

News of War in a Distant Land: The News Media and the Korean War

Andrew Fraser

University of Windsor

The University of Detroit Mercy School of Law

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the arduous saga of the news reporters who covered the Korean War. The war was often presented to American audiences in terms that were generally uncritical of American actions. This can partly be traced to the fact that the onerous conditions in the field caused reporters to rely heavily on information from government sources. Beyond this, attitudes on the home front were being shaped by fears brought on by an intensifying Cold War and audiences desired a view of an America that was standing firm against the communist world. It is often pondered what influence the news media exerts over public opinion, however sometimes the most important question of all is what impact opinion on the home front exerts on the journalist.

In spite of its reputation as a war that inspires only the faintest of memories in the modern popular consciousness, the Korean War occupies a unique place in the expansive canvas of post-war international relations. It was the first protracted military conflict to be fought in the tense atmosphere of the Cold War. It was a war where the western world made a critical decision, to draw a line when faced with an advancing communist army. As the war raged on, the menacing specter of a broader global conflict between nuclear powers lurked ominously in the background. The news media in the United States presented the war to the public in a frame that was often uncritical of American actions, both at the military and the political levels. Setbacks were frequently downplayed, progress was often emphasized and official information, even when it was of questionable veracity, was frequently accepted in the American press unchallenged.

Two principal factors shaped the contours of this frame. First, covering the war was fraught with massive logistical challenges and journalists came to rely on American military and government sources for news because acquiring information otherwise was often difficult. Second, and more importantly, much of the reporting reflected the prevailing political culture and audience expectations in the United States. The public was immersed in a climate of anxiety. There was a general feeling that the United States was threatened by a seemingly monolithic communist adversary. Many on the home front desired a portrait of a confident and robust America challenging the malicious ambitions of the communist enemy. This was reflected strongly in the coverage of the Korean War in the American news media. There was frequently little criticism of American policies or actions. Reporters who offered an assertively dissenting opinion often found that there was only limited tolerance for their views. Ultimately, these two factors shaped the style of war reporting in the United States that cast an often uncritical eye on Washington's war against the communist enemy.

On the grey and rainy morning of June 25, 1950, the North Korean army thundered across the 38th Parallel in a lightning assault that stunned much of the world.¹ When the peninsula's previous ruler, Japan, was vanquished in 1945, Korea was placed under the stewardship of a four nation trusteeship. The Soviet Union dominated the North while the United States took control in the South. They installed pliant regimes in their respective halves of the peninsula. Korea, however, had long faded as a major concern by the time war broke out. In fact, South Korea was considered so marginal in

¹ Lisle A. Rose, *The Cold War Comes to Main Street: America in 1950*, (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1998), p.166

American geo-strategic thinking that in January of 1950, it had not even been listed among the states protected by the American defensive perimeter in Asia.²

The invasion took place at a time when the Cold War was intensifying. The previous year, the Soviet Union had tested the atomic bomb, ending the American monopoly over the world's most terrifying weapon. Political rhetoric across the widening Cold War divide was escalating. However, the American administration saw Europe, not Asia, and most especially not Korea, as the likely flashpoint for a major confrontation with the communist world. Some in the administration saw Korea as expendable and were prepared to let the south fall into the hands of communist North Korea. For President Harry Truman, however, there could be no compromise. In the 1930s, he reasoned, the world had backed down in the face of Nazi Germany's drive for territory and power, this time the free world would draw a line.³ The American intervention would eventually take the form of a "limited war" carried out under the auspices of the United Nations, striving to counter North Korean aggression, while at the same time avoiding a larger global conflagration.

When the invasion began, the only western reporters on the scene were a handful of correspondents in Seoul. The first American journalist to report on the invasion was *United Press* correspondent Jack James, who came upon the most important scoop of his career in a chance conversation with a nervous American military officer in Seoul.⁴ James cabled an urgent message to Tokyo reporting the invasion. When a reporter at the

² Joseph C. Goulden, *Korea: The Untold Story of the War*, (New York: The New York Times Book Co., 1982), p.XX

³ Arthur Krock, "President Takes Chief Role in Determining US Course", *The New York Times*, June 28, 1950, p.1

⁴ Edward Horrell, *Reporting the Forgotten War: Military-Press Relations in Korea, 1950-1954*, (Doctoral Dissertation, University of Kentucky, 2002), p.11

Washington bureau of *The United Press* telephoned the Pentagon and asked for a comment on the unfolding situation they found that the senior press officer on duty was unaware of the invasion. The first American newspaper accounts of the attack appeared on June 25. They reflected the confusion and uncertainty that characterized the early phase of the war. *The New York Times* and *The Boston Daily Globe* initially published American wire service reports from the region that reported fighting, but claimed that the invasion had been ground to a halt.⁵

As the fighting raged, the North Korean military made astounding gains. They conquered Seoul and chased the South Korean army down the peninsula. Within two days, correspondents were arriving in Korea to cover the war. The situation was in such a state of flux that the American military contingent in Korea lacked the time and the resources to enforce a code of censorship. In an initial attempt at media management American military officials took a recently arrived group of correspondents on a visit to the town of Suwon, near the front line. In an oversight that hints at the confusion that reigned behind the allied lines only a single American officer mentioned to both the reporters and the enlisted men who accompanied them that the town was in danger of being overrun. They quickly fled for their lives as the North Korean army stormed the town.⁶ *New York Herald Tribune* correspondent Marguerite Higgins later claimed that it was the most appalling act of disorganization she had ever seen.⁷

