a few days after the interview: David Lawrence, “Attempts to Discredit Syngman Rhee Are Seen,” *Spokane Daily Chronicle*, 31 October 1950.
 86. “Father of his country?,” *Time*, 16 October 1950; Shea to Birmingham, 6 October 1950, Time Inc. Dispatches from Time magazine correspondents: First Series, 1942–1955, Houghton Library, Harvard College Library.

87. Sulds to Fitch, 2 November 1950, Box 10, George and Geraldine Fitch Papers, Harvard-Yenching Library, Harvard University. General John Hodge, the former commander of the Korea occupation government, provided Fitch with some general background material on Meacham after the debate aired: Hodge to Fitch, 8 November 1950, Box 10, George and Geraldine Fitch Papers, Harvard-Yenching Library, Harvard University.
88. Meacham to Wilson, 14 November 1950, Box 10, George and Geraldine Fitch Papers, Harvard-Yenching Library, Harvard University.
89. Fitzgerald to Alsop, 17 October 1950, Box 5, Joseph and Stewart Alsop Papers, LOC. Fitzgerald was the father of Vietnam War correspondent and critic Frances Fitzgerald.
90. Geraldine Fitch to Van Deusen, 14 November 1950, Box 10, George and Geraldine Fitch Papers, Harvard-Yenching Library, Harvard University.
91. Harlan Trott, "Pentagon Hears Rumor UN Will Evacuate Korea," *Christian Science Monitor*, 12 December 1950.
92. George H. Gallup, *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion, 1935-1971* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 1972), 961.
93. The first allegations appeared in communist media outlets, and were then given more credence by the eyewitness reports of Peter Kalischer and other correspondents in South Korea: Peter Kalischer, "2 U.S. Priests Protest as S. Koreans Kill Prisoners by Hundreds", *Washington Post*, 17 December 1950.
94. Francesca Rhee Diary Entry for 12 December 1950, Personal Papers of Syngman Rhee and Francesca Rhee, Syngman Rhee Papers, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars.
95. AP, "Rhee Denies Execution of Korean Boy," *Baltimore Sun*, 18 December 1950; AP, "Rhee Orders Executions in Seoul Speeded," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 19 December 1950.
96. "Rhee Terms News of Killings Untrue," *New York Times*, 19 December 1950.
97. Muccio pointed out that exhumation of the bodies of the executed had proven "wholly false" accusations that children had been executed. He also noted that correspondents had misunderstood Rhee's comment on speeding up trials and had mistakenly identified the national police as being involved in the execution: Muccio to Acheson, 20 December 1950, *FRUS* 1950, 7, 1579-81. An account of UNCURK's role in the crisis can be found in UNCURK, Annual Report 1951 (New York, 1951), 21-2.
98. UP, "Seoul Halts Execution Of Political Prisoners," *New York Times*, 21 December 1950; Richard Johnston, "Seoul to Mitigate Prisoners' Terms," *New York Times*, 22 December 1950.

99. Letter to Richmond, 19 April 1951, President Rhee Correspondence (Unofficial), Syngman Rhee Papers, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars.
100. Richmond to Mrs Rhee, 28 December 1950, President Rhee Correspondence (Unofficial), Syngman Rhee Papers, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars.
101. Oliver to Rhee, 19 April 1951, President Rhee Correspondence (Unofficial), Syngman Rhee Papers, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars.
102. Oliver to Rhee, 1 April 1950, President Rhee Correspondence (Unofficial), Syngman Rhee Papers, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars.
103. Mrs Oliver to Mrs Rhee, 28 April 1951, President Rhee Correspondence (Unofficial), Syngman Rhee Papers, Woodrow Wilson Center.
104. Oliver to Rhee, 21 April 1951, President Rhee Correspondence (Unofficial), Syngman Rhee Papers, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars.
105. Hyunki J. Lew, Letter “Conditions in Korea,” *New York Times*, 7 April 1951.
106. “Geissinger in Korea,” *Buckeye Barrister*, September 1951.
107. Oliver to Rhee, 9 April 1951, President Rhee Correspondence (Unofficial), Syngman Rhee Papers, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars.
108. Richmond to Mrs Rhee, April 1951, President Rhee Correspondence (Unofficial), Syngman Rhee Papers, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars.
109. Office of the Korean President to Charlotte Richmond, 17 May 1951, President Rhee Correspondence (Unofficial), Syngman Rhee Papers, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars.
110. Gibney, “The First Three Months of War: A Journalist’s Reminiscences of Korea,” 109.
111. Cumings, “American Orientalism at War in Korea and the United States,” 49.



The 1952 Crisis: Rhee's Takeover

In the summer of 1952, two years into the Korean War, the Republic of Korea (ROK) experienced a new kind of political crisis. After four years in power, Syngman Rhee's presidential term was due to expire. Under the 1948 constitution, the responsibility for deciding the next president rested with the National Assembly. After years of feuding with the Assembly, Rhee knew that he stood little chance of re-election. As the deadline for the end of his term approached, Rhee unleashed an unprecedented campaign of arrests and police intimidation designed to force the Assembly into accepting a modification of the constitution establishing election of the president by popular vote. Rhee's flagrant disregard for constitutional democracy marked an important turning point in South Korean history. Not only did the crisis effectively destroy the last remaining checks on Rhee's power in the ROK's political system, it also represented the moment when the United States abandoned democracy promotion as a significant goal in its relationship with the ROK. Rhee's unconstitutional takeover of the political system established a pattern of dictatorship which defined South Korean politics for decades to come.¹

Despite the major influence of the crisis on the history of South Korea's political development, only three English-language journal articles have explored it in any depth.² Edward C. Keefer showed how US officials were deeply conflicted on how to respond to Rhee's provocations. While State Department officials warned that allowing Rhee to get his way would signal an end to Korean democracy, the Truman administration had little

appetite for risking the political destabilization of the country. Plans to remove Rhee in a coup were developed and then shelved. The United States watched helplessly as Rhee used national police forces to take his own National Assembly hostage and force a vote in favor of his constitutional amendment. Keefer concluded that the crisis was a troubling reminder that democracies sometimes make decisions which produce far from ideal outcomes.

One aspect of the crisis that Keefer did not address was the role of the American press. At the start of 1952, US Ambassador to South Korea John Muccio warned Rhee that he needed to take care when his country was a “goldfish bowl” full of journalists looking for sensational stories.³ However, when Rhee actually imposed martial law in the area surrounding Pusan, the wartime capital, and began arresting his opponents in the National Assembly at the end of May, the press offered only a dispassionate account of events, punctuated with the occasional mild rebuke of his police state methods. After members of the Assembly went into hiding, awaiting an intervention by the United States that never came, newspapers gave the story very limited space. Rhee’s constitutional coup was completed with only the slightest murmur of editorial criticism back in the United States.

This chapter argues that several factors help explain the lack of press interest in the crisis. First, and most important, was the lack of interest in South Korean politics amongst most American journalists, virtually all of whom saw the Korean War through a narrow Cold War lens. Before the crisis, journalists either ignored the political situation in South Korea or relied on the propagandistic assessments of American and United Nations (UN) observers who had a strong interest in presenting the ROK as a strong democracy. Thus, even as tensions between Rhee and the National Assembly greatly escalated in 1951, the press offered little indication that a major political crisis was brewing. Following the onset of the crisis in late May, the most influential establishment newspapers, most importantly the *New York Times* and the *New York Herald Tribune*, took their editorial cues from the cautious statements of concern emanating from American and UN diplomats.

Coverage was further constrained by the pro-Rhee sympathies of many newspaper publishers and the confluence of dramatic developments that struck South Korea in the spring of 1952. In particular, the Kojé riots provided a major distraction from the South Korean political situation. Few news organizations had either the manpower or the motivation to

cover several major stories from South Korea simultaneously. Without strong editorial backing for the story, coverage of the National Assembly crisis remained fleeting.

Finally, the Rhee regime won the battle of narratives. While a small number of liberal journalists and newspapers covered the crisis from the perspective of the Korean opposition, Rhee's supporters were more successful in presenting his narrative to the rest of the press. By the time the crisis had resolved, many newspapers had portrayed Rhee's attack on the Assembly as a victory for the United Nations Command and even as a triumph of democracy.

THE PRESS AND THE ROK

By the summer of 1952, the Korean War had become a source of deep frustration and confusion for the American public. With the war bogged down along the 38th parallel and no further dramatic developments expected, public interest in the conflict had faded. *Chicago Daily News* correspondent Fred Sparks told a convention of young photographers that the war depressed reporters and soldiers alike because they could not understand its objectives; neither could the press find ways of making the conflict interesting to readers back in the United States.⁴ In an October 1951 article headlined "Korea: The 'Forgotten' War," *U.S. News and World Report* argued that the American public largely perceived it as an "experimental war" where new weapons, tactics and methods could be tried out to prepare the United States for future conflicts.⁵

The decline in coverage of the war had begun almost immediately in the wake of the Chinese intervention, when many correspondents made clear that they had seen enough of the conflict. One reporter wrote that the war had left his colleagues feeling more exhausted after two months than three years of reporting during World War II.⁶ After six months of battlefield reporting, many of the biggest journalistic names left Korea, including five of the six winners of the Pulitzer Prize for war coverage in 1950. Press agencies, which had not expected the war to last more than six months, replaced their older veterans with young and generally inexperienced correspondents who could put up with the difficult working conditions.⁷

For the correspondents who remained in South Korea, their primary role was to report on combat operations along the front line and, after June 1951, the peace talks at Kaesong and Panmunjom. As shown in

Chap. 5, American correspondents in Korea wrote about the war entirely within the Cold War framework established in the summer of 1950. The United States was in South Korea to save the country from communist annexation, not to enforce good government. The domestic political situation was outside of the domain of US interests unless it posed a direct threat to the war effort, a point made by the *New York Times*' Murray Schumach in May 1951 when the ROK's Vice-President resigned in a protest against Rhee's authoritarianism: "more important for Americans than the possibility that the bickering may lead to political crisis is the danger that it may create disharmony in the South Korean Army and thereby lessen the military strength of the United Nations in Korea."⁸

The *Times* was one of the few newspapers to dedicate any significant attention to South Korean politics, yet, by looking at it through the prism of the UN war effort, it relied on briefings from American and UN officials to form the basis of its reporting. These officials were far from neutral in their perspective. Both the United States and the UN had a vested interest in avoiding embarrassing scandals that could undermine international support for the war effort or damage relations with the mercurial Rhee regime.⁹ Thus, when Schumach reported on the growing tensions between President Rhee and the National Assembly in May 1951, he relayed a sympathetic account of the situation based on briefings by US diplomats:

United States diplomats here think that despite acceptance today of the Resignation of the Korean Vice President, Lee Si Yung, and the continuing legislative bickering, there is still no serious revolt against President Syngman Rhee. Vice President Lee's resignation was accepted by the Korean Assembly after it had overwhelmingly refused to permit the 82-year-old Government official to leave office last week. United States representatives have felt that this reversal by the legislators indicated neither a growing nor a shrinking of anti-Rhee feeling but merely a concession to an old man desirous of retiring from public life.¹⁰

One optimistic official told Schumach that "Korean legislators were behaving more like United States Congressmen every day" and pointed out that there had been calls for sweeping investigations following charges of political corruption. Rhee's hints that he did not plan to stand again for election unless asked to do so were also taken as further evidence of the orderly and constitutional nature of Korean government.

Only one journalist adopted a more critical approach to reporting South Korean politics prior to the crisis, Schumach's fellow *New York Times* correspondent George Barrett. On the same day that the *Times* published Schumach's article, the *Reporter* carried a report by Barrett which offered a far less sanguine assessment of the political situation in South Korea:

To be anti-Rhee today in Korea is to be immediately branded a Communist. Even to be non-Rhee involves considerable risk. Assemblymen will talk frankly only behind closed doors and after being assured that their names will not be revealed. Tradespeople and editors will sometimes talk friendly, but always "Somewhere else," in a secluded tea room or an out-of-the-way wine house.¹¹

Unlike Schumach's American-centric account, Barrett based his article on conversations with assemblymen and young Korean dissidents who were deeply concerned about Rhee's use of "arbitrary police action" to silence dissidents. While Barrett was not entirely uncritical of the Assembly—he admitted that many members had a poor understanding of parliamentary procedure and spent their time drafting silly questions to the government—he argued that Rhee had failed as a leader:

[The Rhee] Administration has tried to make a political program of nothing more than anti-Communism and to rally the people around a vague ideal of "democracy." One assemblyman declared: "We are told to hate Communism. Any of us who have had experiences with the Communists don't have to be told to hate them. But to be told in effect that because Communism is so bad we must automatically like democracy is a back-handed way of getting support. We want democracy for itself."

This was the last article Barrett wrote that was critical of the Rhee government. While it is not clear if the Rhee lobby put pressure on the *Times* to rein Barrett in, Rhee and his advisers were angered by Barrett's reporting and accused him of being a "quickie expert" under the influence of "some English speaking politicians who are out to drive a wedge between the President and our Assembly."¹² His reporting after May 1951 shifted away from Korean aspects of the war. When Barrett finally returned to the subject of democracy in the ROK in early 1952, it was to praise the UN command for its democracy-building projects in South Korea.¹³

In the eyes of many Western observers, the fact that South Korea had any form of functional government following the invasion was a miracle. In a report published in late 1951, the United Nations Mission on the Unification and Rehabilitation of Korea (UNCURK) remarked that, in contrast to many other countries in wartime, the Korean National Assembly had remained an active and respected force within Korean politics. Public criticism of the government had been permitted and major scandals, most notably the Kochang executions in early 1951, had been exposed in the Assembly and the South Korean press. Although the ROK faced great developmental challenges, UNCURK believed that Korea would “continue to develop the institutions of democracy.”¹⁴

Filled with such ebullient optimism, international observers failed to recognize the existential threat to Korean democracy posed by the brewing political crisis in Pusan. With Rhee’s presidential term due to expire in June 1952, the National Assembly had the power to decide whether Rhee would remain in office. After years of being sidelined by Rhee, the National Assembly had little desire to re-elect him without being offered significant power-sharing concessions.¹⁵ Unwilling to compromise his monopoly on power, Rhee began calling for an amendment to South Korea’s constitution to make the president directly elected by the public. Although this was presented as a democratizing measure, few observers of Korean politics believed that Rhee intended to allow opposition parties to run serious political campaigns. Through his control of both the Korean police and the press, Rhee could manage virtually every aspect of the electoral process and guarantee his own re-election. Only the Assembly stood in his way. With little hope of securing a vote in favor of the amendment in the Assembly through conventional political means, in the first months of 1952 Rhee began a campaign of increasingly violent political intimidation.

SPRING CRISES

Between February and May 1952, Rhee gradually stepped up his campaign of repression against the National Assembly, culminating in the imposition of martial law and the mass arrest of assemblymen at the end of May. The first signs of trouble came during by-elections in February, when both the national police and militia groups affiliated with Rhee’s supporters used threats of violence and propaganda posters to intimidate voters. Rhee accused several leading opposition assembly members of being

communist agents. Although Ambassador Muccio warned him that the proliferation of journalists, intelligence operatives and political representatives in Korea meant this kind of behavior would cause international outrage, these developments received virtually no attention in the American press.¹⁶ When Associated Press (AP) interviewed Rhee about his difficult relationship with the Assembly at the end of February, the story received little coverage in American newspapers.¹⁷ In other press conferences with Rhee, reporters only asked Rhee soft-ball questions about his future plans.¹⁸ Coverage of these press conferences generally amounted to a few sentences in a handful of newspapers. In one of the only analytical articles on the crisis, the *New York Herald Tribune's* Mac Johnson wrote that the National Assembly was likely to re-elect Rhee simply because there were no other viable candidates.¹⁹

Until late May, the situation in Pusan was overshadowed by a series of dramatic riots at the UN prisoner of war camp on the island of Koje-Do. During 1951, a resistance movement had gained a foothold in the sprawling and loosely policed camp system, while the negotiators at Panmunjom argued over whether prisoners had the right to be repatriated to the country of their choosing.²⁰ In an attempt to embarrass the UN and undermine its negotiating position, the communists had ordered undercover agents into the camps to ferment a major uprising against the camp guards. Although the uprising failed, the understrength UN forces struggled to fully secure the camp. On May 7, 1952, a group of prisoners sensationally kidnapped the commandant of the prison camp, General Francis Dodd, and forced UN authorities to issue a document apologizing for the poor treatment of the prisoners.

Just as the communists hoped, Dodd's kidnapping was regarded as a deep humiliation for the UN and the United States. Members of the press, who had been barred from Koje during Dodd's kidnapping, flooded onto the island, where they discovered that the UN had been secretly tackling riots and a state of "civil war" between prisoners for eight months.²¹ The problems with Koje continued to dominate headlines for much of the rest of May and June until the new commandant, Haydon L. Boatner, ordered troops supported by tanks to take full control of the remaining rebellious compound on June 10. For the press, the story of the UN's inability to control rioting prisoners was a powerful illustration of the absurdity of the entire conflict.

With almost every correspondent in South Korea focused on the Koje uprising, no one had time to investigate allegations of political skulduggery

in Pusan. Neither could correspondents expect to receive any tip-offs from diplomatic sources. Americans diplomats were deeply concerned about tarnishing South Korea's global image and international support at the UN.²² Although Muccio had tried to use the threat of press scrutiny to convince Rhee to back down, American diplomats knew that Rhee's defensiveness and tendency to willfully misrepresent events made him almost invulnerable to the usual soft pressure tactics.²³ Turning the crisis into a major media scandal risked permanently damaging the already strained US–ROK relationship for no appreciable benefit.²⁴

INTERNATIONAL CRISIS

On May 24, 1952, with just one month of Rhee's term remaining, his newly appointed home minister Lee Bum Suk, the infamous founder of the paramilitary Youth Corps, imposed martial law in the capital Pusan and 22 surrounding counties. Over the next two days, police arrested several members of the National Assembly and detained another 50 for more than a day when they tried to enter the Assembly building. Ultimately, 12 opposition assemblymen were arrested on suspicion of supporting a communist plot to seize control of the government, assassinate Rhee and appoint their own "gangster president."²⁵ Rumors spread throughout the country that Rhee planned to dissolve the Assembly and call a new election. Rhee's actions caught both American diplomats and the press off guard. On the day that martial law was imposed, Ambassador Muccio left Korea for a two-week trip back to the United States, despite being told by Rhee in their final meeting that he was planning to impose martial law in several areas, including Pusan.²⁶ Apparently missing the potential significance of this development, Muccio had simply reminded Rhee that the eyes of the world were on South Korea.

Despite Muccio's warning, remarkably few detailed or analytical stories appeared during the first week of the crisis in Pusan. Coverage was dominated by short press agency stories which privileged the South Korean government's perspective and offered little context for events:

Pusan, Korea, 25 May (UP)—Martial law was reinforced in Pusan at midnight yesterday in an effort to stem pre-election political disturbances.

The military control, lifted a month ago, was restored in certain areas for the purpose of "rooting out communists *** who show growing activities in taking advantage of the lifting of martial law."

The proclamation was issued by the Defense Ministry of the South Korean Government.

