

What We Learned From the Korean War

By James Wright

The demilitarized zone dividing the two Koreas, in Paju, about 55 km (34 miles) north of Seoul (Lee Jae Won/Reuters)

This week marks an important anniversary. Sixty years ago, on July 27, 1953, representatives of the United Nations, led by U.S. Army Lt. Gen William Harrison, met their North Korean counterparts in Panmunjom, Korea, to sign an armistice agreement ending the 37-month-long war. Negotiators had been discussing the agreement for nearly 25 of those months in 158 separate meetings.

The document was not a peace treaty. It provided for a truce. The historic occasion had no mark of formality and no sense of finality. The representatives signed the agreement without speaking a single word to each other, and no one offered handshakes. The South Korean representatives refused to sign and did not join in the meeting. There surely was no ceremony comparable to the one on the battleship *Missouri* in Tokyo Bay in September 1945. The *New York Times* reported from the treaty site, "Outside the thin wooden walls there was the mutter of artillery fire - a grim reminder that even as the truce was being signed men were still dying on near-by hills and the fight would continue for twelve more hours."

Americans at home were similarly restrained. There were no celebrations in Times Square--or anywhere else. The *Washington Post* noted, "Washington greeted news of the Korean truce yesterday with a matter-of-fact attitude--quietly, without evident jubilation...." It was peace without a clear victory.

Is Korea still, as it was called then, the Forgotten War? Unfortunately it is. But it shouldn't be. The objectives, the conduct, and the conclusion of that war are significant in too many ways. This anniversary provides an occasion to remember them, and to honor those who served in that war.

Those who fought there have said that, at a heavy cost, they accomplished their objective. This had been described by the United Nations declaration of June 1950 and President Harry Truman's statements at the time when he authorized American troops to participate in the action: securing "a withdrawal of the invading forces to positions north of the 38th parallel."

The 1953 agreement provided that Korea would be divided along that line and specified that there should be a follow-up conference within three months to conclude a comprehensive peace treaty. That conference never convened. Even if permanent peace remains a work in progress, the strong democratic government in South Korea today affirms to those who fought that they did their job.

We have much to learn from the Korean War--and this is relevant as we face decisions about the pending drawdown from Afghanistan. History is not a blueprint or a lesson plan, but it surely does provide a real-life insight into the problems we face. There are stunning examples of the consequences of wars with shifting military goals -- and absent realistic public discussion about the likely means and the costs of achieving these goals. Without these shared commitments and understandings, we should not send men and women to die.

The Korean War veterans who claim that they accomplished what they were sent to do are absolutely correct. This assessment requires a sharply defined assignment focusing on the original goal. In fact the Korean command had accomplished that objective by late September 1950. Those who fought in Korea demonstrated courage and sacrifice that is the equal of any American forces in any war. They did not have a victory parade--at least not until New York City belatedly held one in 1991. In fact their "police action" was not congressionally recognized as a "war" until 1998. Nearly 1.8 million Americans served in Korea from 1950 to 1953, and 36,574 died there.

The UN forces--largely from the U.S.--had some extremely difficult early months in the summer of 1950 with heavy casualties. By August they were defending a last enclave around Pusan, with some even fearing the need for a full withdrawal. Finally sufficient forces arrived that enabled General Douglas MacArthur to order a landing at Inchon on September 1950. This fractured the already-stretched North Korean supply line. Within days the North Korean invaders were routed and UN troops had recaptured Seoul.

On September 29, MacArthur accompanied Republic of Korea (South Korea) President Syngman Rhee back into the National Assembly Hall in Seoul. By the end of September, UN forces were moving into North Korea. Country singer Jimmie Osborne wrote and recorded a song on October 2, "Thank God for Victory in Korea."

Despite all of the euphoria of an objective reached, this had not been an easy victory. In three months 8,182 American troops were killed in Korea. To underline the magnitude of this sacrifice, that number is nearly 1,400 more than have been killed in Iraq and Afghanistan in the last 12 years.

This costly victory in three months only previewed the compounded tragedy that followed. General MacArthur insisted that the total defeat of North Korea was certain and the peninsula could be reunified, as the WWII Russian-United States agreement for a "temporary" division had promised. Confident of an easy victory, the American Joint Chiefs and the Truman administration urged the United Nations to expand the war goal to accomplish the reunification of Korea. The UN did.

Some worried in October 1950 about Chinese statements that they would enter the war if the UN forces approached their border on the Yalu River. Ignoring his own intelligence reports of Chinese troop movements and consumed with his own confidence, MacArthur assured Washington that China would not enter the war -- and if they did he was certain they did not have the means to mount a significant threat. One of his top generals dismissed them as Chinese "laundrymen." MacArthur boasted that he would bring "the boys home by Christmas."

The only American boys who got home for Christmas in 1950 came on hospital ships or in coffins. The Chinese entered the war as they had promised they would, and they did it in far greater numbers and with greater military capacity than MacArthur had predicted. By late November the First Marine Division faced annihilation at the Chosin Reservoir and fought their way out in what some have described as one of the great military actions of American history.