A number of remarkable reports from American field correspondents that were highly critical of the unfolding situation emerged in the early stages of the conflict. One

⁵ *The New York Times, The Associated Press*, "Virtually Stopped US Aides Say", June 25, 1950, p.1

⁶ Phillip Knightley, *The First Casualty: From Crimea to Vietnam, the War Correspondent as Hero, Propagandist, and Myth Maker*, (New York and London: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1975), p.336

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.338

of the most extraordinary involved *New York Times* correspondent Burton Crane. Shortly after the fall of Seoul he found himself in the middle of a desperate retreat by the South Korean military. Their commanders blew up a bridge as hundreds of soldiers, along with Crane himself, were still on it. Crane reported that he had almost finished crossing the bridge when the explosive charges detonated. A truck packed with South Korean soldiers that was immediately behind him absorbed the full force of the blast, killing everyone on board. Crane wrote an account of the incident, noting that South Korean commanders had prematurely dynamited a series of bridges, killing hundreds of their own soldiers and leaving two South Korean divisions on the other side of the river to face certain annihilation at the hands of the advancing North Koreans.⁸

The tragedy was also chronicled in *Time* and *The New York Herald Tribune*. In his article, Crane cynically commented that “the Korean war situation is, to use a conveniently evasive military term, fluid, which means that nobody knows much about anything.”⁹ It was an implicit criticism of the American Ambassador to South Korea and other senior American officials in Korea whom, when asked by Crane, characterized the situation on the peninsula as “fluid”.¹⁰ When newly-deployed American ground forces went into action for the first time against the North Korean military in early July, suffering considerable losses, a handful of American correspondents wrote of “whipped and frightened” American soldiers retreating from the front line.¹¹ In her accounts of American forces suffering battlefield defeats at the hands of the North Koreans, Marguerite Higgins wrote of “a series of seemingly endless retreats” by the American

⁸ Burton Crane, “South Koreans Kill Own Troops by Destroying Bridge Too Soon”, *The New York Times*, June 29, 1950, p.3

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Knightley, *The First Casualty*, p.337

forces.¹² She reported on the gallantry of many enlisted soldiers and junior officers, but conveyed the hopelessness of the predicament they found themselves in, outnumbered and outgunned by the North Koreans. *The New York Times* offered a more sedate interpretation of such engagements, “United States troops fighting their first major engagement in the Korean War successfully stood off the initial attacks of massive tank-led North Korean force.”¹³ Moreover, “(t)he thinly manned defense line held in fierce fighting...the Americans fought for seven hours before running out of ammunition and were compelled to destroy their guns and evacuate.”¹⁴

Although the critical reports written by the likes of Higgins and Crane represented some of the most dramatic eye witness accounts of the fighting, the tone and content of their reporting ran against the preponderance of the emerging reportage on the war. Already, a dominant frame in the American news media’s coverage of the Korean War was taking shape. The majority opinion was far less critical than the dissenting point of view. As would be expected given the times, the war was portrayed in stark “us” against “them” terms. The “reds” were cast as an enemy who at times was presented as being only marginally human.

In the early period of the war, as South Korean and American forces fell back in the face a devastating onslaught, many articles carried in major American newspapers spoke of the “rallying” South Korean army and repeatedly alluded to how the advancing North Koreans had been virtually halted by the intervention of the American military.¹⁵

¹² Marguerite Higgins, *War in Korea: The Report of a Woman Combat Correspondent*, (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company Inc., 1951), p.84

¹³ Lesley Parrott, “US Troops Check North Koreans in Fierce Battle South of Suwon; Bar Break Despite Tank Attack”, *The New York Times*, July 6, 1950, p.1

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.1

¹⁵ *The New York Times, The United Press*, “South Korean Forces Rally After Seoul and Inchon Fall”, June

Reports generally downplayed American and South Korean casualties, referring instead to massive losses on the North Korean side. During the summer of 1950, when American forces were under siege there was often a reassuring emphasis on the American reinforcements that would soon be joining the battle.

The more critical reports at times seemed lost in a larger body of articles that stressed progress on the part of the American war effort, even at times when there was little or no progress to speak of. The near death experience on the bridge over the Han River that suggested significant disorganization in the allied response to the invasion, ran on page 3, alongside an article that enthusiastically trumpeted the success of the American air force in trouncing their communist adversaries in the skies over Korea.¹⁶

Nonetheless there were critical reports that vividly chronicled setbacks, such as a remarkable piece in *The New York Times*, which quoted an unnamed American General as saying in reference to a failed American attempt to hold the town of Chinju, “the Reds beat the beat the Hell out of us”.¹⁷ Other reportage, notably by Homer Biggart raised serious questions about the quality of American equipment. In mid-July, reporter Richard Johnson commented in *The New York Times*, “(i)n the last few bloody days of fighting the bravado and self-assurance have given way to the sober realization that at best the United States troops face a long and costly campaign to drive the invaders from South Korea and that at worst, we are facing a military disaster in which the American