Thirty persons were injured Tuesday when 1,500 demonstrators surrounded the Capitol compound for three hours and attempted to break in. Police, reinforced by several hundred South Korean troops, finally broke up the riot.²⁷

The *Times* carried its first and only eyewitness report from an unnamed correspondent on May 29. They claimed that observers outside South Korean politics were “deeply disturbed” by the “absurd” charge by Rhee that funds had been funneled into the pockets of assemblymen through international communist agencies.²⁸ The correspondent also made clear the links between the arrest of the assemblymen and Rhee’s “long campaign to whittle down the power of the legislative body”—a detail missed in most of the press agency reporting.

Much newspaper coverage focused on dutifully recording the American and international diplomatic response to the crisis. In the wake of the arrest of the assemblymen, senior American and UN figures had put pressure on Rhee with a series of high-profile meetings and statements to the press. On May 27, General James Van Fleet, commander of the Eighth Army in Korea, visited Rhee to discuss the crisis.²⁹ The next day, UNCURK issued a public statement which called on Rhee to end martial law and release the detained assemblymen.

In private, policy-makers were deeply conflicted on how to respond to Rhee’s provocation. UN Commander Mark Clark felt that the United States may have to swallow its pride and “go on working with Rhee even after watching him overthrow democracy.”³⁰ Military leaders were primarily concerned with the impact of Rhee’s machinations on the ROKA. In his meeting with General Van Fleet on May 27, Rhee threatened to remove from office the ROK Army Chief of Staff General Lee Chong Chan, a talented military leader who had a close relationship with the Americans. While Van Fleet forced Rhee to keep Lee in position, military leaders feared that Rhee could end up withdrawing troops from the battlefield to enforce martial law, opening up critical gaps in the UN defensive line. Both Van Fleet and Clark thus repeatedly sought a commitment from Rhee not to allow the political crisis to undermine the war effort.

While the military leadership fretted over the impact of the crisis on the war effort, US and UNCURK diplomats worried about the political implications of the crisis. Acting in Muccio’s absence, the American chargé d’affaires, Allen Lightner, warned Rhee that South Korea faced severe

repercussions when the world's democracies learned of the ROK's drastic police measures.³¹ In his dispatches back to Washington, Lightner argued that if the democratic process were allowed to be violated in Korea, where the UN had a special position of influence on political matters, the United States would give "the impression to the new governments of the Far East and to the world in general that we are unwilling [to] fully back the system and ideology we profess."³² Lightner highlighted the impossibility of compromise; either Rhee could get his way or be swept from power. Washington had to decide which option it preferred.

On May 30, Muccio met with Secretary of State Dean Acheson and his Far East advisers in Washington to discuss their options. At the top of the agenda was an offer made by a group of South Korean Army officers to stage a military coup with the promise of a rapid transition back to constitutional rule.³³ The participants, however, failed to come to a firm decision. Washington had no preferred candidate to push towards power. Without strong leadership from the Korean opposition, it was all too easy for the military to cling onto power—creating even more of a propaganda problem than Rhee's abrogation of the constitution. Although the potential domestic ramifications of the crisis were not discussed, Rhee also had key allies in Washington who could turn his removal into a major controversy in the run up to the 1952 President election.³⁴

As policy-makers vacillated over what to do about Rhee in private, they were also careful not to denounce him in public. In a memo to the US Embassy in South Korea in early June, Acheson wrote that "The U.S. has consistently supported and defended the ROK against its detractors upon the basis of ROK performance under a democratic constitution and legal system. The U.S. government so far has, despite strong pressure, not made public its attitude toward recent events in the ROK."³⁵ Instead of criticizing Rhee directly, US officials piled pressure on Rhee through public statements of concern, including a letter from President Truman—the content of which was only made available to the press in summary form. Newspapers built their coverage of the crisis around these statements, usually without any assessment of the veracity of Rhee's claims or why Rhee had wanted the constitution changed in the first place.³⁶ The *Times*' first editorial on the crisis simply outlined the course of events and ended with a mild rebuke:

As a result of a double-barrelled intervention by President Truman and the British government, President Rhee of (South) Korea appears to be reconsidering the arbitrary and unconstitutional policy he has pursued in his feud

with the Assembly ... In any case, if Korean democracy is to prevail it must learn to handle such situations by regular judicial processes. There can be little excuse for resort to unconstitutional practices which compromise not only the South Korean Government but also the cause of the United Nations, thereby tending to encourage Communist truculence at Panmunjom and Koje, and to prolong the war.³⁷

In the most extensive analysis of the crisis to appear in the *Times*, Tokyo bureau chief Lindesay Parrot revealed the pragmatic logic which underlay the newspaper's position on the crisis. He argued that the United States was only interested in this issue of "internal politics" because any political disruption would have serious effects on the ability of the United Nations forces to support frontline forces.³⁸

However, other factors also shaped the *Times*' coverage of the crisis. Although the paper had two correspondents in South Korea at the time, Murray Schumach was mostly confined to the truce talks site at Panmunjom in readiness for any unexpected diplomatic developments.³⁹ George Barrett spent much of the period of the crisis on Koje writing daily updates on the security situation and preparing a lengthy article for the *Reporter*.⁴⁰ Both reporters may also have been discouraged from covering the crisis by the *New York Times*' publisher Arthur Hayes Sulzberger, who happened to be visiting South Korea on an inspection trip at the end of May. While enjoying the "five star general" treatment from Eighth Army staff, Sulzberger took a very diplomatic approach to the crisis, meeting with Rhee to discuss the response of the American press.⁴¹ Although Sulzberger gave an account of his time with Rhee to American diplomats, he chose not to publish anything about the experience in the newspaper.⁴² Sulzberger left Korea impressed by Rhee—he later wrote that his findings from the trip "pretty well" lined up with the views of Rhee's American publicist Robert T. Oliver.⁴³ In the weeks after the visit, Sulzberger maintained correspondence with senior figures in the Korean government but did not mention the political crisis until June 16, when he wrote to Rhee to call for an end to censorship and for steps to be taken to restore the confidence of South Korea's allies.⁴⁴

Once it became clear that Rhee was not going to dissolve the Assembly, coverage of the crisis began to dissipate. Apart from an outcry over Rhee's decision to block broadcasts of the Voice of America after they quoted American newspaper editorials critical of Rhee, the attention of journalists in Korea shifted back to Koje and a visit by British Defence Minister Viscount Alexander.⁴⁵ George Barrett travelled to Seoul to write a lengthy

report praising the great progress made by the ROKA under General Van Fleet's training regime. The article quoted a letter sent home by a ROK officer training in the United States; after seeing America, the Korean declared, "I know that there can be, and we can have, the same freedom of religion, speech and press in our own country." No connection was made to Rhee's suppression of these civil liberties.⁴⁶

The crisis received similarly marginal attention in the *Times*' main establishment rival, the *Herald Tribune*. Korea correspondent Mac Johnson spent the first weeks of the crisis in Koje, only returning to cover the situation in Pusan for a handful of articles in mid- and late June. In his first article on the crisis on June 8, Johnson argued that Rhee had "turned from democratic means to the dictatorial methods he despises. He has decreed martial law, threatened dissolution of the nation's unicameral legislature, the National Assembly, arrested twelve assemblymen and frightened another thirty or forty into hiding as he used the ROK Army in Latin-American fashion to achieve his ends."⁴⁷ Yet, Johnson's attention once again slipped away until the last week of June, when Rhee's supporters increased pressure on the Assembly to vote in favor of a constitutional amendment. In his dispatches from Pusan, Johnson suggested that the Assembly had been "embarrassed and discredited" by government demonstrators holding them captive inside their meeting hall for five hours.⁴⁸

Like Arthur Hayes Sulzberger, the *Tribune*'s publisher Helen Ogden Reid was also a friendly acquaintance of members of the Rhee lobby and a strong advocate for an anti-communist foreign policy.⁴⁹ It was thus unsurprising when, at the end of June, the *Tribune* published a belated and rather meek editorial raising concern over Rhee's methods: "Syngman Rhee's desire to remain President of South Korea is understandable and perhaps praiseworthy, but there is little to praise in the steps he has recently taken to fulfil it ... It is distressing that the cause of popular government in South, which Rhee promises to uphold, is being seriously jeopardized by the methods with which he has chosen to defend it."⁵⁰

BACKLASH AGAINST RHEE

While the most influential New York newspapers avoided directly criticizing Rhee, journalists for other publications were far more willing to take sides. Amongst the most aggressive was the *Chicago Daily News*' star reporter Keyes Beech.⁵¹ As the Tokyo bureau chief for a newspaper renowned for its open-minded editorial policy and proud tradition of foreign affairs journalism, Beech was unusually well-placed to offer forthright

analysis on the crisis. A veteran Far East correspondent, Beech had developed a strong disdain for authoritarianism of any kind, whether it be the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (SCAP) regime in Japan, Chiang Kai-Shek's dying nationalist government or Syngman Rhee's police state.⁵² His experiences in China had convinced him that the United States had erred in its support for reactionary regimes which did not offer the hope of revolutionary change for repressed postcolonial peoples.⁵³ Although initially sympathetic to the South Korean cause in the first months of the war, by 1951 he was publicly in favor of the complete withdrawal of US forces from Korea.⁵⁴

Like many Americans in South Korea, his views of the regime began to improve in late 1951 and early 1952. While covering local elections in April 1952, he claimed that "despite communist aggression and infiltration, democracy still functions in South Korea."⁵⁵ After the Pusan crisis erupted in late May, Beech argued that democracy could only continue to survive if Rhee respected the democratic constitutional order: "When Rhee says nobody wants more than he to see his country put on a sound democratic basis, he means it. Yet the methods he has employed are the very antithesis of democracy. Rhee deplores dictatorships and advocates constitutional government. Yet he is in fact the dictator of South Korea and the constitution is what Rhee says it is."⁵⁶ In Beech's rendition, the Assemblymen opposing Rhee, Shin Icky and Kim Dong Sung, the speaker and vice-speaker of the South Korean National Assembly, were now the torch bearers for South Korean democracy.⁵⁷

As the crisis wore on, however, Beech became increasingly despondent about the lack of international support for these noble men. He quoted Kim Dong Sung: "We are like men drowning. You sit with arms folded and watch us. You ask why we don't do something—why don't these Koreans do something if they're so interested in democracy? What can you do against the police? We have no power except the constitution and the constitution is no more. We have no police and no army."⁵⁸ By the end of June, Beech judged that in "four weeks of dictatorial rule" Rhee had "blackened the reputation it took him 40 years to build as a fighter for Korean independence and champion of democracy."⁵⁹

The *Monitor's* Henry S. Hayward adopted a much more analytical perspective on Korea's political crisis. A Harvard graduate and expert commentator on international affairs, Hayward was one of the most intellectual foreign correspondents in South Korea.⁶⁰ After five years on the foreign desk, the *Monitor* sent Hayward to Japan in early 1952 to provide his

trademark magazine-style analysis of the end of the occupation. Like Beech, Hayward was staunchly liberal and often expressed concern over the dangers of excessive anti-communism; in one article in 1949, he warned that “fear of communism might well drive a liberated Japan into communism’s opposite—a reactionary regime along fascist lines.”⁶¹

Hayward believed that the conflict in South Korea reflected two manifestations of democratic forces—one elected democratically in 1950, and the other Rhee’s constructed “people’s will.”⁶² He argued that both sides paid lip service to the “people,” but only when it ran in their favor. He was not particularly impressed by members of the National Assembly who opposed Rhee, arguing that they probably had taken bribe money from communists, even if they had not recognized it as such. But he did see the bigger threat that the crisis posed to South Korea. It could turn the country into a “banana republic” —a Latin-American style regime where it would be “relatively easy for a strong man to seize power, swing the police behind him and take control into his own hands.”⁶³

The impact of Beech’s and Hayward’s critical coverage was limited. Although their editors had given them the freedom to write about the crisis as they saw fit, neither newspaper gave their reporters strong editorial backing. After initially arguing that this was “hardly the sort of government that UN soldiers have given their lives to defend,” by the end of June the *Monitor* accepted that authoritarian tendencies in a politically inexperienced country like Korea could be excused.⁶⁴ The *Daily News* made no editorial comment until after the crisis was over. The closest it came was an analytical article written by Peter Lisagor based on an interview with Rhee’s US-based critic, Yong-jeung Kim, in which he called on the United States to respond to Rhee’s provocations.⁶⁵ Ultimately, the most severe editorial criticism of Rhee appeared only in smaller regional and city newspapers. The *Hartford Courant*, Connecticut’s biggest-selling newspaper, suggested that the United States drop Rhee entirely, arguing that he was the kind of feudal politician who hurt the image of the United States in the postcolonial world.⁶⁶ However, scattered calls for Rhee’s removal in second and third tier newspapers had little impact on the broader debate.

ASSESSING THE CRISIS

The crisis reached a climax at the end of June when Rhee deployed police units to round up members of the Assembly who had gone into hiding. After several days of effectively being held hostage in the Assembly building, assembly members finally passed the constitutional amendment on July 4.

Once elections were hurriedly organized for August 10, Rhee won in a landslide with 74.6% of the vote and even managed to orchestrate the defeat of his own official vice-presidential candidate Lee Bum Suk, after becoming paranoid that Lee was too ambitious for power.

Rhee's refusal to back down put the press in a difficult position. In an off-the-record briefing to a *Time* reporter, State Department officials explained that there had been no indication that the US response to Rhee's undemocratic and "utterly unpalatable" tactics had had any influence on his behavior.⁶⁷ How could journalists explain this major diplomatic defeat inflicted on the United States by its own ally?

The answer was to focus, instead, on the positives of the end of the crisis; the stabilization of the political situation and Rhee's promises of delivering full democracy. In this, the press was greatly aided by Rhee's clever manipulation of the news narrative. At the end of June, Rhee had allowed the Voice of America to resume broadcasting and distanced himself from accusations of press censorship, declaring that, "such practices, if they exist, must be abolished immediately." These de-escalatory steps coincided with a strong effort by Rhee and his supporters to present Rhee's side of the argument to American journalists. According to Robert T. Oliver's aide Seymour Vinocour, Rhee dramatically improved the way he dealt with the press in the last weeks of the crisis.⁶⁸ During Rhee's first press conference on May 29, Rhee's highly emotional remarks had provided far more interesting and controversial copy for the assembled reporters than the pre-prepared handout which had coherently and clearly set out Rhee's reasons for arresting members of the Assembly.⁶⁹ For three weeks, Rhee then gave no further comments to the press, effectively removing his voice from the debate. Only at the end of June, between June 23 and 27, as Rhee realized the damage that was being done to his image abroad, did he abandon this aloof approach and grant four interviews with the major press agencies.⁷⁰

Rhee was a master of press interviews. George Barrett observed how during one interview Rhee had talked so eloquently about democracy that even he, an ardent critic of the president, had wondered whether he was actually being honest.⁷¹ Rhee's expert knowledge of American history and ability to recite the American constitution word for word left a deep impression on many of those he spoke to.⁷² Rhee also ensured that he had journalists at an advantage by demanding that they supply questions in advance so that he could work out an answer which, in the words of his adviser Seymour Vinocour, "would present his case in the best light

possible.”⁷³ These answers were provided to the journalist before the beginning of the interview, with the expectation that no other topics would be brought up.

In his interviews with AP’s William Jordan and Robert Schakne of the International News Service (INS), Rhee emphasized the communist threat to the country. He told Jordan that his opponents, “bought off by Japanese and communists funds,” were hoping to install another leader who would open reunification negotiations with the north.⁷⁴ While he admitted that his actions against the Assembly were technically illegal, he claimed that all legal routes had been blocked and that he could not allow a tiny minority in the Assembly to use the imperfections of the constitution to deliver South Korea to its enemies. In his interview with Schakne, Rhee argued that the crisis was just the latest manifestation of a lifelong campaign of character assassination by his enemies in both the United States and Korea.⁷⁵

In both interviews, Rhee claimed that he was being bombarded with letters and petitions from the Korean population demanding the dissolution of the Assembly. This tallied with the growing number of demonstrations that had occurred outside the Assembly building over the course of June, including a hunger strike by 500 provincial council members demanding the introduction of popular elections for the presidency.⁷⁶ Although Rhee claimed that these protests were an impromptu and authentic mobilization of popular feeling, most observers suspected that they were organized by the regime. Rhee had used such tactics regularly during the occupation period and did so again during the armistice crisis in 1953. However, no journalist attempted to publicly challenge the legitimacy of the protesters.

Rhee’s American lobbyists and propaganda agents also managed to persuade elements of the right-wing press that Rhee had been acting in the interests of Korean democracy.⁷⁷ In mid-June, the *Chicago Daily Tribune* published an editorial which argued that the decision to change the constitution “in accordance with American principles” should receive no censure from the US government.⁷⁸ The *Washington Evening Star*, then the leading newspaper in Washington, published a letter, by Robert T. Oliver, which argued that Rhee’s violation of the constitution stemmed not from authoritarianism but a desire to avoid bargaining with the Assembly through corrupt horse-trading and political patronage.⁷⁹ Oliver suggested that it was only natural for Rhee’s pursuit of greater democracy to have priority over the constitution. In San Francisco, the Korean consul

convinced the *San Francisco Chronicle* to run an editorial entitled "Rhee's side of the story," which likewise argued that it was more democratic to let Rhee, with his solid backing by the Korean people, to revise the constitution in his own way.⁸⁰ In late June, the *New York Times* published a letter by writer and Rhee sympathizer Geraldine Fitch that criticized the "over-simplified" coverage of Rhee's constitutional reforms.⁸¹ She repeated Rhee's rhetoric about the existence of a communist conspiracy within the Assembly and disingenuously argued that Rhee had no intention of using the constitutional amendment to secure his own re-election.⁸²

Rhee's most influential American supporters publicly declared that he was too important to the anti-communist cause to be sacrificed over an internal political issue. Senator William Knowland, often jokingly referred to as the "Senator from Formosa" due to close ties with Chiang Kai-Shek, called on the Senate to suspend judgment on the political situation in South Korea, arguing that, while Rhee had faults, his uncompromising opposition to communism had earned him the benefit of the doubt.⁸³ Senator William E. Jenner warned the Senate that attacks on Rhee might be a communist plot and disputed the right of the UN to intervene in his re-election plans.⁸⁴ At least one McCarthy-inspired Republican Congressman even accused the State Department of trying to use the crisis as a means of replacing Rhee with a communist leader.⁸⁵

Rhee's charges of a conspiracy appeared to be sensationally vindicated on June 26 when news broke of an assassination attempt at a rally commemorating the second anniversary of the Korean War. The Korean police identified the alleged assassin as a member of a Chinese terrorist group and claimed that he had been ordered to carry out the hit by a member of the Assembly. Many historians now regard the entire episode as a hoax perpetrated by Rhee, although this remains speculative.⁸⁶ Certainly, the State Department briefed reporters at the time that the incident may have been staged.⁸⁷ In an article published once the crisis was over, *Time* wondered how news of the assassination attempt made it into pro-Rhee Korean newspapers in less than 30 minutes.⁸⁸ Whether or not the incident was fabricated, it undoubtedly helped Rhee justify his repressive tactics.