The Army's 31st Regimental Combat Team was nearly annihilated northeast of the reservoir. And units of the 8th Army that had advanced far to the north on the western side of the peninsula retreated under heavy Chinese assault. South Korean general Sun Yup Paik said the "God of Death himself hovered" over them. Correspondent Homer Bigart reported that it was "the worst licking Americans had suffered since Bataan." The largely American UN force was pushed back south of the 38th parallel and 5,964 Americans died in November and December 1950.

The war would continue for 30 more months, pushing and pulling a little north and a little south of the 38th parallel. And nearly 22,000 more Americans would die from 1951 to 1953.

In the last months before the 1953 truce, the U.S. Army fought the Chinese for Pork Chop Hill in a brutal battle. Everyone knew the treaty was coming but the fight continued over a piece of real estate whose ownership would finally be resolved at the Panmunjom talks rather than on the battlefield. In July 1953, as all recognized the agreement was near conclusion, 1160 more Americans died. As some of the troops in Korea described it, they "died for a tie."

Thirty Americans died on July 27th. A recent special *VFW* publication described the last American killed that day, a young Marine from Illinois who stepped on a land mine and died the next morning.

As we note the anniversary of the end of this war, we need to do two things: resolve that it is long past time to honor those who served and sacrificed in this brutal war, a war that many of their fellow citizens ignored. We might also pause now to reflect on the nature and consequences of this war. We can learn much from the Korean War experience.

Korea established a pattern that has been unfortunately followed in American wars in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan. These are wars without declaration and without the political consensus and the resolve to meet specific and changing goals. They are improvisational wars. They are dangerous.

The wars of the last 63 years, ranging from Korea to Vietnam to Afghanistan to Iraq (but excepting Operation Desert Storm, which is an outlier from this pattern) have been marked by:

- Inconsistent or unclear military goals with no congressional declaration of war.
- Early presumptions on the part of the civilian leadership and some top military officials that this would be an easy operation. An exaggerated view of American military strength, a dismissal of the ability of the opposing forces, and little recognition of the need for innovation.
- Military action that, except during the first year in Korea, largely lacked geographical objectives of seize and hold.
- Military action with restricted rules of engagement and political constraints on the use of a full arsenal of firepower.
- Military action against enemy forces that have sanctuaries which are largely off-limits.
- Military action that is rhetorically in defense of democracy--ignoring the reality of the undemocratic nature of regimes in Seoul, Saigon, Baghdad, and Kabul.

- With the exception of some of the South Korean and South Vietnamese military units, these have been wars with in-country allies that were not dependable.
- Military action that civilian leaders modulate, often clumsily, between domestic political reassurance and international muscle-flexing. Downplaying the scale of deployment and length of commitment for the domestic audience and threatening expansion of these for the international community.
- Wars fought by increasingly less representative sectors of American society, which further encourages most Americans to pay little attention to the details of these encounters.
- Military action that is costly in lives and treasure and yet does not enjoy the support that wars require in a democracy.

Some of the restraints and restrictions on the conduct of these wars have been politically and even morally necessary. But it is neither politically nor morally defensible to send the young to war without a public consensus that the goals are understood and essential, and the restraints and the costs are acceptable.

On June 27, some veterans of the Korean War and their survivors will gather at the Korean War Veterans Memorial on the Mall. This is a powerful memorial that every American needs to visit. And it is a memorial that lacks a record of the names of the 36,574 Americans who died in Korea.

The veterans of the Korean War want those comrades they still mourn to be recorded as individuals who served and who sacrificed when their nation asked them to. Retired U.S. Army Colonel William Weber, the Chair of the Korean War Veterans Memorial Foundation, possesses three Purple Hearts and two prosthetic limbs from his service in Korea. He recently wrote to Speaker John Boehner, "The surviving comrades of the 36,000+ fallen have been ravaged by time and illness and their numbers dwindle, but they cry out in their last plea to their countrymen and the Congress to honor their fallen comrades by recording their names for posterity."

This recognition needs to be considered as honoring the implicit contract that a nation presents to those who serve. Those who died on our behalf and at our request in Korea deserve a public accounting and a permanent record equivalent to that powerful reminder provided across the National Mall to those who fell in Vietnam. Wars marked by unknown casualties mourned quietly by anonymous families and largely unnoticed by a preoccupied nation -- forgotten wars -- are profoundly dangerous.

In addition to remembering those who served, we need to reflect on the lessons of Korea. In fact it is three other wars with over 65,000 dead -- and counting -- past the time for us to do this. And it is tragically past time to quit repeating the experience while expecting a different outcome.

If the agreement signed at Panmunjom 60 years ago remains temporary and tentative, it nonetheless ended a cruel war. As President Dwight Eisenhower said when announcing the agreement, the conference table had worked: he hoped that "all nations may come to see the wisdom of composing differences in this fashion before, rather than after, there is resort to brutal and futile battle."