29, 1950, p.1 and *The New York Times*, “Force Flown In, Expected to Hold Bridgeheads Across the Kun River”, July 1, 1950, p.1 and Lesley Parrott, “Reds Pushed Back”, *The New York Times*, July 5, 1950, p.1

¹⁶ *The New York Times*, “US Jet Pilots Describe ‘Kills’ in Korean Action; Russian Made Planes Downed Over Kimbo Field”, June 29, 1950, p.3

¹⁷ W.H. Lawrence, “General at Chinju Reports, ‘Red Beat the Hell Out of Us’”, *The New York Times*, August 1, 1950, p. 1

troops, committed of necessity in small numbers and piecemeal, can either be driven into the sea or bottled into rugged mountain passes and soggy rice fields for annihilation.”¹⁸

There was an acknowledgement of defeats and setbacks but there was also a tendency downplay them, frequently choosing not to focus on the fact that the American forces in Korea were effectively under siege.¹⁹ “Indications are king here and opinion is growing that the back of the invasion has been broken” professed a piece in *The New York Times* in August in recognition of the fact that American forces were having some success in defending the perimeter around Pusan where they were locked in on the southeastern tip of the peninsula.²⁰

Although relatively limited, critical accounts of the war were dramatic and they raised concern in the higher echelons of government. Furthermore, despite the tone of the dominant frame it was impossible to escape the fact that the war was not going well. Senior officials, along with various commentators scoffed at the more critical frontline reports. Many government officials were concerned that such reporting would sap morale on the home front. A remarkable exchange of letters between President Truman and former first lady Eleanor Roosevelt illustrates this concern and offers insight into just how seriously it was taken at the highest levels of the American administration.

Roosevelt wrote Truman in August 1950, expressing her distress that media coverage of

¹⁸ Richard Johnson, “Korea Shakes GI’s Faith in US Arms Superiority”, *The New York Times*, July 13, 1950, p.1

¹⁹ Lesley Parrott “North Korean Drive Slowed”, *The New York Times*, July 4, 1950, p.1, and Lesley Parrott “Reds Pushed Back”, *The New York Times*, July 5, 1950, p.1, and *The New York Times*, Lesley Parrott, US Troops Check North Korean; Bar Break Despite Tank attack, July 6, 1950, p.1 and *The New York Times*, *The Associated Press*, “A Patrol 22 Miles Behind Enemy Lines” p.1, and W.H. Lawrence, “Blasting of Bridge Impedes Foe”, *The New York Times*, August 2, 1950, p.1, *The New York Times*, Lesley Parrott, “Northern Line Hit; Enemy Casualties”, August 6, 1950, p.1, and Richard J.H. Johnson, ‘Resistance Light: UN Forces Gain Above Kunwi and Kunhwaon Nanking’, *The New York Times*,

²⁰ Lesley Parrott, “Korean Reds Attack Repulsed; Foe’s losses in Offensive Heavy; Invasion’s Back Believed Broken”, *The New York Times*, August 22, 1950

the war would have a detrimental effect on morale in the United States. She specifically made reference to a piece written by long serving *New York Herald Tribune* correspondent Homer Bigart which stated that some of the weapons and equipment he had seen being used by American soldiers were antiquated and defective. Truman responded that he certainly shared her concerns and that he had raised the subject with the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and been assured that Bigart's observations were unfounded.²¹

After the initial discontent from the Pentagon regarding the early coverage of the war, the American military moved to achieve greater control over what was being reported. They imposed a voluntary code of censorship; however, they stopped short of the formal imposition of censorship that many in the press had expected. The legendary allied commander, General Douglas MacArthur had reason to have at least some confidence in the press. Among his admirers were many of the reporters who had come to know him when he was a press officer and later a Brigadier General during the First World War. Some of those reporters were now senior editors at various American news outlets, such as Roy Howard of Scripps-Howard.²² MacArthur proposed a voluntary code, requesting that journalists refrain from criticizing the actions of allied soldiers and their commanders. Many of the correspondents covering the war were ready to accept censorship, but under the voluntary code they were left confused about exactly what they were permitted to report.²³

To improve media management, senior American press officers suggested a pooling system for the reporters who were accredited to the war zone, both in the

²¹ Horrell, *Reporting the Forgotten War*, p.29

²² *Ibid.*, p.32

²³ Higgins, *War in Korea*, p.56

interests of the American military and for the safety of the correspondents themselves. The environment in Korea was so arduous that Hal Boyle of the *Associated Press* commented that no conflict since the American Civil War had been so difficult to cover.²⁴ Homer Bigart, well known for his reportage from the front lines of the Second World War, wrote a letter to his wife saying that covering the war in Korea was the most arduous experience of his life. Conditions for the soldier and the journalist alike were fraught with danger and brutality; over the course of the Korean War, 11 accredited correspondents were killed. Beyond this, the basic tools of the news media craft were grossly lacking. Communications lines were so limited that many reporters could not file their dispatches until they flew back to Tokyo. *United Press* correspondent Rutherford Poats attempted to resolve the problem by employing messenger pigeons to fly his reports back to Tokyo.²⁵ However, he reportedly abandoned the idea when the pigeons took eleven days to arrive in Japan.²⁶