When the Assembly finally voted in favor of the constitutional amendment on July 4, the *Times* welcomed the clearing of the air so that that all sides could renew their focus on the war: Rhee had made clear that he truly desired "a wider and firmer democracy."⁸⁹ It was also noted that Rhee had offered some significant compromises by giving the Assembly the right to remove the cabinet through a vote of no confidence.⁹⁰ In another editorial

after Rhee's re-election, the *Times* argued that Rhee had clearly accomplished his goal of creating a more vigorous democracy.⁹¹ Most importantly, Rhee's victory confirmed his symbolic status as the defender of national independence and opponent of communism in any form.

More liberal newspapers also looked to find the positive in the crisis. The *Chicago Daily News* wrote that it was understandable, if not excusable, that Rhee had resorted to dictatorial methods to impose order and that his tactics had resolved a difficult situation in a manner which should not displease his democratic allies.⁹² Only the *Washington Post*, historically one of the greatest press skeptics of the Rhee regime, struck a lonely note of concern in an editorial which argued that, while Rhee may have been acting out of patriotism, it was plain to see that he had "used an iron hand to re-establish himself as Korea's strong man."⁹³

CONCLUSION

The Pusan crisis was an unusual moment in American coverage of South Korea. For the first and only time, newspaper headlines and editorials throughout the press drew attention to Rhee's anti-democratic practices. Unlike previous episodes of electoral corruption or police repression, Rhee's blatant violation of constitutional order in the summer of 1952 was highly visible and impossible to deny. Indeed, US diplomats and administration officials were as disturbed by the conduct of the Rhee regime as liberal journalists.

However, the unusual context of the crisis did not change the fundamental pattern of coverage of authoritarianism in South Korea. The majority of foreign correspondents either did not report on the crisis or took a position sympathetic to the ROK government. Very few newspapers or journalists tried to present the opposition's perspective in any depth. Once the crisis was resolved, the press sought to rationalize what had happened and not to dwell on its disturbing long-term ramifications.

As Wada Haruki has argued, the Syngman Rhee regime emerged from the crisis "stronger than ever."⁹⁴ Rhee had shown that the United States had very little leverage over him when it came enforcing the ROK's constitution. The groundwork was thus laid for Rhee to establish complete control of the ROK's political system over the following two years. It also set a precedent for many of the developments which consigned South Korea to another 40 years of dictatorial rule. As Edward Keefer has argued, this was "the first time that the man in power attempted successfully to

prolong his tenure of office by means of constitutional revision, the first time a power crisis was controlled by martial law, and the first time the military, or part of it, seriously considered intervening in politics.”⁹⁵

While the press did not know of these future consequences in 1952, it was clear from the egregiousness of Rhee's acts that this was a crucial moment in South Korea's political development. Although it is difficult to believe that the UN could have removed Rhee from power without causing a much greater crisis, Edward C. Keefer has argued that plausible alternative approaches were available. In one plan, devised by British Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Selwyn Lloyd, the United States and UK would have offered a compromise ultimatum to Rhee demanding that he share more power with the National Assembly in return for agreeing to the constitutional amendment.⁹⁶ Another plan mooted by US officials suggested putting UN soldiers around the National Assembly to protect assemblymen from the police while both sides worked on a compromise. Even without knowing the details of these plans, the press could have put more pressure on the US government to take direct action and save South Korean democracy.

NOTES

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2. Garry Woodward, “The Politics of Intervention: James Plimsoll in the South Korean Constitutional Crisis of 1952,” *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 56, no. 3 (2002), 473–86; Keefer, “South Korean Political Crisis of 1952: Democracy's Failure?”; Jong Yil Ra, “Political Crisis in Korea, 1952: The Administration, Legislature, Military and Foreign Powers,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 27, no. 2 (1992), 301–18.
3. Muccio to DOS, 12 February 1952, *FRUS* 1952–54, 15, 48.
4. “Sparks Hits K-War Coverage At Home,” *Editor & Publisher*, 22 March 1952.
5. “Korea: The ‘Forgotten’ War,” *U.S. News and World Report*, 5 October 1951.
6. Relman Morin, “Press Does a Job in Korea but It's War Nobody Liked,” *Quill*, October 1950.
7. Gould to Brines, 12 July 1950, October BD. Korean War Coverage: staff, manpower, etc., Subject Files, General Files, AP Corporate Archives; “Farris Assigns Young Staffers to Korean War,” *Editor & Publisher*, 24 March 1951.

8. Murray Schumach, "Bickering in Korea Hinders Aim of U.S.," *New York Times*, 12 May 1951.
9. Ambassador John Muccio told Rhee that he had been careful to report as favorably as possible back to Washington on scandals involving ROK atrocities and political corruption: Memo by Muccio, 12 February 1952, *FRUS* 1952-54, 15, 48.
10. Murray Schumach, "Experts Doubt Anti-Rhee Revolt," *New York Times*, 15 May 1951.
11. George Barrett, "Syngman Rhee and the Korean Assembly," *Reporter*, 15 May 1951.
12. Richmond to Mrs Rhee, 15 May 1951, President Rhee Correspondence (Unofficial), Syngman Rhee Papers, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. See also Office of the President to Richmond, 17 May 1951, President Rhee Correspondence (Unofficial), Syngman Rhee Papers, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars; Richmond to Mrs Rhee, 8 May 1951, President Rhee Correspondence (Unofficial), Syngman Rhee Papers, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars.
13. George Barrett, "Democratic Ideal Is Pushed in Korea," *New York Times*, 12 January 1952; George Barrett, "North Koreans Grasp Democracy Enthusiastically in a Freed Area," *New York Times*, 17 February 1952.
14. UNCORK, Annual report 1951 (New York, 1951), 20.
15. Keefer, "South Korean Political Crisis of 1952: Democracy's Failure?," 151; Henderson, *The Politics of the Vortex*, 291-4.
16. Muccio to DOS, 12 February 1952, *FRUS* 1952-54, 15, 48.
17. AP's William Jordan interviewed Rhee on the ROK's domestic political problems on 29 February 1952: Seymour Murray Vinocour, "*Syngman Rhee: Spokesman for Korea* (June 23, 1951-October 8, 1952): A Case Study in International Speaking" (Unpublished Ph.D. Diss.: Pennsylvania State University, 1953), 327.
18. Vinocour, "*Syngman Rhee: Spokesman for Korea*," 80.
19. Mac Johnson, "Lack of a Rival Due to Re-Elect Rhee President," *New York Herald Tribune*, 22 April 1952.
20. For more on the background of the Kojé uprising, see Allan R. Millett, "War Behind the Wire," *Quarterly Journal of Military History* 21, no. 2 (2009), 46-61.
21. Mark Clark, *From the Danube to the Yalu* (London: George G. Harrap, 1954), 53. Communist correspondents Wilfred Burchett and Alan Winnington published a propagandistic account of press coverage of the Kojé crisis in 1953 which omitted any mention of the Pusan crisis, perhaps because the existence of any kind of functioning opposition in South Korea undermined communist claims that the ROK was a fascist dictatorship: Alan Winnington and Wilfred Burchett, *Kojé Unscreened* (London: Britain-China Friendship, 1953).

22. Acting Secretary of State to Embassy in Korea, 26 February 1952, *FRUS* 1952-54, 15, 61.
23. Muccio questioned whether Rhee "realizes and is capable of checking up on the methods used in carrying out his orders": Muccio to Johnson, 27 February 1952, *FRUS* 1952-54, 15, 64.
24. Muccio to Allison, 15 February 1952, *FRUS* 1952-54, 15, 51.
25. Lightner to DOS, 27 May 1952, *FRUS* 1952-54, 15, 254.
26. Memorandum of conversation, 23 May 1952, *FRUS* 1952-54, 15, 228.
27. UP, "Pusan Tightens Control," *New York Times*, 25 May 1950.
28. "Pusan Assembly Hits At Rhee," *New York Times*, 29 May 1952.
29. Murray Schumach, "Van Fleet Confers With Rhee on Acts," *New York Times*, 28 May 1952.
30. Lightner to DOS, 3 June 1952, *FRUS* 1952-54, 15, 287.
31. Lightner to DOS, 27 May 1952, *FRUS* 1952-54, 15, 255.
32. Lightner to DOS, 28 May 1952, *FRUS* 1952-54, 15, 264.
33. E. Allan Lightner, Jr. Oral History by Richard D. McKinzie, 26 October 1973, Harry S. Truman Presidential Library.
34. Edward C. Keefer argued that Rhee's powerful allies in Congress, including such ultraconservatives as Senator William Jenner, Representative Earl Wilson and Senator William F. Knowland, were a powerful deterrent against removing Rhee. They admired Rhee's anti-communism and accepted his argument that Korean communists pulled the strings in the National Assembly, just as they believed that Kremlin agents had burrowed into key positions in Dean Acheson's State Department: Keefer, "South Korean Political Crisis of 1952: Democracy's Failure?," 159.
35. Dean Acheson to U.S. Embassy Korea, 4 June 1952, *FRUS* 1952-54, 15, 303.
36. For instance, while the *New York Times* and the *New York Herald Tribune* each ran 35-40 stories related to the crisis, the vast majority were press agency reports that simply described a statement by a Western military or diplomatic official.
37. "New Trouble in Korea," *New York Times*, 5 June 1952.
38. Lindsay Parrott, "South Korean Politics Poses Problem for U.N.," *New York Times*, 8 June 1952.
39. Freeman to Catledge, 1 July 1952, Box 156, New York Times Company Records. Foreign Desk Records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, NYPL.
40. George Barrett, "Why Our Red Prisoners Refuse to Go Home," *Reporter*, 5 August 1952.
41. Turnblad to Gould, 28 May 1952, SF, 1952, S-Writing Criticism, New Box 102, Subject Files, General Files, AP Corporate Archives; Vinocour, "*Syngman Rhee: Spokesman for Korea*," 309.

42. Lightner to Young, 5 June 1952, *FRUS* 1952–54, 15, 308.
43. Sulzberger to Catledge, 31 December 1952, Box 134, New York Times Company Records. Foreign Desk Records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, NYPL.
44. Sulzberger to Rhee, 16 June 1952, Box 192, New York Times Company Records. Foreign Desk Records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, NYPL.
45. UP, “Rhee Rebuffs U.S. on ‘Voice’ Ban and Extends Censorship on Press,” *New York Times*, 14 June 1952.
46. George Barrett, “The ROK’s Learn to Be an Army,” *New York Times*, 22 June 1952.
47. Mac Johnson, “Rhee’s Total Democracy,” *New York Herald Tribune*, 8 June 1952.
48. Mac Johnson, “Pro-Rhee Mob Holds Assembly Captive for 5 Hours,” *New York Herald Tribune*, 29 June 1952.
49. Reid to Yim, 29 December 1951, Box D104, Reid Family Papers, Library of Congress.
50. “Syngman Rhee’s Solution,” *New York Herald Tribune*, 27 June 1952.
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52. Beech was one of the reporters had who had witnessed the brutal killing of civilians by ROK forces during the Yosu uprising in October 1948.
53. Beech, *Tokyo and Points East*, 97.
54. “Korea of No Value to Us, Keyes Beech Declares,” *Chicago Daily News*, 19 April 1951.
55. Keyes Beech, “South Koreans Hold 1st Local Elections,” *Chicago Daily News*, 25 April 1952.
56. Keyes Beech, “4 Weeks Blacken 40-Year Reputation of Korea’s Rhee,” *Chicago Daily News*, 23 June 1952.
57. Keyes Beech, “2 S. Koreans Defy Rhee’s Power Grab,” *Chicago Daily News*, 6 June 1952.
58. Keyes Beech, “Rhee Foes Brace to Bar Dictatorship,” *Chicago Daily News*, 17 June 1952.
59. Keyes Beech, “4 Weeks Blacken 40-Year Reputation of Korea’s Rhee,” *Chicago Daily News*, 23 June 1952.
60. “Henry Hayward, Unflappable Global Reporter and Editor,” *Christian Science Monitor*, 14 April 1998.
61. Henry S. Hayward, “This World ... Red Tinge Over Japan – Bright and Dim,” *Christian Science Monitor*, 10 November 1949.
62. Henry S. Hayward, “Rhee’s One-Man Revolution Shakes Korean Democracy,” *Cristian Science Monitor*, 17 June 1952.

63. The term "banana republic" was in wide use amongst Americans in South Korea at the time: Keyes Beech, "Rhee Wins Extension of Korea Rule," *Chicago Daily News*, 23 June 1952.
64. "Korean Politics," *Christian Science Monitor*, 5 June 1952; "Constitutional Crises," *Christian Science Monitor*, 24 June 1952.
65. Peter Lisagor, "Rhee Crisis May Compel U.S. to Act," *Chicago Daily News*, 3 June 1952.
66. "Complex Korea," *Boston Globe*, 31 May 1952; "Can't we drop Syngman Rhee?," 30 May 1952, *Hartford Courant*.
67. Caturani to Visson, 27 June 1952, Time Inc. Dispatches from Time magazine correspondents: First Series, 1942–1955, Houghton Library, Harvard College Library.
68. Seymour Murray Vinocour, "*Syngman Rhee: Spokesman for Korea*," 327.
69. The handout is reprinted in Vinocour, "*Syngman Rhee: Spokesman for Korea*," 83–5.
70. These four interviews were conducted by four different journalists with the three main press agencies: Bill Shinn, AP, 23 June 1952; William Jordan, AP, 24 June 1952; Robert Shakne, INS, 27 June 1952; Warren Franklin, UP, 27 June 1952.
71. George Barrett, "Syngman Rhee and the Korean Assembly," *Reporter*, 15 May 1951. Some US diplomats were also convinced that Rhee was being manipulated by a group of politically ambitious officials, most notably Lee Bum Suk: Lightner to Young, 5 June 1952, *FRUS* 1952–1954, 15 (1), 308.
72. Clark, *From the Danube to the Yalu*, 148.
73. Vinocour, "*Syngman Rhee: Spokesman for Korea*," 85.
74. A copy of Jordan's dispatch can be found in Vinocour, "*Syngman Rhee: Spokesman for Korea*," 439–45.
75. A copy of Schakne's dispatch can be found in Vinocour, "*Syngman Rhee: Spokesman for Korea*," 446–53.
76. AP, "Rhee Group Stages a Hunger Sitdown," *New York Times*, 24 June 1952.
77. Rhee's US-based lobbyists did not publish anything significant during the first two weeks of the crisis beyond Robert T. Oliver's biweekly newsletter, *Periscope on Asia*, which carried a series of articles praising the ROK's fledgling democracy. In the issue of 2 June, Vinocour examined the "new epoch in Korea's democratic development" following the success of the April local elections: Seymour Murray Vinocour, "Koreans Elect Local Officials," *Periscope on Asia*, 2 June 1952.
78. "Korean Crisis," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 11 June 1952.
79. Robert T. Oliver, Letter, *Washington Evening Star*, 10 June 1952.
80. "Rhee's Side of the Story," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 18 June 1952.

81. Geraldine Fitch, Letter "Rhee's Actions Upheld," *New York Times*, 24 June 1952.
82. Rhee's American press advisers were not always helpful to his cause. Paul Douglass, a former president of American University who worked as a press adviser to Rhee from 1952 to 1955, adopted the peculiar strategy of admitting that Rhee's charges against the assemblymen were largely fictitious. He told correspondents that Rhee's behavior was justified because he was leading a revolution on behalf of the Korean people. This attempt to cloak Rhee's fraudulent actions in the progressive rhetoric of "revolutionary" reform was criticized by Henry S. Hayward: Henry S. Hayward, "'Pusan Plot': Rhee Charged With Inventing Conspiracy as Stratagem in Power," *Christian Science Monitor*, 18 June 1952.
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84. AP, "Senator Jenner Upholds Rhee," *New York Times*, 26 June 1952.
85. "U.S. Denies It Sought Rhee Election Defeat," *New York Times*, 21 September 1952.
86. James I. Matray and Jr. Donald W. Boose, eds., *The Ashgate Research Companion to the Korean War* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2014), 31.
87. Caturani to Visson, 27 June 1952, Time Inc. Dispatches from Time magazine correspondents: First Series, 1942–1955, Houghton Library, Harvard College Library.
88. "The Allies: Rhee's Round," *Time*, 7 July 1952.
89. "Compromise At Pusan," *New York Times*, 6 July 1952.
90. "Korea's Constitutional Problem," *New York Herald Tribune*, 15 July 1952.
91. "Dr Rhee as a symbol," *New York Times*, 8 August 1952.
92. "Support for Rhee," *Chicago Daily News*, 7 July 1952.
93. "Korean 'Harmony'," *Washington Post*, 13 July 1952.
94. Wada Haruki, *The Korean War: An International History* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2013), 234.
95. Ra, "Political Crisis in Korea, 1952: The Administration, Legislature, Military and Foreign Powers," 301.
96. Keefer, "South Korean Political Crisis of 1952: Democracy's Failure?," 165.



CHAPTER 7

The Rise of the ROKA

Amongst the most remarkable aspects of the Korean War was the revival of the ROK's Army (ROKA) following its near total collapse in the summer of 1950. After coming close to disaster once again in the spring of 1951, the ROKA was fundamentally rebuilt and reformed by the US military. Following the election of Dwight Eisenhower to the presidency in November 1952, the rapid expansion in the size and capability of the ROKA became the foundation for the "Koreanization" of the war effort. This transformation in the ROKA played a major role in the shift of American perceptions of the ROK; where once it had been seen as little more than a helpless victim, by 1953 it was a powerful military ally in the fight against communism.

This chapter shows how this change in perception occurred.¹ It argues that press coverage of the ROKA developed in line with the changing perceptions of the ROKA amongst American military officials and the political elite. Aside from the moments of near collapse in July 1950 and May 1951, the press showed only sporadic interest in the ROKA during the first two years of the war. Although the ROKA began a dramatic program of improvement in mid-1951, it was not until the summer of 1952—as the possibility of ROKA forces replacing US forces on the front line became a political issue—that coverage significantly changed. As a result of the political activism of the Eighth Army's popular Commander, General James Van Fleet, and the Eisenhower administration's desire to justify the US commitment to South Korea, a new narrative took hold,

establishing the ROKA as a world-class fighting force. When the last Chinese offensive of the war threatened to once again cripple ROK forces in July 1953, US military officials kept the story secret in order to preserve the image of the ROKA as a power ready to stand toe-to-toe against its communist foe.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

When the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) launched its invasion of the ROK in June 1950, accounts of the catastrophic collapse of the ROK's armed forces headlined almost every newspaper: for many Americans this was the first news story they had ever read about Korea. Within days of North Korean tanks crossing the 38th parallel, the ROK's armed forces had fallen into a disorganized retreat.² Three American reporters were almost killed when South Korean forces blew up a bridge over the Han River in a premature effort to stop communist forces from pursuing retreating South Korean forces south of Seoul. Although the correspondents survived, hundreds of soldiers and civilian refugees died in the blast.³ The American public watched in astonishment as a country which had received all the benefits of American military guidance and preparation teetered on the brink of a violent communist takeover.