Due to the enormous logistical challenges of covering the war, as well as the terrible dangers, reporters in the field came to rely on the American military for information. Dispatches from press officers became more detailed and they came to feature prominently as sources of information for reporters who rarely challenged what they were being told. Transmitting reports out of Korea that the military disapproved of was difficult given the way reporters were housed and managed by the American military. The growing contingent of reporters arriving in Korea were housed by the military in a crumbling government building in the city of Taegu. It was roundly

²⁴ Knightley, *The First Casualty*, p.338

²⁵ *Time: The Weekly News Magazine*, "Covering Korea", August 21, 1950

²⁶ Knightley, *The First Casualty*, p.338

described by those who were there as filthy and rat-infested.²⁷ The correspondents were required to work and sleep in a single room. They were permitted to use a military communications line to Tokyo for one hour each night. The reporters would line up to use it in the middle of the night. Given the poor quality of the signal, they were required to shout their dispatches in order to be heard on the other end of the line.

This created an environment where no one could report anything that was unknown to their competitors or the American military. Reporters were, however, given a relatively substantial degree of latitude regarding where they were permitted to go. Some, such as Higgins and Biggart, would even accompany soldiers on patrol near the front line. Editors and writers outside the war zone also often shied away from questioning official news releases, even when they contained information that was highly suspect. When General MacArthur's office began releasing impossibly detailed enemy casualty reports, questions were seldom raised by the media outlets who quoted them, save for the rare acknowledgment that although likely imprecise, the official casualty reports were the best numbers that were available.²⁸ From a very early stage, the daily releases issued by the American military offering an official summary of the fighting took a place of prominence in *The New York Times*. They were printed verbatim, usually occupying most of the newspaper's second page.

The enormous logistical challenges of covering the war account for why the press came to rely so heavily on the military. There is a broader and more overarching reason for the position taken in the preponderance of the Korean War coverage. American audiences desired the view of a robust and confident United States confronting the

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.338

²⁸ *The New York Times*, "Red Losses Put at New High", September 23, 1950, p.3

communist world. At the time of the Korean War, a new political culture was solidifying in the United States. A mentality was emerging that reflected the fears and ambitions of a nation that was beginning to confront the Cold War. For the United States, aspirations of an idyllic post-war world had given way to a global climate where much of international and domestic politics were dominated by the pervasive fear of communism.

In the eyes of Americans, the world was becoming a much more terrifying place. On September 24, 1949, it was confirmed that the Soviet Union had tested its first atomic bomb.²⁹ The American monopoly on nuclear weapons was over; the world's most dreaded weapon was now being wielded by the enemy. That same year, China's Nationalist government was swept away in a communist revolution. Broad swaths of Asia were now under communist control. Former American allies were now avowed enemies.³⁰ Such developments served to generate the feeling of an advancing communist menace that was creeping ever closer to the United States.

The invasion of South Korea was only the latest in a series of events which drove it home to Americans that the Cold War was becoming very hot and very dangerous. This feeling of tension and unease in the United States was accentuated by the fact that in the year leading up to the outbreak of the Korean War, the dominant line of American thought regarding the communist world was going through a transformation. In the years immediately following the Second World War there was a general acceptance by both the American public and the government that communist movements throughout the world operated independently and were not presumed automatically to be loyal to the Soviet

²⁹ Paul Boyer, *By the Bomb's Early Light: American Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age*, (New York City: Pantheon Books, 1985), p.340

³⁰ Margot Henrikson, *Dr. Stangelove's America: Society and Culture in the Atomic Age*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997), p.27

Union. However, as the relationship between Washington and Moscow grew increasingly tense and as Communist movements, such as the one led by Mao Zedong in China, gained power and prominence, the United States began to see the communist world as a monolithic bloc, taking its directions from Moscow. Local communist parties in Asia and Latin America, which heretofore had been seen as independent from one and other, came to be seen as Soviet pawns, heightening the sense of immanent danger.³¹

The fear of an encroaching communist menace permeated the American news media's coverage of international events. As the Korean War was beginning, *The New York Times* ran exposés warning that communist parties in Latin America were gaining influence and if one of them were to get into power Moscow would have a foothold on the very doorstep of the United States.³² Articles alerting the reader to the terrible dangers emanating from behind the iron curtain were commonplace; from the growing communist influence in southern Europe to the attempts by the Soviet Union to entice the youth of the world into their ideological grip.³³

In a celebrated editorial that appeared in *The New York Times* on Christmas Day 1949, famed columnist Arthur Krock commented that in the span of less than half a century the nation now known as the Soviet Union had evolved from a distant backwater that barely registered in American thought to a frightening colossus that exerted a menacing influence on virtually every facet of American political life: "It has come to pass that in less than 50 years, however, that virtually every governmental policy, act and

³¹ Nick Cullather, *Secret History: The CIA's Classified Account of its Operations in Guatemala*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), p.27

³² Will Lessner "Soviets Use Liberation Bait in Americas to Win Foothold", *The New York Times*, June 23, 1950, p.1

³³ Anthony Leviero, "Truman Condemns Red Grip on Youth", *The New York Times*, July 1, 1950, p.1

though of Washington is based on that nation and people.”³⁴ “The American mind”, Krock continued, “has reached such an acute awareness of the danger of the situation that loyal citizens known to have been friendly at any time to the professed aims of the Kremlin find themselves suspect.”³⁵ Given this context of fear, especially the fear that the United States was losing ground in the global arena to communism, it is hardly surprising that the media presented the war in a manner that was so accepting of American actions, so long as they seemed to be challenging the ambitions of an expanding communist world.

By 1950, the Soviet Union had the atomic bomb and communism appeared to be on the rise. Communist ideologues often billed their movement as the way of the future; there were fears in many quarters in the United States that perhaps they were right. The American public was jittery. When hostilities erupted in Korea and the American military went into action there was a strong public expectation of a firm and robust performance by the United States to challenge the threat posed by the communist monolith. A week after the invasion, a Gallup poll found that 80% of Americans supported military intervention on the peninsula to fight the communists.³⁶ Further Gallup polling found that even during the harshest days of the war prior to the Inchon landings, 65% of respondents still voiced support for the war.³⁷

Another survey of Americans taken by Gallup at the beginning of the Korean War found that 28% of respondents favored the use of atomic weapons on military targets to

³⁴ Arthur Krock, “Kremlin Casts Shadow on Most US Affairs”, *The New York Times*, December 25, 1949, Section E, p.3

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Rose, *The Cold War Comes to Main Street*, p.162

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p.241

win in Korea.³⁸ When China intervened in the war in November of that year, *US News and World Report* noted a “wave of demand” on the part of the public for a nuclear assault against the enemy, something which the publication suggested was a viable option so long as the bomb was used “sparingly”.³⁹ A poll taken by Gallup at that time found that support for the use of atomic weapons against military targets to win the war had climbed to 50%.⁴⁰ Another Gallup poll taken in the United States in November 1950 revealed that nearly 50% of respondents identified war with the communist bloc as the gravest threat facing the United States; an additional 29% alluded to international communism in general as the most significant threat.⁴¹ A further 15% identified communism inside the United States as the greatest threat facing the nation.⁴² When American journalists covered the war they were presenting the news to an audience that was anxious about the emerging global climate and hoped for an inspiring performance from the American administration and the military as they took on the red enemy.

There is a further dimension to the Cold War mentality that influenced the way the American news media covered the war. The threat to the United States from communism was not only seen as external, but internal as well. Communism as an ideology had found a following in the United States that predated the Cold War. Some Americans saw communism as a pathway to an egalitarian society. A number of them sympathized with the Soviet Union. This was the genesis of a seemingly endless litany of red scares in the United States. In 1947, the House Committee on Un-American

³⁸ Boyer, *By the Bomb's Early Light*, p.340

³⁹ Paul Boyer, *Fallout: A Historian Reflects on America's Half-Century Encounter with Nuclear Weapons*, (Columbus, OH: Ohio States University Press, 1998), p.38

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p.340

⁴¹ Gallup Poll, “What do you think are the greatest dangers facing the United States at the present time?” November 1950, (New York, NY: Gallup Organization, 1950)

⁴² *Ibid.*

Activities held a wave of hearings in which various figures in the entertainment industry were accused of being communists; several of them who were reluctant to testify were jailed.⁴³

In 1948, Alger Hiss, the president of the Carnegie Endowment for Peace, who had previously served as a senior official at the State Department, was accused of being a communist and a spy. In January 1950, after his second trial, he was convicted of perjury charges relating to the allegation. The reverberations rippled through the nation. Combined with the growing feeling of a dire threat from the communist world, the scandal created a media sensation and added to the considerable national concern about communist infiltration of the government.⁴⁴

The Hiss case fed the growing impression that anyone in government could be a communist and that every one of those communists was a possible traitor.⁴⁵ In 1951, the House Committee on Un-American Activities was taken over by Senator Joseph McCarthy who used it as a venue to launch his infamous crusade targeting supposed communists who were apparently everywhere. The arrests of American communists Julius and Ethel Rosenberg in 1950, on charges of conspiring to commit espionage on behalf of the Soviet Union, caused yet another sensation over the issue of domestic penetration by the communist empire in the United States. The couple's tumultuous odyssey through the American judicial system; their arrests, trial and eventual execution in June 1953, ran in a chronological arc that, with some sense of irony, largely paralleled the duration of the Korean War.

⁴³ Henrikson, *Dr. Stangelove's America*

⁴⁴ David Halberstam, *The Fifties*, (New York: Villiard Books, 1993), pp.10-16

⁴⁵ Stephen Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War*, (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), p.31

Fear of communism was filtering down to the local level. An enlightening example of this can be found in a roundup of events around the nation that appeared in *Time* on July 31, 1950. The article announced that Americans were fed up with communists, both of the domestic and international varieties. It was noted that in McKeesport, Pennsylvania, city council passed a municipal ordinance requiring the “registration” of all those accused of promoting communism and ordered that they be fined \$100 or jailed for 30 days. In Columbus, Ohio, police juvenile officers warned local clubs run by teenagers to be on the lookout for “communist agitators” and cautioned them against admitting any new members whose backgrounds were not an “open book”.