The shock of the ROKA's poor performance was exacerbated by the complacent attitude of the press towards South Korean security issues prior to June 1950. After South Korea had become independent in 1948, the ROK's armed forces had faced a series of confrontations on the border with the DPRK, as well as a major insurgency in the south of the country. These conflicts received only fleeting mentions in the press. When hundreds of Korean soldiers mutinied and tried to organize an uprising against the government in the autumn of 1948, it was treated as an isolated, albeit ominous, incident and did not lead to longer-term scrutiny of the ROK's military capabilities.⁴ Over the following year and a half, most correspondents simply repeated official endorsements of South Korean military capabilities.⁵ As became all too apparent in June 1950, these officials were often guilty of wishful thinking—none more so than the commanding officer of the Korean Military Advisory Group (KMAG), General William L. Roberts, who was convinced that Korea's mountainous terrain made it completely unsuited to tank warfare. When responding to rumors that the Soviets had outfitted North Korean forces with heavy weapons, General Roberts told Associated Press (AP) correspondent Oliver King that there

“was not a tank in all of Asia, much less nearly two hundred just across the parallel.”⁶ In his memoir, King bitterly remembered that, like many other correspondents, he chose to rely on the word of officials he believed had no reason to misrepresent the situation.

American press coverage reflected what Jongnam Na described as the “almost delusional” belief in the ROKA’s capability amongst Americans in the Far East.⁷ KMAG officials, American diplomats and MacArthur’s Command in Tokyo all shared in the collective fantasy that the “Americanization” of the South Korean Army had turned it into an effective fighting force able to withstand whatever the communists could throw at it. The *New York Times*’ Walter Sullivan, a Seoul-based correspondent in early 1950, wrote that the ROKA was the most Americanized of all foreign troops trained by the Americans, so much so that “a visitor to Korea is startled into thinking American forces are still in occupation.”⁸ In early June 1950, just weeks before the North Korean invasion, *Time*’s Frank Gibney enthusiastically praised the growing capabilities of South Korea’s armed forces following meetings with senior KMAG officers. One observer even told him that it was “the best army of its size in Asia.”⁹ In an article written long after the war, Gibney recalled that he had not expected the ROKA to be seriously tested as US Intelligence headquarters in Tokyo had persistently downplayed the idea of an imminent invasion.¹⁰

It took just a few days for the South Koreans to dispel any optimism about their capabilities. Reports from the front line revealed that South Korean forces were no match for the heavily armed North Koreans. As ROKA forces fell back in an almost totally disorganized manner, large gaps opened up in their lines through which North Koreans poured soldiers and heavy armor. American officials were quick to give reporters their honest and damning assessment of the situation. The head of MacArthur’s advance survey team, General John H. Church, told Marguerite Higgins that US advisers had been having many problems with the South Koreans: “We can’t put backbone into them. What are you going to do with troops that won’t stay where they’re put? We have no way of knowing whether the South Korean reports are accurate or just wild rumor.”¹¹ A KMAG officer told another reporter that “South Koreans fight with 25% ferocity, when they actually fight, and there has been no report that they have taken prisoners on a mass scale. If World War III broke out, South Korea would be safer than New York state.”¹²

The publication of such quotes by newspapers reflected the unprecedented nature of the Korean conflict. The ambiguous role of the United States in the first days of the war gave both American officials and journalists a window in which they felt free to tell the unvarnished truth about the chaos of the South Korean defense efforts. Even after President Truman made it clear that the United States was intervening on behalf of the ROK, General MacArthur refused to impose full censorship and, instead, put forward a system of “voluntary censorship” where reporters promised to avoid giving away militarily sensitive information. Although the relationship with military authorities was not easy, correspondents felt free to criticize the South Korean military in a way that would have been unimaginable during World War II.

Such coverage had a dramatic impact on perceptions of the ROKA back in the United States. According to an editorial in the *Times*, weeks of shocking reports from Korea had convinced most Americans that the ROKA was a “routed, disorganized and demoralized mob which could be discounted as a fighting force.”¹³ Newspapers published editorials questioning whether the ROKA’s lack of fighting spirit reflected wider disenchantment with the Rhee regime. Several newspapers published a letter from Rhee critic Yong-jeung Kim in which he argued that the ROKA’s disintegration stemmed from “misrule and a lack of incentive for the soldiers to fight.”¹⁴

MIXED RESPONSE

The arrival of American reinforcements in the second week of July marked a crucial turning point for the ROKA. With time to regroup and establish defensive positions, South Korean forces began to push back against the North Korean advance. Following MacArthur’s appointment as United Nations commander, ROKA forces were brought under American leadership, both at the strategic and tactical levels. With ROK forces now part of a joint UN war effort, US military officials sought to bolster the shattered reputation of their allies. Eighth Army commander Walton Walker praised the South Koreans for their “magnificent stand” against the North Koreans after they scored a number of minor tactical victories.¹⁵ In his communique of July 18, General MacArthur even claimed that the South Koreans had delivered “two of the most conclusive setbacks administered to the North Koreans since they crossed the Thirty-Eighth Parallel.”¹⁶

KMAG officials also tried to undo some of the damage done to the ROKA's reputation. In a press conference on July 6, a KMAG official told journalists that mass sabotage of the ROKA's weapons by communist agents had been a major factor in their disastrous performance.¹⁷ In the field, KMAG officials praised the fighting spirit of their men. One KMAG officer told a correspondent that he'd "never seen troops of any nationality hold as these men are doing, even with half their casualties."¹⁸ Six weeks into the war, an official declared that the Koreans were a far cry from the army of the first days of the war: "Under good leadership these men have been whipped into a fighting force to be reckoned with and their morale is extremely high."¹⁹

The physical toughness of Korean troops compared to "green" American soldiers was a recurring theme for reporters covering the struggle to hold on to the Pusan perimeter.²⁰ Gordon Walker claimed that South Korean regiments were so good that almost all American soldiers he had spoken to wanted South Korean troops attached to their units.²¹ Marguerite Higgins, one of the few reporters to visit ROK troops fighting on the front line, marveled at the capacity of the South Koreans to defend their section of the front line without the logistical and artillery support enjoyed by American forces (Fig. 7.1).²²

However, these accounts of South Korean bravery were more of the exception than the rule. Even though ROK troops constituted the majority of forces under the UN's command, most war reportage narrowly focused on American soldiers on the front line. Correspondents knew that newspapers back home were desperate for dramatic combat stories and news about American units. Few editors sought out stories about South Korean units beyond general assessments of their contribution to the bigger strategic picture.²³ When one newspaper editor wrote to complain that news updates from Korea had almost completely overlooked the great job being done by the ROKA, AP admitted that it simply could not justify dedicating its limited manpower to cover the story.²⁴

One correspondent who recognized the potential importance of the ROKA to the future war effort was *Time's* John Osborne. In a lengthy article for *Time* in August, Osborne suggested that the bravery and effectiveness of the South Korean Army was one of few positives of the first months of the war.²⁵ In a memo to *Time* editors in early October, Osborne argued that the decision to integrate small numbers of South Korean soldiers into US military units had been the most meaningful event of the war.²⁶ Osborne believed that this program, known as Korean



Fig. 7.1 A South Korean patrol, August 1950. Source: United States Army. Harry S. Truman Library and Museum

Augmentation to The United States Army (KATUSA), had been a great success.²⁷ US officers and enlisted men greatly appreciated these South Korean soldiers, in spite of teething problems related to differences in language, culture and training. Osborne called for less critical coverage of South Korean military performance, even if this required a certain conditioning of “the facts.”

A major obstacle to more positive reporting on the ROKA was the US military itself. While KMAC officials were often willing to praise the Koreans for their tenaciousness and fighting spirit, it was readily apparent that most US military authorities had little interest in the South Koreans. When a *Time* reporter visited Eighth Army headquarters to find out more about the ROKA commanders operating in North Korea after the break-out from the Pusan perimeter, he was told that US commanders knew nothing more than the brief summary already sent out on the press wire.²⁸ Throughout the first year of the war, US military commanders were highly

dismissive of the value of the South Korean Army.²⁹ Most regarded it as dangerously fragile and unreliable. When American and ROK forces were forced to fall back to south of Seoul in the face of the Chinese intervention, Major General Frank Lowe, President Truman's personal adviser on Korea, told him that ROK troops were "useless" and "cowardly."³⁰

The press became even more beholden to US military sources when MacArthur belatedly imposed full censorship in late December 1950. Although the guidelines were vague, correspondents came to understand that the Army treated criticism of the performance of the South Korean Army as a security violation. Colonel Melvin B. Voorhees, the Army official in charge of censorship in Korea, believed that criticism of the South Korean Army was ill-advised since "far too much has been expected of the Koreans."³¹ Rather than criticism, Voorhees suggested that such a backward people needed more time and training to improve their fighting capability and root out corruption.

While the tough censorship restrictions infuriated correspondents, they had little choice but to follow the story leads provided by military authorities. Eighth Army spokesmen emphasized how ROK units and US troops were working together to fight the Chinese, with South Koreans often leading the way to battle and wiping out large numbers of enemy troops.³² The new positive narrative occasionally bordered on the absurd. After talking with officials at Eighth Army headquarters, Gordon Walker wrote that the South Koreans could not be blamed for their defeat in June 1950 since they had never been expected to fight a well-equipped army. He praised the hard work done by KMAC to develop the South Korean Army both before and during the war, claiming it had a virtually "unbroken record of success."³³ Stories critical of the ROKA were either ignored or given marginal coverage. The press ignored early reports of the mass starvation of tens of thousands of Korean soldiers recruited by the ROK's National Defense Corps even though it was not censored by either American or Korean authorities.³⁴ When the story did belatedly make it into the American press, reporters framed it around the success of the Korean judicial system in punishing those it believed to be responsible, rather than the causes and consequences of the incident itself.³⁵

The changes in coverage of the ROKA over the first nine months of the war thus primarily reflected the influence of US military authorities on the press. While coverage during the first months of the war reflected the ambivalent attitudes of military officials, by the spring of 1951, a more coherent and comprehensive American public relations program helped to

boost the ROKA's public image. Yet, there were limits to how far military leaders were willing to go with this positive message. None seriously believed that the ROKA could play a decisive role in the ROK's military security in the near future. It would take new US military leadership in Korea for the full potential of the ROKA to be recognized.

NEW LEADERSHIP

The ROKA's rebirth as an effective fighting force is usually dated to the spring of 1951, when General James Van Fleet replaced General Matthew Ridgway as Eighth Army Commander in the wake of Truman's recall of Douglas MacArthur. General Van Fleet was a highly respected soldier selected for the post by the president following his successful stint as head of the US military advisory mission during the Greek civil war.³⁶ Once in Korea, Van Fleet immediately set about planning a radical new program of training and development for ROKA forces to bring them closer to the standards of American units.

Van Fleet faced a baptism of fire when the Chinese launched a major offensive in late April. In a bid to stop the UN advance back to the 38th parallel, the Chinese purposefully focused their attacks on ROKA units regarded to be the most vulnerable forces on the UN front line. The gambit proved highly successful; the ROK'S III Corps collapsed, forcing U.S. units to plug the gap. The ROKA's disastrous performance was widely reported on.³⁷ In a front page opinion piece, the *Chicago Daily News*' correspondent Fred Sparks declared that "our native allies have broken and fled in utter rout."³⁸

The revival of the ROKA collapse narrative posed serious problems for the US command. While an American corps commander told AP that the soldiers of the South Korean Army were simply not first-class troops, General Mathew Ridgway's public relations adviser James T. Quirk warned that negative coverage was damaging ROKA morale and called into question why the United States allowed any Korean forces on the front line at all.³⁹ Yet, Quirk also argued that military leaders should not defend the ROKA too effusively. If US officials went too far in their endorsement of the ROKA, they risked legitimizing Rhee's demands for a large expansion and arming of ROK forces and creating the perception that US forces could be easily replaced with Korean units.

Van Fleet resolved the dilemma by preparing for a transformation of the ROKA itself. In a public statement, General Van Fleet paid tribute to

ROKA soldiers and declared that they were now ready “to make a major contribution to the war efforts.”⁴⁰ He adopted the conclusion of a report by KMAG into the ROKA’s failings as the basis for a program of reform, designed to address problems such as poor leadership and lack of access to adequate levels of logistical support and weapons. At the heart of this plan was a complete overhaul of the training regime for Korean soldiers, including the re-opening of training schools that had been disestablished during the communist invasion, as well as the creation of a new officer academy modelled on West Point. In a briefing to correspondents in August, Van Fleet announced that, due to these changes, South Korean divisions would be improved “at least 100 per cent as battle units.”⁴¹

Although welcomed by both the South Korean government and military leaders in Washington, Van Fleet’s reform program did not initially make much of an impression on the press. After entering its stalemate phase in June 1951, the Korean War faded from newspaper headlines. Much of the press corps in South Korea was focused on covering the negotiations at Panmunjom, where an armistice agreement was widely anticipated. When the Army tried to publicize ROKA operations, newspapers rarely bothered to print stories about them. In one notable case, military authorities ran a complex public affairs operation for the ROKA’s pacification program in Cholla province in November 1951—the same location as the 1948 rebellion that had greatly disturbed American reporters.⁴² The Army provided numerous background briefings for journalists at its headquarters in Seoul and embedded nine journalists with the ROKA forces in the field. While the military regarded the combat mission as a great success—ROK ground forces had deployed sophisticated blocking and envelopment tactics to kill or capture rebels—only a handful of short articles about it appeared in the press.⁴³

Only one high-profile American journalist, Jim Lucas of Scripps-Howard Press, published anything significant about the ROKA in the latter half of 1951. As a prize-winning war correspondent with a reputation for conducting penetrating interviews with troops on the front line, Lucas was one of the few “big gun” reporters with the prestige and editorial freedom to write at length about topics of interest to him.⁴⁴ His boss at Scripps-Howard, Roy Howard, had a strong interest in Korea and, according to Syngman Rhee, was one of the earliest supporters of the build-up of the ROKA.⁴⁵ In November and December 1951, Lucas wrote a series of dispatches saluting the ROKA’s progress under Van Fleet, based on interviews with soldiers on the frontline and with military and civilian officials.⁴⁶

Broadly speaking, however, Van Fleet's radical reform program for the ROKA demonstrated the limits of what military public relations could achieve. While the ROKA was making impressive progress as a fighting force, the press had little interest in pursuing the story when many observers anticipated the war ending in just a few months. Yet, as the war dragged on through 1952 and 1953, the ROKA's growing military strength became increasingly significant to both Korean and American politics.

THE ROKA'S GROWING STRENGTH

In a June 1952 article, the *Times*' George Barrett gushed about the capabilities of the new Korean Army: "There is a new army shaping up in the Far East, an Oriental force with Western fire power fused with the ancient faith of the Korean people in their own fighting qualities."⁴⁷ Barrett claimed young Korean recruits were so absorbed by their military training they took no interest in the constitutional crisis brewing in Pusan. Barrett implied, however, that this may change in the future as a result of the sociological changes wrought by the Americanization of the ROKA. Korean military officials exposed to the United States could not help but recognize the importance of American values, including freedom of religion, speech and the press. In an article published in the *New York Herald Tribune* during the same month, correspondent Ansel E. Talbert also found evidence that the ROKA was Americanizing effectively.⁴⁸ Whereas at the beginning of the war Americans soldiers would refer to the ROK's indiscriminately as "gooks," he found Americans now exclusively referred to them as the "rocks" or "Korean joes."

These articles came at an important time for the ROK. Following Rhee's imposition of martial law around the temporary capital of Pusan, Western diplomats had feared that he might try to use the ROKA to suppress the National Assembly. Van Fleet and other military leaders made representations to Rhee, demanding that the ROKA be kept out of domestic politics. Although it ultimately did not become involved in the constitutional crisis, it was clear that the ROKA was now perceived as an important political institution. Both Barrett and Talbert implied that the ROKA's exceptionally close ties with the United States could act as a moderating and Americanizing force in Korean society.

The constitutional crisis coincided with growing demands from both the American public and political leaders for the United States to bring the Korean War to a definitive resolution. In early 1952, negotiations between

the United Nations and the communists had broken down over the question of what to do with the tens of thousands of communist prisoners that had refused to be repatriated back to the DPRK or the People's Republic of China. As the prospects for an armistice agreement faded, many Americans wondered if the ROK could take over more of the burden of fighting. In March, the US Army's Chief of Public Affairs wrote to General Van Fleet to inform him that he had had many queries from "both civilians and Congressional circles" about the ROKA's progress.⁴⁹ Public polling expert George Gallup revealed that many Americans wanted to know why the ROKA was not doing more, with 57% of those polled indicating they would support an expansion of the ROKA to two million men.⁵⁰

The call to expand the ROKA had first appeared in the American press in early 1951, when the South Korean government had argued that it could be expanded to 20 divisions and equipped with weapons intended for Chiang Kai-Shek's nationalist regime in Formosa. In an interview with Jim Lucas at the end of 1951, Rhee had made clear that the end goal of an expanded ROKA would be to enable South Koreans to launch a decisive and, if necessary, unilateral assault on the DPRK. Such talk alarmed American officials and the idea of significant expansion was not seriously discussed during the first two years of the war. However, two developments in 1952 helped to fundamentally alter the situation: the 1952 presidential elections and the lobbying activities of General James Van Fleet.

VAN FLEET AND THE ROKA

During his first months in Korea, Van Fleet had developed an unusually close bond with the ROK. Unlike most of his colleagues, Van Fleet established a close and warm friendship with Rhee and spoke publicly of his commitment to reunifying Korea.⁵¹ He believed that the opportunity to defeat the communists decisively during his first months as Commander of the Eighth Army had been tragically missed by UN forces.⁵² Despite the start of armistice negotiations, he still saw it as the job of the UN to do everything it could to enable military victory. Even if the UN did not decide to go on an all-out offensive, he believed that the ROK's future security depended on the expansion of the ROKA.

Without the authority to alter the ROKA's size himself, Van Fleet found other ways to lobby for a change of policy in Washington. In March 1952, Van Fleet briefed a reporter for the *U.S. News and World Report* on his aspiration to see a ROK Army consisting of 20 divisions.⁵³ The publication

of the article caught Army officials in Washington off guard and led to urgent inquiries being sent to General Ridgway in Tokyo as to whether the United States should shift its position on expansion. Ridgway was dismissive of the idea, arguing that the Korean economy could not sustain an army bigger than ten divisions and that Japan should remain the priority for any military expansion program.⁵⁴ Yet, observers could not help but note the peculiarity of the gap in size between the ten divisions of the ROK and the 25 divisions of its North Korean counterpart. With the ROKA's recent dramatic improvement clear for all to see, journalists increasingly asked why the United States was not supporting a policy of expansion.⁵⁵

In May 1952, General Mark Clark replaced Ridgway as UN Commander and immediately began a review of the options for ROKA expansion. Clark was so impressed with the ROKA's progress that he gave his backing to Van Fleet's plans to expand the Army from 10 to 20 divisions. In a report submitted to the Department of the Army in October, Clark argued that by adding ten extra ROKA divisions the United States could bring home more than 70% of its forces by mid-1954.⁵⁶ While the Pentagon gave its backing to Clark's plan, the major expenditures it entailed required presidential authorization. When the plan went in front of Truman in October 1952, his approval was not forthcoming. The cost of the program threatened to undermine other crucial military projects in Europe and South-east Asia. A great deal of skepticism also remained over the reliability of the ROKA. Many military experts still believed that it would be many years before the South Koreans could wage war independently of the United States.⁵⁷

Truman failed to reckon with the growing sentiment that the ROKA was ready to take on more responsibility for the war effort. In late September, George Barrett had written that authorities at the United Nations Command were convinced that the ROKA was rapidly reaching the stage where its own army could take over the bulk of the country's defense if Chinese forces were withdrawn.⁵⁸ In the second week of October, the press gave significant prominence to the battle of White Horse Mountain, during which ROK and Chinese forces exchanged control of a hill twenty-four times over the course of ten days. When the ROKA took final control of the hill, General Van Fleet declared it a "tremendous victory" against "overwhelming odds and manpower."⁵⁹

The debate over the future of the ROKA became even more significant on October 2, when Republican presidential candidate Dwight D. Eisenhower called for the South Koreans to be prepared to defend their

own front line. Eisenhower shrewdly understood that Korea was the biggest weakness for the Democrats and that expanding the ROKA was an intrinsically appealing option for Americans frustrated with the burden of warfighting that had fallen on the United States. After Democratic candidate Adlai Stevenson and President Truman criticized Eisenhower for creating false hope over the possibility of withdrawing US forces from Korea, Eisenhower fought back by revealing the incendiary contents of a letter written by Van Fleet criticizing the administration's failure to support the expansion of the ROKA:

You know that I have felt all the time that we should be preparing strenuously all during the past year for what may eventually be required, and that my plans include doubling the size of the ROK Army—twenty divisions instead of ten. I said, “Give me six and I would release two United States divisions; or, give me four and I would release one United States division.” It finally got down to a two-division increase, but still no approval to this date.⁶⁰

The resulting press furor put the administration on the defensive.⁶¹ Just a few days later, Truman gave his backing to the Joint Chiefs of Staff recommendation to expand the ROKA up to 14 divisions.

When Eisenhower won the presidential election a few days later, the press filled with speculation as to whether the new president would go through with a “Koreanization” of the war effort. Although Eisenhower refused to divulge his plans for Korea before taking power in January 1953, at the end of November he fulfilled a campaign pledge to go to Korea, where he dedicated part of his visit to watching ROKA units in action.⁶² After briefings by US military commanders, including Van Fleet, Eisenhower's press secretary James Hagerty thought that the prospect of improving the fighting ability of the ROKA in order to save the lives of American soldiers would be a “pretty convincing argument” for the American public. To the large press contingent following Eisenhower, it was clear that he had been deeply impressed by the skill and dedication of the South Korean forces. The *Times*' Robert Alden declared that the president-elect was now convinced that any amount of aid or money supplied to the South Korean Army was a wise investment.⁶³

Eisenhower's election victory did not bring a halt to Van Fleet's efforts to publicize the ROKA. A week before his trip to Korea, Van Fleet published a major article in the *New York Herald Tribune* explaining how the ROKs were not only the equal of American soldiers on the front line, but

already doing a majority of the fighting.⁶⁴ After reaching mandatory retirement age, Van Fleet returned to the United States in February 1953, where he redoubled his efforts to sell the ROKA to the American public. In widely reported on appearances in front of several Congressional committees, Van Fleet declared that victory was the only solution in Korea and that a major offensive, involving an expanded ROKA, could leave both the United States and the ROK in a much better position.⁶⁵ After these appearances in Washington, Van Fleet began a busy schedule of meetings and briefings where he consulted with leading figures in politics, journalism and business, often coordinating with Rhee's public relations adviser Robert T. Oliver.⁶⁶ Korea war correspondent turned star columnist Marguerite Higgins offered her assistance and best wishes in their mutual campaign to energize the American people in the fight against communism.⁶⁷

Van Fleet was a popular figure with the American public. His earnest and straightforward devotion to defeating the enemy instinctively appealed to the many Americans who did not understand why the United States seemed to be making only a half-hearted effort in Korea. His popularity amongst his men was often commented on; after visiting Korea in mid-1951, Republican leader Thomas Dewey wrote that it was clear Van Fleet did not drive his men, they followed him.⁶⁸ Such effusive praise was common in newspaper profiles, which generally depicted him as a rugged and heroic frontline commander.⁶⁹ His public relations team, led by James C. McNamara, a respected former radio reporter, won great plaudits from journalists for their willingness to go far beyond the call of duty in providing logistical support and usable information.⁷⁰ Although many correspondents in South Korea regarded Van Fleet as a "political ignoramus" for his unstinting support for Syngman Rhee, even his critics accepted that his military accomplishments were beyond reproach.⁷¹ In January 1953, *Time* correspondent John Osborne told his editors that, in spite of Van Fleet's obtuseness on many issues of politics and propaganda, Van Fleet had successfully tackled the greatest command problem ever faced by an American commander.⁷²

As the American public waited expectantly for the new administration to bring an end to the war, Van Fleet's professional commentary was highly sought after. In articles for magazines *Life* and *Reader's Digest*, Van Fleet made the case that the ROKA was reliable and effective enough to replace US forces fighting on the front line.⁷³ While many journalists entertained doubts about Van Fleet's claims, they declined to make them public. In a lengthy memorandum to the editors of *Time*, John Osborne

expressed major skepticism about the ROKA: "The best and biggest ROK army that can be envisioned would still require massive air, artillery and logistical support. It would require extensive command supervision. And, for any assurance of US and UN security, we would have to maintain substantial reserves of ground troops in Korea ... a ROK division is not the equivalent of an American or other UN division."⁷⁴ Osborne suggested that Van Fleet had, in fact, been talking for "morale effect" when he spoke of withdrawing US forces following the activation of ROKA units. Yet, Osborne instructed *Time* not to state this openly. Instead, *Time*'s coverage lavished praise on the ROKA. In one article, *Time* recounted how communist attacks had targeted ROKA forces, nicknamed "Van Fleet's Bootleg Division," expecting an easy victory. Instead, the division held on, killing 94 Korean attackers to only 24 ROK dead.⁷⁵ The article ended with the observation that the ROKA, which had begun seven years before as a constabulary of just 600 men, was now holding 70% of the UN line in Korea, doing most of the fighting and taking the brunt of the casualties.

Another powerful endorsement of the ROKA came from Homer Bigart in an article for the *New York Herald Tribune*.⁷⁶ Bigart wrote that the rebirth of the ROKA was the one bright spot in the whole grim Korea picture as its expansion offered the only realistic basis for hoping that the United States could eventually withdraw any, or even all, of its troops from the peninsula. Although Bigart identified a few niggling problems with ROKA forces, in particular its lack of senior leadership and limited experience with advanced weaponry, he recognized that it was a very different army to the one that had collapsed in the first year of the war.

By the spring of 1953, Van Fleet's campaign to draw attention to the capabilities of the ROKA had accomplished a great deal. Not only did he push the issue of expansion into the public debate, he also dispelled perceptions of the ROKA as a broken fighting force and transformed its image into that of a modern and effective military power.⁷⁷

A NEW POWER

Over the course of the first six months of 1953, five ROKA divisions were activated and made combat ready. In mid-May, Eisenhower authorized the final expansion up to a full 20 divisions. By July, the *New York Times*'s Lindsay Parrott could convincingly argue that the ROKA was the strongest anti-communist army in Asia.⁷⁸ The rebuilding of the image of the ROKA was complete, as Parrott argued, "Almost every high United

Nations officer has spoken well of the Republic of Korea troops. The days are gone when the South Koreans advanced fast and retreated fast when confronted with hard opposition. The motto of the Republic of Korea army has become ‘stand and fight’.”

The ROKA also gained an increasingly prominent political role within the ROK. After the resumption of armistice talks in April, American officials became increasingly wary of Rhee using the ROKA to unilaterally continue fighting the war and to violate the armistice. American officials reminded senior ROKA leaders of their ties to the United States and the impossibility of the ROK sustaining a long-term military operation against the combined weight of communist forces.⁷⁹ After it became clear that ROK generals were prepared to launch a suicidal attack on North Korea if Rhee ordered it, American officials did all they could to avoid giving Rhee an excuse to launch a unilateral attack. In July, just weeks before the signing of the armistice, the Eighth Army suppressed negative coverage of the very mixed performance of the ROKA during one of the biggest Chinese offensives of the war. The Chinese had focused a large-scale attack on what they still perceived to be the United Nations’ weakest point—the ROK units responsible for defending a protrusion in the UN line known as the Kumsong salient.⁸⁰ The ROKA initially fell back under the pressure of the Chinese assault, reigniting fears that it was once again on the verge of collapse. The Eighth Army responded to the offensive by imposing tight censorship on all critical coverage of the ROKA.⁸¹ After several days of heavy fighting, ROK forces managed to stand their ground, earning rapturous coverage in the press. One UN officer told an AP correspondent that “this is one of the greatest achievements of the Republic of Korea Army and justifies the great faith it took to create it.”⁸²

While the battle for the Kumsong salient was the last major battle of the Korean War, the importance of the ROKA to the United States continued to grow through the 1950s. Gregg Brazinsky has noted how, after the Korean War, the United States worked to boost the “reputation and prestige” of the ROKA, due to its vital role in maintaining both South Korean stability and the “entire strategic balance in the Pacific.”⁸³ Indeed, the ROKA in many ways became the core foundation of the entire US–ROK alliance.

CONCLUSION

By the end of the Korean War, the ROK had finally developed an army which matched KMAG’s rhetoric in the months before the invasion in 1950. But, just as critically, this rhetoric had been successfully exported to

the United States. General James Van Fleet masterfully turned the development of the ROKA into a political story in the United States and generated a new positive narrative for both the ROKA and the ROK more generally.

The positive media portrayal of the ROKA helped the ROK consolidate its image as a crucial ally in the global struggle against communism. It also helped to mitigate the fear that Rhee's authoritarianism could threaten the stability of the country. The ROKA's growing military and political strength, as well as its close links with the United States, offered hope that Rhee could be contained if his behavior began to threaten the country's future. In the crucial summer months of 1952, when Syngman Rhee was effectively launching an authoritarian coup against the Korean National Assembly, the ROKA was portrayed in the press as a stabilizing and Americanizing force of greater significance than South Korea's democratic institutions.

The positive image of the ROKA established during the Korean War also helped to soften American attitudes towards the military regimes that came to dominate South Korea after Park Chung-hee's military coup in 1961.⁸⁴ Indeed, in the wake of that coup, Van Fleet wrote to one of the military junta's leaders to praise it for seizing power. In his opinion, Van Fleet wrote, "any leadership must include the military as well as civilians, because after all, the military have proven to be the best citizens."⁸⁵

NOTES

1. A handful of studies have looked at military and political aspects of the ROKA's development during the Korean War: Bryan R. Gibby, *The Will to Win: American Military Advisers in Korea, 1946–1953* (Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 2012); Robert K. Sawyer, *Military Advisers in Korea: KMAC in Peace and War* (Washington, DC: Office of Military History, Department of the Army, 1963). See also Jongnam Na, "Making Cold War Soldiers: The Americanization of the South Korean Army 1945–1955" (Unpublished Ph.D. Diss.: University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2006).
2. There is an extensive historiography looking at the causes of the military collapse of the ROKA. See Roy E. Appleman, *South to the Naktong, North to the Yalu* (Washington, DC: Office of the Chief of Military History, Department of the Army, 1961). Allan R. Millett, *The War for Korea, 1950–1951: They Came From the North* (Lawrence, KA: University Press of Kansas, 2010).

3. Burton Crane, "South Koreans kill own troops by dynamiting a bridge too soon," *New York Times*, 28 June 1950.
4. Coverage of the Cholla uprising is looked at in more detail in Chap. 3.
5. UP, "Korean Troops Said Capable," *Eugene Register-Guard*, 16 April 1949.
6. King, *Tail of the Paper Tiger*, 93.
7. Jongnam Na, "*Making Cold War Soldiers: The Americanization of the South Korean Army 1945–1955*," 58.
8. Walter Sullivan, "Soviet, US models for Korean armies," *New York Times*, 26 June 1950.
9. "Korea: Progress Report," *Time*, 5 June 1950.
10. Gibney, "The First Three Months of War: A Journalist's Reminiscences of Korea," 102. For a more detailed assessment of Frank Gibney's reporting by fellow *Time* correspondent John Osborne, see Osborne to Roy, 23 August 1950, Journalism File, Box 2, John Osborne Papers, Library of Congress.
11. Higgins, *War in Korea: The Report of a Woman Combat Correspondent*, 38.
12. AP, "South's Soldiers Walk Away After Enemy Armor Breaks Defense Line on Han River," *Washington Post*, 1 July 1950.
13. "A South Korean Victory," *New York Times*, 18 July 1950.
14. Yong-jeung Kim, Letter "Korea Under the U.N.," *Washington Post*, 5 July 1950.
15. Rhee's supporters quoted Walker in their attempts to persuade newspaper publishers to ignore the "unpatriotic" Yong-jeung Kim: John M. Chang to Robert R. McCormick, 19 July 1950, "Korea, 1946–1955, (Syngman Rhee)" Folder, Box 48, Papers of Colonel Robert R. McCormick, First Division Museum.
16. "A South Korean Victory," *New York Times*, 18 July 1950.
17. "Officers baffled by retreats," *Chicago Daily News*, 6 July 1950.
18. UP, "South Korean Army Tough, Battle Wise," *Boston Globe*, 30 July 1950.
19. Richard Johnston, "South Korean Welded to Toughness," *New York Times*, 8 August 1950.
20. "Time for a New Estimate of the South Korean Army," *Baltimore Sun*, 7 August 1950.
21. Gordon Walker, "South Korean Regiment Plays Star Role," *Christian Science Monitor*, 7 August 1950.
22. Marguerite Higgins, "South Korea's Tattered Forces Use 'Indian Warfare' to Kill Reds," *New York Herald Tribune*, 2 August 1950.
23. King, *Tail of the Paper Tiger*, 492.
24. Parker to Gould, 10 August 1950, Korean War Coverage Reaction, August 1950, Subject Files, General Files, AP Corporate Archives; Mickelson to Parker, 14 August 1950, Korean War Coverage Reaction, August 1950, Subject Files, General Files, AP Corporate Archives.

25. John Osborne, "The Ugly War," *Time*, 21 August 1950.
26. Osborne to Billings, Thompson and Alexander, 6 October 1950, Journalism File, Box 2, John Osborne Papers, Library of Congress.
27. For more on the background to the KATUSA program, see David Curtis Skaggs, "The Katusa Experiment: The Integration of Korean Nationals Into the U.S. Army, 1950–1965," *Military Affairs* 38, no. 2 (1974), 53–8. In practice, the KATUSA program was unpopular with some officers and was briefly suspended in the wake of the Chinese intervention: Hal Boyle, "Buddy System Gets Shelved," *Tuscaloosa News*, 7 December 1950.
28. South Koreans in action, Moffett, 22 October 1950, Time Inc. Dispatches from Time magazine correspondents: First Series, 1942–1955, Houghton Library, Harvard College Library.
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30. Millett, 380.
31. Melvin B. Voorhees, *Korean Tales* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1952), 142.
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35. "50,000 Koreans Die in Camps in South; Government Inquiry Confirms Abuse of Draftees – General Held for Malfeasance," *New York Times*, 13 June 1951.
36. Paul F. Braim, *The Will to Win: The Life of General James A. Van Fleet* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2001), 239.
37. UP, "Foe's Losses Terrible," *Chicago Daily News*, 24 April 1951; "Battle of Korea," *Time*, 28 May 1951.
38. Fred Sparks, "It's Another Stalemate in Korea: Sparks," *Chicago Daily News*, 8 May 1951.
39. AP dispatch, 21 May 1951, Box 1, James T. Quirk Papers, Harry S. Truman Presidential Library; Quirk to Ridgway, 22 May 1951, Box 1, James T. Quirk Papers, Harry S. Truman Presidential Library.
40. AP, "Van Fleet Cites Gain in the South Koreans," *New York Times*, 13 May 1951.
41. George Barrett, "U.S. Is Retraining South Korea Army," *New York Times*, 12 August 1951.
42. Casey, *Selling the Korean War: Propaganda, Politics, and Public Opinion in the United States, 1950–1953*, 351.
43. Gibby, *The Will to Win: American Military Advisers in Korea, 1946–1953*, 213–14.

44. Another renowned reporter, photojournalist Margaret Bourke-White, used her considerable clout to persuade *Life* to let her spend three months roaming around Korea for a story on the guerrilla threat in South Korea in late 1952. She asked Editor Ed Thompson for permission to produce an article on South Korean aspects of the conflict because she felt this issue had been neglected by the rest of the press: Margaret Bourke-White, "The Savage, Secret War in Korea," *Life*, 1 December 1952; Margaret Bourke-White, *Portrait of Myself* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1963), 330.
45. Rhee to Van Fleet, 28 December 1953, Box 77, James Van Fleet Papers, George C. Marshall Foundation.
46. The articles were so well received by the ROK regime that Robert T. Oliver, who attended some of the interviews, compiled them into a pamphlet that was published by the Korean Pacific Press: Jim Lucas, *Our Fighting Heart: The Story of the Republic of Korea Armed Forces, as Published in a Series of Articles in the Scripps-Howard Newspapers, November–December, 1951* (Washington, DC: Korean Pacific Press, 1951).
47. George Barrett, "The ROK's Learn to Be an Army," *New York Times*, 22 June 1952.
48. Ansel E. Talbert, "South Korea's New Army Is Vastly Larger, More Efficient," *New York Herald Tribune*, 2 June 1952.
49. General F. L. Parks to Van Fleet, 20 March 1952, Box 71, James Van Fleet Papers, George C. Marshall Foundation.
50. "Voters Favor U.S.-Trained Korean Army," *Washington Post*, 29 February 1952.
51. Van Fleet to Rhee, 1 February 1953, Box 74, James Van Fleet Papers, George C. Marshall Foundation.
52. James Van Fleet, "The Truth About Korea" Part I, *Life*, 11 May 1953.
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62. Diary entry for 1952 Korea trip, 2nd Day, Box 11, James C. Hagerty Papers, Dwight Eisenhower Presidential Library.
63. Robert Alden, "Korea: R.O.K's as Replacements," *New York Times*, 7 December 1952.
64. James Van Fleet, "Who Says They Won't Fight?," *New York Herald Tribune*, 23 November 1952.
65. Harold B. Hinton, "Victory Is the Only Solution in Korea, Van Fleet Testifies," *New York Times*, 5 March 1953.
66. Van Fleet to Oliver, 11 March 1953, Box 74, James Van Fleet Papers, George C. Marshall Foundation.
67. Higgins to Van Fleet, 18 March 1953, Box 74, James Van Fleet Papers, George C. Marshall Foundation.
68. Thomas Dewey, *Journey to the Far Pacific* (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1952), 71–2.
69. Murry Schumach, "Van Fleet: Mud-and-Foxhole General," *New York Times*, 29 April 1951. General Floyd Parks, head of the US Army's Office of Information, wrote to Van Fleet in July 1951 to express his satisfaction with the universal praise he had been receiving in the press: Parks to Van Fleet, 3 July 1951, Van Fleet Papers, Box 71, James Van Fleet Papers, George C. Marshall Foundation.
70. *Herald Tribune* reporter Mac R. Johnson wrote a glowing assessment of Van Fleet's relationship with the press; Johnson to Van Fleet, 6 October 1952, Box 69, James Van Fleet Papers, George C. Marshall Foundation.
71. Osborne to Beshoar, 12 January 1953, Time Inc. Dispatches from Time magazine correspondents: First Series, 1942–1955, Houghton Library, Harvard College Library. Van Fleet developed close relationships with many American members of the Rhee lobby and, in late 1953, became the chairman of the American-Korean Foundation, an organization which sought to boost the public profile of the ROK in the United States and raise funds for American humanitarian projects in South Korea: J. H. R. Cromwell to Van Fleet, 3 May 1953, Box 68, James Van Fleet Papers, George C. Marshall Foundation.
72. Osborne to Beshoar, 12 January 1953, Time Inc. Dispatches from Time magazine correspondents: First Series, 1942–1955, Houghton Library, Harvard College Library.