In Birmingham, Alabama, the city’s “big, blustery” police Commissioner Eugene “Bull” Connor, who had been rounding up suspected communists and charging them with vagrancy, called on city hall to pass an ordinance banning communists from the city. His definition of a communist included anyone caught speaking to a communist in a non-public place, as well anyone “passing out literature that can be traced to a communist hand.” In suburban Los Angeles, a fired-up war veteran assembled a posse to carry out a “crusade against communism”. The first order of business for the gang was to mete out rough justice on a group of suspected communist undesirables. They pounced on six unfortunate Chrysler assembly plant workers with supposed communist affiliations as they were leaving the factory at the end of their shift. *Time* reported that three of the workers were “badly mauled” in the attack. For the vigilantes, triumph turned to disappointment the next day when it was revealed that the victims of the Chrysler plant beating included fellow war veterans, prompting their leader to conclude that perhaps

they should not have taken the law into their own hands. The article does not mention if charges were filed against the group.⁴⁶

The general feeling of an internal threat accentuated the fear of the communist menace even further. Raymond Fosdick, the former Undersecretary of State for the long defunct League of Nations, described the climate of fear that had crystallized in American society in an essay in *The New York Times Magazine* just after the Korean War began. Writing on the American fear of communist expansion, he declared that “not since the Black Death swept medieval Europe in the 14th Century has so real a cause of terror been alive in the world as that which stalks the 20th Century.”⁴⁷ The United States, he argued, was responding to the challenge with “panicky witch hunts” instead of resolve. He lamented that if his hero Woodrow Wilson were still alive he would be stunned by what was taking place in the United States. Wilson, according to Fosdick, would “scarcely be able to breathe in the anxiety saturated atmosphere that has descended over our country.”⁴⁸ It was from a nation gripped by this pervasive climate of fear that came the journalists who would cover the Korean War, America’s first war against the communists. On September 15, 1950, the United States launched an ambitious counter-attack in the form of an amphibious landing at Inchon, near Seoul. The operation was a brilliant success. In a bold masterstroke, the United States seized a foothold behind the North Korean battle lines and took the initiative. The allies quickly retook Seoul and the North Korean lines crumbled.

⁴⁶ *Time: The Weekly Magazine*, “Communists: Boiling Over”, July 31, 1950, Vol. LVI, No. 5, p.13

⁴⁷ Raymond Fosdick, “We Should Walk Without Fear”, *The New York Times Magazine*, July 2, 1950, pp. 5 and 21

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

The American press articulated a sense of relief and satisfaction with the sudden turn of events. *Newsweek* effused that the situation was “almost too good to be true”.⁴⁹ The following issue of *The New York Times Magazine* ran an image of a North Korean soldier with his hands in the air captioned with a single word: “Surrender”.⁵⁰ “Since it became apparent that their Korean satellite was lost, the Russians talked more loudly than ever about peace” snickered *Newsweek*.⁵¹ Shortly after the landings, the liberal-minded magazine *The Reporter* ran a front page headline, “An Ex-Soviet Officer Tells: How Russia Built the North Korean Army”.⁵² The acerbically-worded report that accompanied the splashy headline was later unmasked as a CIA plant.⁵³

American victories were celebrated in the news media and as noted by historian Lisle Rose, a certain hubris emerged in media discussions of the war. “Korea had looked like a sure thing and it had blown up in Stalin’s face” professed a jubilant commentary in *Time*.⁵⁴ As the allied thrust pushed beyond Pyonyang, various publications offered a rather blissful listing of Korean industrial areas that were of particular importance to China and the Soviet Union and were now directly in the cross-hairs of the American advance. Little acknowledgement was paid to the possibility that China might intervene. *Newsweek* noted that the communists had reluctantly given up the key rail city of Chonju, not far from Shinuiju, the “Japanese built industrial city” of more than 60,000 people that contained Korea’s largest lumber plant, in addition its airfield was the nearest on the

⁴⁹ Rose, *The Cold War Comes to Main Street*, p.227

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p.227

⁵¹ *Newsweek*, “The Presidency: Truman’s Response to Red Peace Feelers”, October 30, 1950

⁵² Jon Halliday and Bruce Cumings, *Korea: The Unknown War*, (New York: Penguin, 1988), p.72

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p.72

⁵⁴ *Time: The Weekly News Magazine*, “This Was the War”, October 9, 1950, Vol LVI, No 16

peninsula to the Russian-occupied harbours of Dairen and Port Arthur.⁵⁵⁵⁶ “Shinuiju is a particularly sensitive spot for the Chinese” noted *Newsweek*, “Its power plants-carefully spared so far by the American planes, supply electricity to much of Manchuria, including the Russian-held Port Arthur.”⁵⁷

In late October, it was reported that South Korean army reconnaissance units had reached the vitally important city of Sakchu, home to Korea’s largest hydroelectric plant that also supplied power to the industrial centres in Manchuria. On October 23, *Time* commented on the triumphal fall of the industrial city of Wonson, a “strategic seaport” and “communications hub for railways and highways running west to Pyongyang and northeast to Siberia.”⁵⁸ By the time of the Inchon landings the number of accredited correspondents who were covering the war in either Korea itself or in Japan had reached 330.⁵⁹ The style in which the news was presented by the American news media was reflected in the outlook of many American correspondents in Korea. Some British reporters complained that many of them subscribed to entrenched and immutable view points which would inevitably colour their coverage of the war. The British press coverage of the war was often more critical of the American position, especially in the early stages of the fighting. Questions regarding the accuracy of official American information were more common. In the wake of the invasion, accounts in the British press painted a vivid portrait that cast the South Korean military as disorganized, inadequately equipped, and prone to blundering. British media accounts also took a more

⁵⁵ Rose, *The Cold War Comes to Main Street*, p.260

⁵⁶ *Newsweek*, “The Battle: Doug Oversees the End”, October 30, 1950

⁵⁷ Rose, *The Cold War Comes to Main Street*, p.260

⁵⁸ *Time: The Weekly News Magazine*, “The Battle for Korea: No Stop”, October 23, 1950, p.37

⁵⁹ Horrell, *Reporting the Forgotten War*, p.36

sobering view of the American military predicament on the Korean Peninsula.⁶⁰ A greater proportion of the British correspondents who covered the conflict were veterans of covering the Second World War and tended to take a more cynical view of warfare.

Rene Cutforth, covering the war for the *British Broadcasting Corporation*, later wrote about colleagues from the United States who were often suited up in what he described as the “the full panoply of the American war correspondent” which included an automatic weapon and belts of ammunition.⁶¹ Firearms were not an uncommon accessory for the American war correspondents in the Korean War. One reporter summed up his reason carrying a gun: “Suppose a gook suddenly jumps into my foxhole. What do I do then? Say to him, ‘*Chicago Daily Tribune*?’”⁶² And the dangers they exposed themselves to were very real; as stated, 11 accredited correspondents were killed during the war. British war correspondent Reginald Thompson alleged that some correspondents from the United States had far more sinister motives for traveling armed. He later lamented that, “The dearest wish of a lot of them was to kill a Korean. They’d cradle their arms and say ‘Today I’ll get me a gook’.”⁶³ Even bearing in mind the *caveat emptor* that the latter statement comes from a source who was committed in his opposition to the war, such testimonials reveal something else about at least some of the correspondents who helped shape the dominant frame in the America media’s portrayal of the war. They brought with them not only strong political views shaped by the Cold War, but in some instances, deeply prejudiced racial biases as well. This provides at least

⁶⁰ *The Times*, “Uncertain Battlelines: US Outpost Overrun”, July 6, 1950, p.6, and *The Times*, “The Capture of Two Towns: Advance by Three Divisions”, July 7, 1950, p.4, and *The Times*, “North Korean Armoured Threat: Advance Despite US Air Attacks”, July 10, 1950, p.4, and *The Sunday Times*, “North Koreans Launch East Coast Attack”, August 27, 1950, p.1

⁶¹ Knightley, *The First Casualty*, p.348

⁶² *Ibid.*, p.338

⁶³ Halliday and Cumings, *Korea: The Unknown War*, p.88

some insight into media portrayals of the enemy, both Korean and Chinese, as marginally human. However, it should be noted that characterizations of Soviet society in the American press were often equally disparaging. Not surprisingly the suffering of the Koreans themselves during the war was usually not a major theme in the American coverage of the war.

The editors of the media outlets in the United States inevitably played a vital role in shaping the dominant frame in the coverage of the Korean War. In some instances correspondents who had prepared critical pieces on the war were overruled by their producers or editors. Famed journalist Edward R. Murrow, a giant in the press coverage of the Second World War, traveled to Korea and filmed a news segment for CBS which raised questions about the war's overall aims. Murrow's Korea was a "flea-bitten" land where devastating American firepower had left "dead villages" scattered throughout the countryside.⁶⁴ The producers back in New York deemed it excessively controversial and opted not to air it on the grounds that it might damage the war effort.⁶⁵ Analogously, when Rene Cutforth submitted a piece offering a chilling description of the effects of napalm bombing by the American forces, the BBC refused to air it.⁶⁶

The framing of the news from Korea extended beyond reporters and editors. When I.F. Stone, an investigative writer and columnist for the left wing *New York Daily Compass* compared accounts of the war in the American press with those in several British and French news papers he was stunned by the vast disparities in the coverage. He investigated the issue and authored a book that questioned the American position on the war. No fewer than 28 publishers in the United States and Britain rejected the

⁶⁴ Rose, *The Cold War Comes to Main Street*, p.226

⁶⁵ Knightley, *The First Casualty*, p.346

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p.346

manuscript before it was finally accepted for publication in the United States in 1952.⁶⁷ Reginald Thompson, for his part, wrote a manuscript entitled *Cry Korea* in 1951, which lamented the terrible loss of life and presented an unremittingly negative view of the American military in Korea.⁶⁸ Although the book was also very critical of the communist side, it was unanimously rejected by every American publishing company he approached.⁶⁹

There were instances when the press cast a more harshly critical eye on the events in Korea, most notably in the aftermath of the Chinese intervention in November 1950. When allied forces fought their way up to the Yalu River, near the Chinese border they were subjected to a massive assault by the Chinese Army. The American drive collapsed in the face of the unrelenting onslaught. With the war going badly, full censorship was imposed by the American military at the end of 1950. The Chinese advance gradually pushed the allies south of the 38th Parallel.