73. James Van Fleet, "Who Says Our Allies Won't Fight?," *Reader's Digest*, February 1953; James Van Fleet, "The Truth About Korea" Part I, *Life*, 11 May 1953 and Part 2, *Life*, 18 May 1953.
74. Osborne to Beshoar, 2 January 1953, Time magazine correspondence, Time Inc. Dispatches from Time magazine correspondents: First Series, 1942–1955, Houghton Library, Harvard College Library.
75. "Victory for the Bootleggers," *Time*, 26 January 1953.
76. Homer Bigart, "Bigart's Report on Korean War," *New York Herald Tribune*, 21 January 1953.
77. Former US Ambassador to South Korea John Muccio wrote to Van Fleet to praise him for dispelling the public's confusion about the poor fighting ability of the ROKA: Muccio to Van Fleet, 26 November 1952, Box 71, James Van Fleet Papers, George C. Marshall Foundation.
78. Lindesay Parrott, "R.O.K.'s Are Good Army but Cannot Go It Alone," *New York Times*, 4 July 1953.
79. Robert Alden, "Rhee's Army Chief Vows to Back Him," *New York Times*, 4 July 1953.
80. General Mark Clark wrote that "There is no doubt in my mind that one of the principal reasons—if not the one reason—for the Communist offensive was to give the ROK's a 'bloody nose,' to show them and the world that 'PUK CHIN'—Go North—was easier said than done." General Mark W. Clark, "The Truth About Korea," *Collier's*, 5 March 1954. For a full account of the battle and the Chinese decision to target ROK forces, see Gibby, *The Will to Win: American Military Advisers in Korea, 1946–1953*, 232–60.
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82. AP, "Korea Foe Checked After 4 Mile Push," *New York Times*, 15 July 1953.
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84. "President Park of South Korea Greeted Here as Firm U.S. Ally," *New York Times*, 20 May 1965; Roscoe Drummond, "South Korea Provides a Brilliant Justification of our Effort There," *Los Angeles Times*, 11 January 1966.
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CHAPTER 8

Legacies of War

On July 27, 1953, all combat operations on the Korean peninsula finally came to an end. After months of difficult negotiations, the United Nations and communist forces agreed to withdraw their forces to either side of a demilitarized zone based on the line of control. For Syngman Rhee, the end of the Korean War represented a major blow to his dream of reunification. Desperate to secure American support for the resumption of fighting, Rhee spent the first year after the armistice seeking political allies in the United States while keeping the world guessing as to whether he would go it alone. While the world focused on the possibility of renewed conflict on the peninsula, Rhee quietly consolidated his control over the South Korean political system. Through a constitutional amendment passed in November 1954, Rhee effectively made himself president for life—thus, completing his authoritarian takeover of the South Korean political system.

Historians of US —ROK relations during this period have almost exclusively focused on the diplomatic ramifications of Rhee's opposition to the armistice.¹ William Stueck argued that the sense of shared sacrifice created by the war helped the American public develop a strong attachment to the ROK.² Although this natural groundswell of sympathy was undermined by Rhee's difficult behavior, it did not evaporate after the war ended.³ Rhee's impassioned refusal to give up on liberating North Korea became a key part of his appeal to Americans on the Right, many of whom were frustrated with the Eisenhower administration's unexpectedly restrained approach to fighting communism.

This chapter argues that Rhee became a central fixture of press coverage of the Republic of Korea (ROK) in the post-armistice period. By refusing to clarify his position on resuming war with North Korea, Rhee kept the press focused on his anti-communist stand and American attempts to placate him rather than the increasingly authoritarian nature of his rule. At the same time, Rhee successfully courted those Americans attached to the idea of “rollback,” culminating in his controversial and era-defining visit to the United States in the summer of 1954.

With Rhee the central focus of press coverage, the American press rarely scrutinized South Korean democracy after the end of the war. Although most of the journalists working in South Korea disliked Rhee, they faced many of the same impediments as reporters working during the occupation period. Press numbers were depleted as other areas of the world, particularly Indochina, became bigger news stories. Those that remained were beholden both to a Cold War narrative that regarded local politics as insignificant and to a South Korean government which was far more confident in repressing foreign journalists. The handful of journalists who wrote about the democratic flaws of the Rhee regime revived a modified form of the fatalistic narrative of the occupation years. Koreans were too politically immature for democracy in the near future. Only long-term modernization and development would deliver democratic progress.

THE POST-ARMISTICE NARRATIVE

After spending much of the war out of the limelight, Syngman Rhee re-emerged as a central figure during the armistice talks between April and July 1953. With negotiators at Panmunjom edging closer to an armistice agreement, Rhee made clear his fierce rejection of any deal with the communists which allowed them to retain control of North Korea. On June 18, Rhee stunned both the communists and his own allies when he released 25,000 anti-communist North Korean prisoners of war in direct violation of communist demands for the repatriation of all prisoners. Throughout the last weeks of armistice negotiations, the world anxiously waited to see whether Rhee would denounce the armistice and order the Korean military to continue fighting alone.

During the early stages of the armistice talks, senior members of the Eisenhower administration had given serious consideration to implementing Operation Eveready, a plan for a coup d'état against the South Korean government first developed during the 1952 constitutional crisis.⁴ The

Americans recognized that launching such a coup carried tremendous risks. An influential group of conservative senators, congressmen and columnists regarded Rhee as a patriotic Korean who wanted nothing more than to stop the loss of half of his country to communism.⁵ Even Eisenhower's Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, had publicly defended the Rhee regime in the past. Equally important were the potential propaganda implications of removing Rhee from power. Rhee was one of the United States' few solidly anti-communist allies. Ousting Rhee risked alienating anti-communists on a global scale. Moreover, such a move could cast doubt on the justification for the American intervention in June 1950 and, perhaps most seriously of all, play straight into the hands of communist propaganda which depicted South Korea as a puppet of American imperialism.

With these arguments in mind, Dulles advised Eisenhower to take a cooperative approach to dealing with the ROK. In exchange for Rhee's acquiescence to the armistice, Eisenhower agreed to sign a bilateral mutual defense treaty, which committed the United States to intervene in case of any further communist attacks. In public statements in the summer and autumn of 1953, Dulles made clear that the ROK deserved American protection following its tremendous sacrifices for the anti-communist cause. In a widely reported speech to the American Legion, Dulles pointedly declared that the ROK was not a puppet and that the world had to recognize the will of a government which could claim the loyalty of 75% of all Koreans.⁶

Policy-makers also sought to strengthen US —ROK relations by emphasizing humanitarian aspects of the US military presence in Korea. Eisenhower had been greatly impressed by the work of General James Van Fleet's American-Korean Foundation (AFK), which had enjoyed great success with humanitarian and social welfare projects in Korea.⁷ In a memo to his senior advisers, Eisenhower called for a large-scale reconstruction project to be led by the US military which would show the world that "America and her allies are engaged in helping humans, not merely in asserting and supporting any particular system or policy."⁸ While this particular plan was fiercely criticized by the press, it reflected a broader shift in US —ROK relations.⁹ Howard A. Rusk, an associate editor at the *New York Times* and Chairman of the AFK's Korean Health and Welfare Mission, and his colleague Leonard W. Mayo wrote a series of articles for the *Times* which stressed the vital importance of American aid to the ROK.¹⁰ Similar points of view regularly appeared in *Korean Survey*, Robert

T. Oliver's magazine, which, thanks to a large budget increase, was now printed in a full color edition. The magazine carried articles highlighting many of the relief projects being undertaken by the United States in South Korea, as well as profiles of and interviews with individuals supportive of the Rhee government.

While military partnership and humanitarian relief were the dominant frameworks through which policy-makers presented South Korea to the American public, they generated only limited press coverage. As development expert John P. Lewis noted in his 1955 book on reconstruction and development in South Korea, these issues did not excite the attention of the public.¹¹ It was increasingly clear that Indochina—where the French were facing a desperate struggle to stop the communist Vietminh from seizing control of large parts of the country—had become the most significant Cold War hotspot. By the start of 1954, only one aspect of the ROK's relationship with the United States still merited sustained coverage—Syngman Rhee and his threats to restart the Korean War.

RHEE AND THE ANTI-COMMUNIST RIGHT

Although the Eisenhower administration had forced Rhee to publicly accept the armistice agreement in the summer of 1953, Rhee strongly hinted in the autumn of 1953 and spring of 1954 that he would resume fighting if he did not secure the reunification of Korea on his terms. Rhee remained coy as to whether the ROK would even attend the peace talks scheduled to begin in Geneva at the end of April. This obstreperous approach to diplomacy reflected more than just opposition to doing a deal with the communists; Rhee was determined to boost his negotiating position with the United States.¹² In return for South Korea's presence at Geneva, Rhee wanted American support for the training and equipping of a further 15 to 20 ROKA divisions, which could potentially be used in an all-out attack on North Korea.

Yet, Rhee recognized that, even with an expanded army, the success of any attack would ultimately depend on the political and military support of the United States. The idea that Eisenhower could support an aggressive Cold War liberation strategy was not entirely unreasonable. In order to establish his credibility with the Republican Right during the election campaign, Eisenhower had made "liberation" a central plank of his foreign policy agenda.¹³ In the Grand Old Party platform drawn up at the Republican convention in July, the party had rebuked the Truman

administration for abandoning countless human beings to a “despotic and godless terrorism,” and suggested that a Republican administration would “revive the contagious, liberating influences which are inherent in freedom” and seek “genuine independence” for the world’s captive peoples.¹⁴ Secretary of State John Foster Dulles was a vocal supporter of a liberation-oriented Cold War strategy. For Rhee and a great many Republicans, the Eisenhower administration offered the promise of the start of a fightback in the Cold War.

Convinced that American public opinion could be aroused in support of reunifying Korea, Rhee and his supporters began a public relations campaign to raise awareness of South Korea’s situation and create sympathy for Rhee’s dream of reunifying his country. Just how this reunification would be accomplished was left purposefully vague—although, on occasion, Rhee suggested that it would occur if the Chinese were forced to withdraw from Korea.¹⁵ In his correspondence with General James Van Fleet, Rhee obsessed over how to win the support of key press allies. He feared that his old friend Henry Luce had been fed negative views of the ROK by his *Time* colleagues.¹⁶ He also expressed a growing level of paranoia towards the Japan lobby in the United States, warning that the only way to resist the growing Japanese influence on US policy was to start spending money on convincing patriotic Americans that the build-up of Japan would lead to another war.¹⁷

While Van Fleet did not share Rhee’s fear of Japan, he fully supported the further expansion of the ROKA and the launch of a new offensive against the communists. In February 1954, he published an article in the popular magazine *Readers Digest* arguing that the creation of twenty-five South Korean divisions could be achieved for the same cost as just one American division.¹⁸ He also met with senior military and press figures, including conservative columnist and *U.S. News and World Report* publisher David Lawrence, to discuss the viability of Rhee’s plans.¹⁹ Although Lawrence was sympathetic to Rhee’s plight, he told Van Fleet that he did not think the American public could be convinced to resume the war and that he did not want to see the ROK go it alone and lose.²⁰

Rhee’s publicity efforts were not confined to influencing journalists in the United States. Having learned the lessons of the 1952 constitutional crisis, Rhee effectively used one-on-one interviews and briefings with American journalists in South Korea to secure sympathetic press coverage. In an interview with *The New York Times* William J. Jorden, Rhee made it clear he wanted a larger ROK Army so that he could, if necessary, reunify

his country without having to ask for more military support from the United States.²¹ In the run-up to Geneva, Rhee also gave a major interview to AP's Relman Morin, a reporter selected by Rhee on the basis that he was "objective and fair-minded" in presenting South Korea's problems and aware of the threat posed by communism to the entire world.²² In his article, Morin portrayed Rhee as an impassioned advocate of Korean unification. Although Morin noted that Rhee was often at loggerheads with US diplomats and had been criticized for suppressing political opponents, the article largely focused on Rhee's background as a "revolutionary preaching liberty and democracy" and his "tough, crafty and eminently practical" approach to politics.²³

In April, Robert T. Oliver triggered a further round of press discussion over Rhee's merits with the release of *Syngman Rhee: The Man Behind the Myth*, the first major biography of Rhee to appear in the United States. Adopting a highly partisan approach to his subject, Oliver presented Rhee as a heroic figure who had been the victim of a grossly unfair campaign of communist vilification.²⁴ In a conclusion perfectly calibrated to appeal to Middle American sensibilities, Oliver argued that Rhee was a simple Christian man who had fought all his life to modernize and democratize his country.²⁵ His willingness to make tough choices had earned him many enemies, a quality which Oliver argued he shared with some of America's greatest leaders, including George Washington and Abraham Lincoln.²⁶

Reaction to Oliver's book revealed how different parts of the press perceived Rhee. In a review for the *New York Times*, editorial writer Robert Aura Smith argued that the book revealed a warm and human side to Rhee which was the opposite of the caricatured version of him in wide currency.²⁷ Smith was so taken with Oliver's defense of Rhee that he concluded that a strong case could be made for Rhee as one of the great leaders of the twentieth century. While reviews in other newspapers and magazines were generally more critical of Rhee's belligerent behavior, they generally agreed with Oliver's conclusion that Rhee was, first and foremost, a vital ally against communism in the Far East.²⁸ The only reviews that discussed Rhee's authoritarian tendencies at any significant length were produced by foreign correspondents who had worked in South Korea. Walter Simmons, the *Chicago Daily Tribune's* long-serving Far East correspondent, argued that Rhee's "fatherly dictatorship" was preferable to the chaos that would ensue if one-man rule was to end yet he also criticized Rhee for his complete lack of concern for American interests.²⁹ In the *Nation*, former Far East correspondent Mark Gayn used his review as an opportunity to once again denounce Rhee's despotism.³⁰

While most American journalists expressed pragmatic optimism about the future of the ROK under Rhee, much of the foreign media continued to heap abuse and criticism on him. The Rhee regime's authoritarian nature and desire to renew the war were a public relations nightmare for the United Nations (UN). The communist press persistently attacked the ROK as a borderline fascist state which was seeking to plunge the world into a new world war. When the Geneva Conference finally got under way on April 26, with a delegation from the ROK coaxed into attendance, UN negotiators hoped to placate critics of the Rhee government by suggesting a plan in which both the ROK and DPRK would hold general elections as part of a reunification deal. Although no one believed that the communists would have accepted the deal, Rhee immediately rejected the plan on the supposed basis that any extra-constitutional elections in the south would be a gross violation of the ROK's existing constitutional order.

The inability of any of the parties to agree on meaningful compromises quickly drained the conference of political momentum. Diplomacy gave way to propagandistic grandstanding, in which all sides vied to present their case to the global press. South Korean Foreign Minister, Pyun Yung Tai, the highest-ranked South Korean at the conference, declared that the ROK sought a peaceful transition to a unified and democratic Korea under the existing framework of the ROK constitution.³¹ In a statement to the press, Pyun accused the communists of distorting the meaning of democracy in their propaganda attacks on the ROK—only South Korea, he argued, exercised rule by the majority of the people, with the presentation of issues and candidates before all the voters, in a fair and open campaign. This rhetoric received little attention in the American press, which was far more interested in the deliberations over the future of Indochina.³² Rhee's narrow win in the South Korean National Assembly elections at the end of May nonetheless bolstered the ROK's claims to democratic legitimacy. Despite reports of police interference in voting, the press accepted the close result as a sign that democracy in South Korea was still alive and well.³³

When the Geneva Conference came to an end in July 1954, Rhee could also argue that his anti-communist rhetoric had been vindicated. Just as he had predicted, negotiation with the communists over the future of Korea had produced a great deal of propaganda and no agreement. Even more alarmingly, the communists appeared to be on the verge of capturing another strategically important Asian nation—the French colony of Indochina. At the start of May, French forces in Vietnam had been decisively defeated by the communist Vietminh at Dien Bien Phu. With

France unwilling to maintain its military commitment to Indochina, the French delegation to Geneva sought to negotiate an end to the conflict with the communists. After two months of talks, the different sides agreed to the de facto partition of Vietnam into a communist north and French-backed south.

Although the Eisenhower administration perceived the Geneva accords as one of the better possible outcomes of a bad situation, a few senior political figures in the United States fiercely criticized the deal. Senator William Knowland called Geneva a “Far *Eastern* Munich.” For these frustrated conservatives, Syngman Rhee’s straightforward anti-communist rhetoric offered a satisfying and hopeful alternative to the compromises and disappointments of international realpolitik. In this context, Syngman Rhee gained a powerful symbolic status—a development that he would take full advantage of when he came to the United States for his first and only state visit in the summer of 1954.

RHEE IN AMERICA

Rhee’s visit to the United States between July 26 and 31, 1954 was arguably the most significant public relations event of Syngman Rhee’s entire presidency. Although Eisenhower had serious concerns about giving Rhee a platform to attack US foreign policy, the ambiguous end to the Geneva Conference made it necessary for the United States and the ROK to clarify, both in private and in public, their next steps.³⁴ Rhee was thus invited to consultations at the White House and to deliver a speech to a joint session of Congress. Although Rhee was initially reluctant to come to the United States, he changed his mind when the Korean Ambassador told him that Dulles had suggested there would be advantages in dealing with “pending matters” through personal conversations.³⁵

When news of the visit was released to the American press, many commentators reacted positively. Liberals described it as a vital opportunity for the United States to learn whether Rhee would follow through on his threats to reunify his country by force.³⁶ Amongst conservatives, Rhee’s trip had a more symbolic importance. Walter Trohan of the *Chicago Daily Tribune* called the visit a triumphal return for a man who had dedicated his life to fighting for the freedom of the Korean people.³⁷

For the Eisenhower administration, Rhee’s visit was primarily an exercise in damage limitation. It began inauspiciously when, after being met off his plane by Vice President Nixon, Rhee delivered an impromptu

15-minute speech in front of reporters in which he blamed American “cold feet” for the ongoing division of his country. After the ceremony at the airport, Rhee immediately set off for the White House, where he was greeted by an estimated crowd of 60,000.³⁸ Contrary to the normal protocols, the press was prohibited from making sound recordings of Rhee and Eisenhower’s official meeting to avoid any embarrassing comments from Rhee in Eisenhower’s presence.

In a private meeting with Eisenhower and his senior advisers the following morning, Rhee confirmed their worst fears. He sought nothing less than a worldwide military campaign to push back against communism. Eisenhower and Dulles warned that such a hardline policy, even one limited to Korea, would almost certainly lead to atomic war and the total destruction of modern civilization. But Rhee could not be dissuaded. After the meeting, Rhee continued his preparations for his address to a joint session of Congress in which he would make public his call for a global war against communism. Although Robert T. Oliver warned that an aggressive speech could put at risk all the international goodwill that the ROK had worked to obtain, Oliver sensed that Rhee was in a “fighting mood.” According to Oliver, “His aim was not conciliation or apology but a sweeping and full-scale attack against U.S. global policies that he considered little short of surrender to communist imperialism. What he undertook was a fighting campaign to influence American public opinion over the heads of President Eisenhower and Dulles.”³⁹

When Rhee gave his speech in front of Congress on July 27, he took square aim at Eisenhower’s goal of “peaceful co-existence” and argued that by not taking a hard line against communism, the United States was being lulled into the “sleep of death” by the Soviet Union. At some point in the future, the Soviets would launch an apocalyptic sneak attack against the United States. “Yet death is scarcely closer to Seoul than to Washington,” he warned, “for the destruction of the United States is the prime objective of the conspirators in the Kremlin. The Soviet Union’s hydrogen bombs may well be dropped on the great cities of America even before they are dropped on our shattered towns.”⁴⁰ The only way to avoid such a fate, Rhee claimed, was for the ROK to launch a major offensive against both the DPRK and communist China. The ROKA, in co-operation with Chinese forces from Formosa, could take on the communists with just a limited commitment of American air and naval support.

Although several parts of Rhee’s speech drew ovations from the crowd, his call for war was met with silence. In comments to the press afterwards,

senators made clear their admiration for the man but refused to discuss the substance of the speech.⁴¹ Over the following days, a slew of editorials in major newspapers declared that Rhee's rhetoric had crossed a political Rubicon. Both the *New York Herald Tribune* and the *New York Times* condemned his assault on the doctrine of peaceful co-existence. The *Times* complained that his words would "alarm the free world and provide fresh grist for communist propaganda mills."⁴²

Yet, Rhee's remarks struck a chord with many Americans who felt that the United States had failed to stand up to communist aggression. The *Los Angeles Times*, then heavily under the influence of its fiercely anti-communist political correspondent Kyle Palmer, suggested that Rhee was probably right, even if it was unlikely that the United States would ever initiate such a military confrontation.⁴³ The conservative columnists David Lawrence and Constantine Brown argued that Rhee had simply told the truth and that history may well one day prove him right.⁴⁴ The speech did little to dampen public support for Rhee during the remainder of his trip to the United States. On August 2, around 150,000 New Yorkers lined Broadway to catch a sight of Rhee in a parade organized in his honor.⁴⁵ In Chicago, Kansas City, Los Angeles and San Francisco, Rhee was treated to a whirl of public celebrations and social events where he repeated his call for the United States to join South Korea in a renewed military struggle against communism.

The only significant public opposition to Rhee mentioned in the press came from small pro-communist groups picketing Rhee's hotel and a handful of social functions. During one event at Los Angeles city hall, members of the Committee For Peaceful Unification of Korea handed out pamphlets accusing Rhee of being a warmonger and a dictator.⁴⁶ The city's chief of police ominously told a reporter that they were taking no risks with Rhee's safety since police intelligence knew of people who were not in sympathy with his views. Opposition to Rhee was thus associated with a tiny and extreme communist fringe.

Rhee's trip to the United States confirmed that he had been correct in his assessment that he could call on strong rhetorical support from a large segment of the American public. He misjudged, however, the political mood in both the United States and Washington. After the Korean War, only the most extreme anti-communists had the stomach for more fighting. As John Foster Dulles noted after Rhee left Washington, he had arrived believing that he could convince Congress to support his war plan and left with the understanding that the country was against it.⁴⁷ According

to Oliver, Rhee regarded the speech in front of Congress as the worst mistake of his life since it irrevocably branded him as a political extremist in the eyes of American policy-makers.⁴⁸

Yet, in terms of public relations, the speech did serve several useful purposes. First, it helped Rhee reach out to a key constituency of support who felt frustrated by Eisenhower's constrained diplomatic approach to the Cold War. The speech solidified Rhee's status as an exceptional figure in the Cold War—an authentic anti-communist nationalist. Second, as *The Wall Street Journal* recognized, the speech made it more difficult for Rhee's opponents to allege that he was a puppet of American imperialism.⁴⁹ Instead, it became clear that part of the United States' role in South Korea was restraining it from triggering a new conflict. These issues became the dominant lenses through which the ROK was perceived and discussed in the American press.

RHEE'S SILENT REVOLUTION

While Rhee worked to improve his image in the United States, he also completed his authoritarian takeover of the South Korean political system. Rhee used the police to ensure victory in the National Assembly elections in May 1954, clearing the path for sweeping constitutional changes—most crucially, the removal of term limits. According to an internal report by the US embassy, the elections represented clear “evidence of the resurgence of old authoritarian traditions coupled with the development of a one-party system.”⁵⁰

None of this was apparent in most American newspaper coverage of the election or its aftermath. While newspapers did carry basic news stories about Rhee's narrow victory in May, and a handful of articles reported incidents of police repression before the election, most of this coverage missed the wider significance of the elections in terms of the future of South Korean democracy.⁵¹ Only Henry S. Hayward of the *Christian Science Monitor* provided a detailed explanation of the amendments Rhee hoped to use to “eliminate all internal opposition to his policies.”⁵² Even in November 1954, when physical fighting broke out in the National Assembly after Rhee's supporters forced through the constitutional amendment granting him the right to hold the presidency for life, newspapers carried only brief narrative accounts of what had happened.⁵³

These deficiencies in coverage reflected some of the same problems that had plagued reporting in South Korea since the days of occupation.

Editors rarely gave space to South Korean political news, particularly as public interest in Korea declined in the wake of the armistice. As had been the case in 1945 and 1951, big-name reporters had stopped visiting the country as other stories developed greater prominence. Korea was left to junior press agency journalists who were rarely allowed to provide interpretative analysis of political developments.

Reporters were also increasingly subject to repression and intimidation by the ROK government. Although Rhee claimed to be a supporter of the free press, he maintained that good correspondents had to be strongly anti-communist.⁵⁴ He interpreted criticism as an attack on the wider cause of anti-communism and believed it necessary to take all steps necessary to silence correspondents who did not fall into line. In at least one case, Rhee had a difficult magazine correspondent removed from South Korea after he published several stories critical of the regime.⁵⁵ More often, correspondents were subject to intimidation by national and military police. In April 1954, Korean police came to visit AP's office to ensure they were writing "good stories" about the National Assembly elections.⁵⁶ In the summer of 1953, the ROK government organized public demonstrations against the armistice negotiations, including one incident where 150 schoolgirls were brought to the Seoul press billets to aggressively chant and sing in front of the foreign correspondents. *Life* correspondent Donald Wilson wrote that although he felt pity for the girls and knew they were being manipulated by their government, he felt he had no choice but to report on the event.⁵⁷

The ROK government's influence over the foreign press was a major concern for correspondents as South Korea transitioned back to peacetime. After the armistice, American reporters continued to receive accreditation from the United Nations Command, granting them not only significant logistical and administrative support, but also immunity from South Korean censorship. Since most American journalists in South Korea believed that the ROK would censor anything critical or unfavorable to Rhee and his government if given the opportunity, they quietly lobbied for the UN to maintain its censorship apparatus in South Korea.⁵⁸ But they could not indefinitely postpone the end of the censorship system. In April 1954, an editorial in *Editor and Publisher* attacked military censorship in South Korea following a tip-off from someone who AP correspondents believed was working for the Rhee government.⁵⁹ The United Nations Command gradually began winding down its press operations until the US Secretary of Defense Charles E. Wilson ordered the end of military censorship in South Korea in November 1954. The announcement came

just days after the *Times*' James Reston wrote that American correspondents in South Korea had been threatened with expulsion by the ROK government if they printed stories embarrassing to it.⁶⁰

The confrontational relationship between journalists and the ROK government was one of several factors that had turned correspondents deeply hostile to Rhee over the course of the Korean War. According to *Time* editor John Osborne, in January 1953 the Seoul press corps habitually referred to Rhee as "that bastard."⁶¹ Osborne speculated that Rhee was particularly disturbing to the liberal sensibilities of American correspondents and the diplomats they relied on for stories because of his perception of the Cold War as an all-out, decisive conflict. This not only reduced the chances of the Western and communist blocs finding some kind of compromise, but also greatly undermined US credibility overseas. In an article for *Harper's* magazine, *Time*'s Frank Gibney argued that Rhee was a reminder of the US failure to ensure "real democracy" in the non-communist world.⁶² In his view, Rhee's authoritarian tactics did more to damage the cause of the United States than the expansion of the Soviet military.

However, Gibney accepted that Rhee's authoritarianism was going to be a fixture of South Korean politics for the foreseeable future:

In Syngman Rhee's case, we must recognize that this believing democrat who rules as an autocrat is a passing—and possibly a necessary—phenomenon in the history of new modern states. He may be succeeded by despotism: or he may give way to a progressively more relaxed and democratic government ... at the best, the United States can recreate a climate in which forces for good government can grow—the only abiding solution to a stable Korean-American relationship. The maddening thing for Americans is that the good and the stable in any country must do their own growing—and the growth is never swift.

A similar conclusion was reached by *Time*'s Dwight Martin in a front cover feature on Rhee for its March 9, 1953 edition.⁶³ Martin argued that South Korea's political stability was due, in almost every respect, to the dominance of Rhee within the South Korean political system. In an interview with South Korean journalist Paik Chung Muk, Martin revealed how even the intellectuals who had once castigated Rhee for his authoritarianism now accepted that he was a necessary step on the path of development. Martin recounted how Muk had told him how he had once believed in the need for democratic socialism, but had since returned to "solid ground":

“Many of my former friends are now with the Communists in the north. I almost went with them. Now I know why they—and very nearly myself—were wrong. It is the same reason so many of you, the Americans, are wrong about us. You want, and we wanted, too much too quickly. Now I know and my friends know that our crime was impatience. Some people turn this around and call it a lack of trust. But it was not that. It was impatience, a grinding desire to achieve our hearts’ desires overnight.” ... “I have talked with more Americans in the last two years than I thought I would see in my lifetime. Now I know that your greatest crime, in terms of political expectations from us, is impatience. You want too much too quickly. Every time I meet a foreigner, the first question I am usually asked is something about freedom of speech, or freedom of the press. At first I used to try and explain that, compared with some of my friends who went north, the answer was definitely yes. Now, when I hear these questions, I would like to slap these people’s stupid faces ... Freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of this, freedom of that. Here in Korea, now, such questions are idiotic. Freedom, my friend, is a very relative thing. Now we have a little—more than the Communists, but still not much. But we have enough to start with. Meantime, don’t push us too hard, don’t ask too much too soon.” Paik added: “You will be here for a long time. You will see.”

In a revival of the fatalistic narrative that had emerged during the occupation era, these correspondents asserted that too much was being expected of the South Korean people—Koreans were simply too primitive to build a fully functioning democracy and the United States could do little to improve the situation. As long as the Rhee regime avoided a descent into the totalitarianism of its northern neighbor, the United States would have to live with it.

One of the greatest contrasts with the pre-Korean War era was the decline in coverage of South Korea in the few remaining leftist press outlets.⁶⁴ Rhee’s brand of independent-minded anti-communist nationalism did not fit into any standard left-wing framework for interpreting the Cold War. Contrary to communist propaganda, Rhee was clearly not an American puppet; neither was he a traditional dictator simply using fear to keep the Korean population under control. Rhee was supported by a significant portion of the Korean population and, in some ways, represented exactly the kind of pro-Western Third World nationalism that many on the Left had argued the United States needed to encourage as the most plausible alternative to communism. With the Left increasingly fixated on leftist anti-colonial struggles in the Third World, Rhee’s rightist post-colonial regime was quietly forgotten.

CONCLUSION

The year 1954 marked the high-water mark of American perceptions of the Rhee regime. Rhee's unpredictable diplomatic strategy was exceptionally successful in keeping the ROK's anti-communism in the public eye and reinforcing Rhee's reputation as an important, if overzealous, Cold War ally. However, Rhee's appeal to the American public was time limited. With every year that passed, the idea of a major confrontation between the communist world and the West looked less and less likely or desirable. As popular support for rollback faded, the Rhee regime looked increasingly like a relic from an antiquated political era.

The dearth of coverage of Rhee's constitutional reforms in 1954 confirmed that virtually all the structural and ideological impediments to reporting on South Korean authoritarianism had continued, and even expanded, through the course of the Korean War. Press coverage continued to be dominated by superficial and compliant press agency reporting. The attention of the press shifted to new areas of confrontation. Even liberal reporters began to doubt the suitability of their own ideals in the Korean context:

The urge to introduce democracy is almost a moral compulsion for Americans: and where it has been introduced, Americans are quick to observe and make their moral judgments. This is the great difficulty in our relationship with Syngman Rhee. Helped by his mastery of American slogans, he has become virtually an American to many people in the United States, and his acts are judged almost the way we would judge those of a contemporary American politician.⁶⁵

For the rest of the 1950s, these standards were rarely applied to the Syngman Rhee regime. While a few liberal newspapers occasionally criticized the Rhee regime for its political corruption and repressiveness, the issue of authoritarianism gained little traction elsewhere.⁶⁶ The *Chicago Daily News'* Keyes Beech remained, in the words of one Korean-American journalist, the lone voice that "repeatedly warned the American people of the explosive undercurrents of the Korean political situation."⁶⁷

In March 1960, the *New York Times* welcomed the start of Rhee's fourth term as president with an editorial which reminded readers that he was one of the "most determined anti-Communist leaders in the Far East" who commands "the overwhelming support of his country," in spite of evidence of widespread vote rigging and election violence.⁶⁸ However, the

regime could not suppress the growing anger within South Korea. After vice-presidential candidate Chang Myon accused the regime of falsifying the results of the vice-presidential elections, tens of thousands of students took to the streets to demand major democratic reforms, prompting a violent crackdown by the ROK government. As the last remnants of his political support in the ROK and the United States evaporated, Rhee finally ran out of options. On April 26, he resigned and once again returned to exile in the United States. However, his authoritarian legacy could not be so easily dismissed. Just nine months after Rhee's overthrow, the democratic government of Chang Myon was overthrown in a military coup by the ROKA.⁶⁹ For almost 30 more years, South Korea languished under authoritarian military rule.

NOTES

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3. Casey, *Selling the Korean War: Propaganda, Politics, and Public Opinion in the United States, 1950–1953*, 352–4.
4. Eddleman memo, 1 June 1953, *FRUS* 1952–1954, 15 (1), 1126–8.
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8. Draft of Eisenhower to Dulles, 31 July 1953, Box 1, Anne Whitman Diary Series, Dwight D. Eisenhower Papers (Ann Whitman File), Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library.
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13. For more on Eisenhower and rollback, see Robert R. Bowie and Richard H. Immerman, *Waging Peace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 76–7.
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15. Rhee to Oliver, 25 February 1954, The Korean Pacific Press, Public Relations, Syngman Rhee Papers, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars.
16. Rhee to Van Fleet, 16 April 1953, Box 77, James Van Fleet Papers, George C. Marshall Foundation.
17. Rhee to Van Fleet, 28 December 1953, Box 77, James Van Fleet Papers, George C. Marshall Foundation.
18. James Van Fleet, "25 Divisions for the Cost of One," *Reader's Digest*, February 1954.
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CHAPTER 9

Conclusions

The growing authoritarianism of the political system in South Korea between 1945 and 1954 never became a major controversy in the United States. While much of the literature on journalism in this period asserts that the press never had serious interest in South Korea, this was not always the case. The growth in authoritarianism under both the American occupation regime and the Rhee government was written about and criticized by journalists. However, such criticism never became extensive enough to fundamentally re-shape popular perceptions of the regime or influence American policy. Looking more broadly, this book has identified five major factors which influenced press coverage of South Korean authoritarianism during this period.

PRESS NARRATIVES

Throughout almost the entire period examined in this study, the press framed the situation in South Korea around two major narratives. The first narrative emerged during World War II and the first year of the occupation, and involved negative assessments of the nature and potential of Korean society. Korea was virtually unknown to most Americans when the United States began its occupation of the southern half of the peninsula in 1945. Most journalists accepted the views of American experts who claimed that the Korean people were too primitive and politically backward to rule themselves. Instead, the Koreans needed a period of

trusteeship and foreign tutelage in order to be prepared for self-rule. Many of the journalists who passed through Seoul in the first decade after World War II were inculcated with similar racial and social prejudices regarding Korean backwardness and the need for American paternal help.

Assumptions about Korean backwardness played a key role in the emergence of a deeply fatalistic narrative about Korea's future prospects. During the early occupation period, few Americans could see a way forward for Korea as a functional independent nation. In late 1947, this fatalistic narrative began to shift. While liberals became ever more despondent about the division of Korea into two ideologically hostile states, the anti-communist Right saw the rise to power of Syngman Rhee as a significant victory for the United States in the struggle against Soviet expansionism.

During the Korean War, a second major narrative emerged, framed around the Cold War nature of the conflict. The North Korean invasion of the ROK was widely interpreted as a Soviet-orchestrated challenge to the West. After surviving the first months of the conflict intact, the ROK became a symbol of resilience to communist militarism. However, the perception that the Korean War was primarily a Cold War struggle relegated South Korea's internal political affairs to marginal status. Although the war was ostensibly fought in defense of freedom, the growing authoritarianism of the South Korean government was considered an issue of concern to the United States only to the extent that it threatened US strategic interests. As Murray Schumach wrote in relation to the growing dispute between the Rhee regime and the National Assembly in May 1951: "More important for Americans than the possibility that the bickering may lead to political crisis is the danger that it may create disharmony in the South Korean Army and thereby lessen the military strength of the United Nations in Korea."¹ When the war ended, this Cold War narrative remained largely in place. On the few occasions when the ROK's authoritarianism was discussed, journalists revived the fatalistic perspective of the occupation era—the Korean people were simply not ready for democracy.

Other aspects of press coverage also served to reinforce these press narratives. One key issue was the problem of complexity. During the occupation period, the dynamics of the Korea story were extremely difficult to explain to readers. The press inevitably framed the story in a simplistic way so that readers stood a chance of understanding the basic features of the situation. This problem was especially acute because of the inherently fleeting nature of press coverage. The attention of the press often shifted

from one crisis to another in rapid succession. Readers had little chance of developing a deeper understanding of events and, instead, relied on the broader press narrative to frame new developments.

PRESS LIMITATIONS

The American press corps based in South Korea was small and deferential to authority. Only three press agency reporters and one newspaper reporter were permanently based in the country between 1945 and 1950. Although the number of American reporters greatly increased after the onset of the Korean War, little changed in terms of reporting on South Korean affairs. Most Seoul-based reporters were heavily influenced and constrained by the ethic of objectivity. By treating government sources as the main source of legitimate news, journalists became conduits for official briefings, reports and statements.

By far the most insightful journalism was produced by visiting newspaper correspondents who had both a skeptical approach to authority, and the freedom to report and write about what they saw. Reporters such as Gordon Walker, Mark Gayn, Keyes Beech, Walter Sullivan, George Barrett and Henry S. Hayward came from dissimilar backgrounds and possessed diverse levels of education, journalistic experience, knowledge of Asia and professional status, yet they all shared a concern for and curiosity about the indirect social impacts of US foreign policy. Crucially, they also all worked for the handful of newspaper outlets which valued independent and interpretative analysis.

Unfortunately, none of these reporters, bar perhaps Walter Sullivan, had enough status to make a significant impact back home. Only those with the most prestigious bylines could be sure of a sensational reaction to a major story. A clear instance of this was Homer Bigart's criticism of the occupation in September 1945, which helped prompt a direct intervention from the White House. Few prominent journalists visited South Korea before the onset of the Korean War and the big names who travelled to Korea in the summer of 1950—including Bigart, Marguerite Higgins, Hal Boyle and Don Whitehead—did not stay for more than a few months.