In January 1951, the communist forces were once again in control of Seoul. Some of the toughest questions from the news media about what was taking place in Korea were posed just as journalists were being hit with heavy restrictions on what they were permitted to say. Numerous American journalists wondered how MacArthur could possibly not have foreseen the Chinese intervention.⁷⁰ When Harry Truman fired MacArthur in April 1951 media reaction was split along partisan lines, with Democratic Party loyalists backing the President, and Republican-friendly press outlets excoriating him. The series of blunders authored by MacArthur and his increasing reputation for

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p.347

⁶⁸ Reginald Thompson, *Cry Korea*, (London: MacDonald & Company, 1951)

⁶⁹ Knightley, *The First Casualty*, p.346

⁷⁰ Horrell, *Reporting the Forgotten War*, p.40

disregarding presidential authority led many independent media outlets to support his sacking.⁷¹

When the allies pushed the communists back to the 38th Parallel midway through 1951 the battle lines froze and a two year deadlock ensued. As negotiations to end the war continued at an agonizingly lethargic pace, grinding battles raged on at the front. With the situation stalemated the war started to slip from its position as the dominant news story. Although the tone of the coverage continued to be favorable to American actions, the war came to be portrayed as simply one facet of a much broader Cold War fight. The theme of Cold War anxiety dominated the headlines as the war dragged on. The war was now sharing the news pages with articles on Joseph McCarthy's sensational accusations of rampant communist infiltration in the United States and other articles that warned of growing communist influence in other parts of Asia, as well as in Latin America. Although questions came up in the press about what was really being accomplished in Korea, it was hardly surprising that the dominant frame of the coverage spoke of staying the course and maintaining a strong posture not only in Korea but in the larger fight against communism world wide.

Given that the coverage of the Korean War in the United States traveled in step with the government and reflected the political climate that was pervasive in the country, the coverage itself did not produce a change in public opinion or American foreign policy. When the war ended in July 1953, there was a general consensus in the news media that it was neither a victory nor a defeat. *The New York Times* made it very clear that the end of the Korean War was merely a stepping stone along the road to larger

⁷¹ *The New York Times*, "US Press Comment on the Removal of MacArthur", April 12, 1951, p.4

confrontations with the communist world.⁷² These battles, it was averred, would require even greater resolve.⁷³

By this point, public interest had shifted away from the war that two years earlier had descended into a seemingly unbreakable battlefield deadlock. Public concern turned toward the possibility of a nuclear confrontation with the Soviet Union. News outlets were now discussing ways for the average citizen to survive a nuclear attack. There was little sense of celebration or finality in the media writings on the end of the conflict, only an acceptance that it was only the first of many challenges in what would be a long Cold War.

The Korean War marked the first major war that was waged in the tension-laden context of the Cold War. The dominant frame that emerged in the American news media coverage of the war was frequently uncritical of American actions, portraying the war in terms of “us” verses “them”, setbacks were often downplayed, while progress on the battlefield was emphasized. This frame quite often crowded out dissenting viewpoints. There were two main factors which shaped the dominant frame. The first was practical; covering the war was a logistical nightmare, information was often difficult to obtain. Consequently, the news media came to rely on official government and military information on what was transpiring.

The second reason relates to the overarching ideological context in which the war took place. It was a time of great public anxiety and expectation. The prevailing view in

⁷² Hanson W. Baldwin, “The Lessons of Korea”, *The New York Times*, July 27, 1953, and Thomas Hamilton, “After a Truce: Diplomatic Problems”, *The New York Times*, July 26, 1953, Section E, p.5 and Hanson W. Baldwin, “After a Truce: Military Problems”, *The New York Times*, July 26, 1953, Section E, p.5

⁷³ Woodrow Watt, “Of Equal Importance: Asia’s Second Front”, *The New York Times Magazine*, July 26, 1953

the United States, quite understandably, was that the western world was locked in an intractable standoff with a communist bloc whose ideology and aspirations ran diametrically opposed to everything the United States stood for. In the year leading up to the war the Soviet Union had tested the atomic bomb and the Chinese government had fallen in a communist revolution. There was a general sense of fear that the United States was losing ground in the Cold War. There was a public expectation that the United States would stand firm against the communist world and a great hope that it would succeed in its endeavor. These aspirations were reflected in almost every facet of the American news media's coverage of the Korean War. In covering the war, the American media patrolled the boundaries of those expectations but often did not exceed them. In the past it has been pondered what influence the news media exercises over public opinion. However, in the case of the Korean War we see that sometimes the greatest impact of all is the one that the conditions on the home front have on the journalist.