Even if these prominent reporters had made more regular visits to South Korea, the internal political situation was not a story that could be covered quickly. Investigations of police repression and political corruption required slow and methodical reporting, as well as supportive editors

willing to give their writers license to cover difficult and controversial topics. This kind of journalism was all too rare in the decade after World War II, and even rarer in Korea—only a handful of American reporters, including Mark Gayn in 1946 and *Life*'s Margaret Bourke-White in 1952, spent a lengthy period of time focused entirely on investigating conditions in the country.

MILITARY INFLUENCE

During the occupation of Korea, American military officials wielded tremendous influence over journalists. General John Hodge used his powers as commander of the occupation government to keep press agency reporters based in South Korea “on message” and to prevent critical newspaper journalists visiting from Japan and the United States. In Tokyo, General Douglas MacArthur isolated liberal and leftist newspaper and magazine correspondents suspected of communist leanings. American newspapers came under pressure from authorities in both Seoul and Tokyo to rein in, or even to let go of, correspondents critical of US policy.

The US military played a very different role in the Korean War. With no direct stake in public perceptions of the ROK regime, the military generally avoided interfering in political reporting. Instead, the military's primary contribution to coverage of the ROK during the Korean War was shaping perceptions of South Korea's armed forces. During the early stages of the war, US military officials contributed a great deal to the negativity surrounding the ROKA's collapse. After some limited attempts to salvage the ROKA's reputation in the spring of 1951, General James Van Fleet introduced a sweeping reform program that re-established the ROKA as a modern and effective fighting force. Van Fleet played a crucial role in promoting these new capabilities in the United States and, in doing so, helped cement a new narrative for the ROK as a strong military ally in the Cold War.

THE RHEE REGIME'S INFLUENCE

One of the most intriguing figures in the history of this period was South Korea's leader and first president, Syngman Rhee. With a Ph.D. from Princeton and 40 years of experience living in the United States, Rhee was in some ways almost as American as he was South Korean. He consistently believed that American public opinion could be harnessed in his struggles

to win the support of the United States for South Korean independence and reunification with the north. In the years after World War II, his close relationship with US press adviser Robert T. Oliver led to an energetic lobbying campaign which helped establish Rhee as virtually the only Korean political figure known to anyone in the United States.

The regime's great public relations breakthrough came after the onset of the Korean War. The survival of the ROK through the devastation of the first months of the war helped to convince many skeptics that the ROK was a viable state. Rhee and his press advisers took full advantage of the journalistic doors that suddenly opened to them in both South Korea and the United States. Although the regime made some significant mistakes in the first weeks of the 1952 election crisis, it successfully contrived a face-saving narrative to preserve its legitimacy in the eyes of the American press. After 1952, the Rhee government's hardline position against peace talks with the communists helped Rhee to establish an image as a martyr to the anti-communist cause amongst a significant number of Americans.

US POLITICAL INFLUENCE

Before the Korean War, South Korea received only sporadic attention from the Truman administration. While Truman battled with Congress to fund a series of aid bills to Korea in 1949 and 1950, he never played a major role in the Korea policy debate. The lack of direct attention from the executive branch meant that Korea rarely made an impression on the political agenda in Washington and gave political reporters little incentive to investigate the story further.

After the onset of the Korean War, the situation in Korea became the dominant political story in the United States. Yet, Truman was careful to frame the conflict as a Cold War struggle and made only limited efforts to praise, or even acknowledge, the ROK as an independent actor in the crisis. It was not until the advent of the Eisenhower administration and the pursuit of an armistice agreement that the political relationship between the United States and the ROK became a major feature of press coverage. In 1953 and 1954, almost all coverage of the ROK was seen through the prism of top level interactions between President Eisenhower or other senior administration officials and Syngman Rhee.

THE PROBLEM OF AUTHORITARIANISM

It is clear from this analysis that previous attempts to explain the poor coverage of South Korea as a straightforward consequence of anti-Korean prejudice or a Cold War mindset have missed the complex ways in which these frameworks influenced journalists and the structures in which they operated.² Prejudice against Koreans was certainly an important and insidious factor in the way Americans thought about South Korea, but its impact was also greatly exacerbated by the routines of American journalism. Pack journalism and the pursuit of “objectivity” ensured that the vast majority of journalists never challenged the racialized assumptions of American policy-makers. While the Cold War added to the pressure on journalists to be seen as supporting US foreign policy, the military’s suppression of critical journalism reflected an innate institutional hostility to criticism as much as a fear of communism.

A small number of journalists tried to break through these institutional and ideological constraints and draw attention to the growing problem of authoritarianism in South Korea. Although they operated in very different ways, they all exemplified the ideal of watchdog journalism. However, these efforts were overwhelmed by the broader cultural and political narratives which regarded Koreans as too politically immature and too imperiled by the threat of communism to manage a functioning liberal democracy.

The authoritarianism issue came to prominence only in those moments when other political forces aligned behind it. This occurred primarily in the period 1949–1950, when the policy of American aid for the Rhee regime was challenged by Republicans in Congress. As South Korea became increasingly politicized, criticisms of the authoritarian nature of the regime in the press became more prominent, most notably through Walter Sullivan’s articles in the *New York Times*. However, the authoritarianism issue did not become central to the debate over American support for the regime as long as Rhee maintained his fidelity to the country’s constitutional order. The United States put heavy pressure on Rhee in 1950 to ensure that he kept to the schedule of elections proscribed by the constitution. During the constitutional crisis two years later, in the midst of the Korean War, the United States failed to maintain this pressure and helped Rhee deliver a deathblow to South Korean democracy. If there had been no war, and thus no overarching Cold War narrative for the press, it seems likely that a much greater controversy would have erupted over Rhee’s gross violation of constitutional order.

This book thus joins a growing body of literature which argues that the Korean War was a significant moment of change in world history. While Robert Jervis has suggested that the Korean War defined the basic parameters for the American Cold War—including high defense budgets, the globalization of American military commitments and the militarization of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization—the war also had a crucial impact on the way the United States perceived authoritarianism in its allies.³ After 1950, interest in the status of South Korean democracy faded as concerns about the country's political and military stability became predominant. This remained the case even after the war had ended. Arguably, the Korean War marked a “Rubicon moment” when the American political elite accepted that the United States had to put its full support behind authoritarian regimes as part of its broader Cold War strategy.⁴

The book has also demonstrated how, even in the wake of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, the American press expressed very limited interest in what would now be described as human rights abuses in South Korea. This raises intriguing questions as to how and when these issues began to be taken more seriously. By the 1970s, human rights issues had become a dominant framework for American coverage of South Korea.⁵ How this transition occurred is a topic that deserves more scholarly attention.

The study of this transition may also shed light on the Korean War's long-term legacy in the United States. Until the 1990s, the Korean War was widely regarded as the “forgotten war” in American history.⁶ In contrast to World War II and Vietnam, Korea made little imprint on popular culture or public memory. While, this is often explained in terms of the war's remoteness and ambiguous conclusion, other factors may also have been at play.⁷ In an essay on the American memory of the Korean War, Steven I. Levine argued that Americans have generally struggled to categorize Korea because of how enmeshed the United States was in both the causes and controversies of the war.⁸ The US role in occupying and dividing Korea, as well as American support for a series of authoritarian regimes in the south, has left a bitter legacy in both countries. This book has shown how, in the 1950s, the American press struggled to reconcile this conflict between Americans ideals and American actions in Korea. Rather than making a serious attempt to analyze these problems, the press simply chose to ignore them.

FINAL REFLECTIONS

Through its focus on the production process of press coverage, this book has shown how a variety of structural and contingent factors shaped reporting on the issue of authoritarianism in South Korea. The existence of these contingent factors inevitably raises crucial questions: what would have happened if the press had done more to raise public awareness of the situation in Korea? Could the press have re-shaped the way that the public and policy-makers thought about South Korea? Was a different approach possible?

It certainly seems plausible that the press could have influenced public attitudes towards the Rhee regime, at least amongst the almost 40% of Americans who claimed to have either great or mild interest in news from Korea even before the Korean War.⁹ If the press had put more emphasis on the police state that operated in South Korea both before and after independence, more Americans may have called for a political intervention of some kind. On the other hand, it is not clear exactly what kind of coverage would have galvanized the public in this way. Reports of atrocities during the Korean War only elicited a response from a small number of concerned citizens. Puncturing the complacency of most Americans towards what was going in South Korea would probably have required a vast campaign of exposure by the press. Korean-American journalist K.W. Lee was perhaps right when he wrote that the horrors the Rhee regime inflicted on its citizens could have been avoided if the American press had had ten Keyes Beeches doing perceptive and forthright reporting.¹⁰

However, such arguments rely on inherently unknowable counterfactuals. It is not clear whether US policy-makers could have made different choices, or whether such choices would have led to a better outcome for South Korea. Allen Lightner, the *chargé d'affaires* in South Korea during the 1952 constitutional crisis, told an interviewer in 1973 that the United States should have removed Rhee from power:

During those eight years from 1952 to 1960 when Rhee continued to be the strong man of the ROK, we could have had a useful influence over the development of, and the education of, a younger President and other leaders who might have been amenable to some American guidance.... But

Rhee was an autocrat leading the country straight to military dictatorship; whereas under any one of the alternative candidates the ROK might have developed toward a democratic system. This was at a time when they might have been receptive to ideas and help from the American side, which was already providing fantastic amounts of economic assistance.¹¹

Lightner ignored the possibility that ousting Rhee could have led to the destabilization of South Korea or the military simply establishing a new kind of authoritarian government at an earlier stage. Similarly, claims that the United States could have adopted a radically different approach during the occupation period have to be treated with caution. Many of the alternative options available to policy-makers carried a high chance of leading to the establishment of a pro-Soviet authoritarian regime over the entire of the Korean peninsula.

Such options should, however, have at least been discussed. The main argument of this book is that the press did not produce an adequate independent assessment of the basic conditions in South Korea or a full consideration of the range of possible policy approaches. This represented a basic failure of the press to fulfil its duty to scrutinize US foreign policy and hold the US government to account.

* * *

By not learning the lessons of its support for authoritarianism in South Korea, the United States set itself on a long and dark road. In Iran, Indonesia, Chile and Central America, to name just a few of the most egregious examples, despotic governments received American support with limited or erratic pushback from the mainstream press. In the case of Iran, the failure to recognize the extent of popular hatred for the regime left the United States entirely unprepared for the Shah's overthrow in 1979.

While human rights and democracy promotion emerged as more central themes in public discourse after the end of the Cold War, the United States continues to lend its support to authoritarian regimes across the world. Since the September 11 attacks, states participating in the war on terror have regularly been given a free pass on human rights abuses. Much of the American media adapted to this new geopolitical context by reviving a version of the old Cold War narrative, with Islamism rather than communism now posing an existential threat to the West.

But the media ecosystem has also changed since the end of the Cold War. The rise of the internet and the globalization of the media market

have led to a proliferation of alternative news outlets and a marked decline in the fortunes of the traditional media. While the growing diversity of perspectives should be welcomed, these changes are not all positive. Many of the media outlets that have appeared in recent years take little heed of journalistic ethics. In today's polarized political environment, emotive and viciously partisan reporting has become increasingly normalized.

A particularly worrying development has been the emergence of non-Western state-sponsored international broadcasters that inject partisan narratives, often based on false or disingenuous information, into American public discourse. These are then spread through social media networks, where audiences cannot identify their questionable origins. The result, as we have seen with coverage of the conflicts in Ukraine and Syria, has been extraordinary levels of polarization and public distrust of the entire journalism profession.

There is no easy solution to this problem. The globalization of the media is a process that cannot be undone. Neither can too much hope be placed on the idea of "truth" ultimately winning out through sheer journalistic rigor. Most media outlets can no longer afford to maintain large staffs of foreign correspondents or to give reporters the time and resources to report on stories in depth. In many cases, there is simply not enough information for anyone to be exactly sure of what is going on.

If there is to be any resolution to this crisis in American journalism, it must come through the media and its audience fundamentally rethinking their relationship. All journalists make assumptions and express prejudices in the way they write about events. Audiences need to learn to make a critical assessment of these claims and to accept their innately subjective nature. This kind of critical thinking, and consideration of alternative possibilities, could have led to a very different outcome in Korea after World War II. Now, with the world becoming ever more complex and unstable, it is needed more than ever.

NOTES

1. Murray Schumach, "Bickering in Korea Hinders Aim of U.S.," *New York Times*, 12 May 1951.
2. See, for instance, Deane, *The Korean War: 1945–1953*, 23; Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War, Vol. 2: The Roaring of the Cataract, 1947–1950*, 701.
3. Robert Jervis, "The Impact of the Korean War on the Cold War," *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 24, no. 4 (1980), 563–92. See also Masuda

- Hajimu, *Cold War Crucible: The Korean Conflict and the Postwar World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).
4. After the start of the Korean War, the United States greatly strengthened ties with several authoritarian regimes which had previously been diplomatically isolated, including Spain, the Dominican Republic and Nicaragua: Schmitz, *Thank God They're on Our Side: The United States and Right-Wing Dictatorships, 1921–65*, 144–67.
 5. See Chung, “‘The Pictures in Our Heads’: Journalists, Human Rights, and U.S.–South Korean Relations, 1970–1976,” 1137.
 6. The term the “forgotten war” was first used by *U.S. News and World Report* in 1951 and was given greater prominence by Matthew Ridgway’s memoir of the war in the 1960s: “Korea: The ‘Forgotten’ War,” *U.S. News and World Report*, 5 October 1951; Matthew B. Ridgway, *The Korean War* (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1967), 88.
 7. For more on American memory and the Korean War, see Philip West, Suh Ji-moon, and Donald Gregg, *Remembering the Forgotten War: The Korean War Through Literature and Art* (New York: Routledge, 2015); Melinda L. Pash, *In the Shadows of the Greatest Generation: The Americans Who Fought the Korean War* (New York: New York University Press, 2012); Paul M. Edwards, *To Acknowledge a War: The Korean War in American Memory* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2000).
 8. Steven I. Levine, “Some Reflections on the Korean War,” in *Remembering the Forgotten War: The Korean War Through Literature and Art* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 3–4.
 9. An opinion poll in October 1948 showed that 28% of respondents regarded themselves as mildly interested and 10% greatly interested in news of US policy towards Korea: National Opinion Research Center [NORC]. NORC Survey: Foreign Affairs, October 1948 [dataset]. USNORC1948-0161, Version 3. National Opinion Research Center [NORC] [producer]. Cornell University, Ithaca, NY: Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, RoperExpress [distributor], accessed 25 September 2016.
 10. K. W. Lee to the editor, 25 April 1960, Box 24, Chicago Daily News, Field Enterprises Collection, Newberry Library.
 11. E. Allan Lightner, Jr., Oral History by Richard D. McKinzie, 26 October 1973, Harry S. Truman Presidential Library.



Epilogue: Prelude to Vietnam?

When the Korean War ended in 1953, the attention of the world rapidly shifted to the communist insurgency in the French colony of Indochina. After the communists won a major military victory against French forces at Dien Bien Phu, France agreed to partition the largest part of the colony, Vietnam. In a striking parallel to Korea, Vietnam became two separate states, the communist Democratic Republic of Vietnam and the US-backed Republic of Vietnam. Like the ROK, the Republic of Vietnam emerged as an authoritarian state led by a pro-Western nationalist president, Ngo Dinh Diem.

In 1963, the press helped turn Diem's repressive rule into a major scandal in the United States. In a series of dispatches for the *New York Times*, Saigon correspondent David Halberstam revealed the regime's manifold military and political failures. The most sensational stories came in August when Halberstam, working closely with AP reporters Malcolm Browne, Horst Faas and Peter Arnett, as well as UP's Neil Sheehan, detailed the brutal repression of the country's Buddhist minority. The critical coverage of Diem helped to turn the political climate in the United States against the Diem regime, creating the conditions in which President John F. Kennedy felt it necessary for Diem to be replaced with someone more amenable to US goals.¹ Although the exact role of the United States in Diem's removal and murder in November 1963 remains controversial, there is no doubt that the American press—and Halberstam, in particular—played a major role in the way the crisis unfolded.

The proactive response of the American press to the authoritarianism of the Diem regime was a stark contrast to what had occurred in South Korea a decade earlier. Indeed, in terms of the five factors identified in this book, the situation in South Vietnam was almost a complete inversion of that in South Korea. By 1963, the legitimacy and efficacy of the regime in South Vietnam had become vitally important to the execution of the war effort. However, neither the South Vietnamese government nor their American advisers wielded enough direct or indirect influence over the local press corps to get them to toe a pro-Diem line. Instead, the Diem government's relentless campaign to expel or intimidate critical reporters, which even went as far as sending secret police to physically attack a group of them covering the Buddhist protests, produced a major backlash. The American embassy in Saigon further provoked journalistic ire with its excessive secrecy and disingenuous public statements.

Most critical of all, however, was the core narrative of the conflict, as perceived by the group of reporters assigned to report on it. While Korea had clearly been framed as a militarized Cold War "hot war," the situation in Vietnam was much harder to define. Was it an international Cold War conflict, a civil war, or something in between? This ambiguity created a space in which the correspondents covering South Vietnam could challenge certain assumptions and ask difficult questions.

This process was undoubtedly aided by wider changes within the journalism profession. By 1963, all of the correspondents covering Vietnam were under 35. They had begun their working lives as McCarthyism was entering its terminal decline. All too aware of the damage that unsubstantiated accusations had inflicted on a generation of Americans, these younger journalists were committed to verifying news before reporting it.² This new approach to reporting also found favor with a new generation of publishers and editors in the United States—most notably, Arthur Ochs Sulzberger at the *Times* and Wes Gallagher at AP.³

It would be a mistake, however, to place too much emphasis on this generational change. The first journalist to seriously question the capacity of the South Vietnamese government to defeat the communist insurgency was not a young upstart but a veteran correspondent.⁴ In 1961, 16 years after he had caused a scandal with his critical coverage of the first days of the American occupation of Korea, Homer Bigart returned to Asia to cover one last war before retirement. Convinced that the corrupt and incompetent Diem regime stood little chance of long-term survival, however, he opted to return to the United States after just six months. In that

time, however, the Saigon press corps was transformed by his influence. Neil Sheehan reverently referred to Bigart as “the professor” of a very special school of journalism.⁵ His skeptical approach to reporting became the basis for a brave new era in the history of American journalism.

NOTES

1. Gary C. Tallman and Joseph P. McKerns, “‘Press Mess’: David Halberstam, the Buddhist Crisis, and U.S. Policy in Vietnam, 1963,” *Journalism and Communication Monographs* 2, no. 3 (2000), 109–53.
2. James Boylan, “Declarations of Independence,” *Columbia Journalism Review*, November/December 1986.
3. David Halberstam, “Foreward,” in *Breaking News: How the Associated Press Has Covered War, Peace, and Everything Else* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2007), 11.
4. Notable Korea veterans who criticized the Saigon press corps included Marguerite Higgins, Joseph Alsop and, most surprisingly, Keyes Beech: Prochnau, *Once Upon a Distant War*, 268–9.
5. Prochnau, 84–5.

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