CHAPTER NINETEEN

The Dilemma of Containment: The Korean War

The United States did not "bring its boys home" from Europe, as Roosevelt had envisioned. Instead, it remained deeply involved, setting up institutions and programs to guard against Soviet incursions and applying pressure on the Soviet sphere wherever possible.

For three years, the containment policy had worked as it had been conceived. The Atlantic Alliance served as a military bulwark against Soviet expansion, while the Marshall Plan strengthened Western Europe economically and socially. The Greek-Turkish aid program rebuffed the Soviet threat in the Eastern Mediterranean, and the Berlin airlift showed that the democracies were prepared to risk war to resist threats to their

established rights. In each case, the Soviet Union recoiled rather than face a showdown with the United States.

But the containment theory had a major flaw, causing American leaders to act on the basis of two erroneous premises: that their challenges would continue to be of as unambiguous a variety as they had been during the Second World War; and, second, that the communists would wait passively for the disintegration of their own rule, as postulated by the containment theory. They failed to consider the possibility that the communists might seek to break out at some point, choosing as their target an area of maximum political or strategic complexity for the United States.

Containment had been sold to a reluctant Congress on behalf of Europe. The fear of a Soviet incursion into the Mediterranean had given rise to the Greek-Turkish aid program, and the danger of a Soviet attack on Western Europe had led to the formation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. The possibility of a Soviet thrust elsewhere had the character of an afterthought, if that.

Then, on June 25, 1950, America was suddenly forced to come to grips with the ambiguities of containment, when it was faced with military aggression by a communist surrogate against a country which Washington had declared to be outside America's defense perimeter and from which all American forces had been withdrawn the previous year. The aggressor was North Korea and the victim was South Korea—both located about as far from Europe, the focal point of American strategy, as it was possible to be. Yet, just days after the North Korean attack, Truman hastily assembled an expeditionary force from among the poorly trained occupation troops in Japan to implement a strategy of local defense which had never been envisaged in American planning or been proposed in Congressional testimony. America's postwar political and strategic doctrine had simply ignored the possibility of this kind of aggression.

American leaders had defined only two likely causes of war: a surprise Soviet attack on the United States or an invasion of Western Europe by the Red Army. "Plans for the national security," testified General Omar N. Bradley as Army Chief of Staff in 1948,

> must consider the possibility that the United States will be subject to air and air-borne attack at the outset. The likelihood and the practicability of this kind of attack increases daily. . . . We would [therefore] have to immediately secure bases from which an enemy might attack us by air. Next, we will have to launch an immediate counterattack . . . predominantly through the air. . . . To make our counterblows we will need bases which we do not have now. The seizing and holding of [these] bases . . . will require Army combat elements.[1]

Bradley failed to explain how or why the Soviet Union might pursue such a strategy three years after a devastating war, while the United States possessed the atomic monopoly, and the Soviet Union had no known capability for long-range air power.

Nothing in America's behavior would have led policymakers in Moscow or Pyongyang, North Korea's capital, to expect more than a diplomatic protest when North Korean troops crossed the 38th Parallel. They must have been as surprised as Saddam Hussein was when America shifted from the conciliation of the late 1980s to the massive deployment in the Persian Gulf in 1990. The communists in Moscow and Pyongyang had taken at face value the pronouncements of leading Americans that had placed Korea outside the American defense perimeter. They assumed that America would not resist a communist takeover of half of Korea after having acquiesced to a communist victory in China, which represented an incomparably more important prize. They had obviously failed to understand that repeated American declarations proclaiming resistance to communist aggression as a moral duty carried far more weight with American policymakers than strategic analysis.

Thus, the Korean War grew out of a double misunderstanding: the communists, analyzing the region in terms of American interests, did not find it plausible that America would resist at the tip of a peninsula when it had conceded most of the mainland of Asia to the communists; while America, perceiving the challenge in terms of principle, was less concerned with Korea's geopolitical significance—which American leaders had publicly discounted—than with the symbolism of permitting communist aggression to go unopposed.

Truman's courageous decision to take a stand on Korea was in flat contradiction to what American leaders had proclaimed only a year before. In March 1949, General Douglas MacArthur, Commander of America's Pacific forces, had placed Korea squarely outside the American defense perimeter in a newspaper interview:

> . . . our line of defense runs through the chain of islands fringing the coast of Asia.
>
> It starts from the Philippines and continues through the Ryukyu Archipelago, which includes its main bastion, Okinawa. Then it bends back through Japan and the Aleutian Island chain to Alaska.[2]

In a speech before the National Press Club on January 12, 1950, Secretary of State Dean Acheson had gone even further. He not only consigned Korea to being outside the American defense perimeter, but specifically abjured any intentions of guaranteeing areas located on the mainland of Asia:

> So far as the military security of other areas in the Pacific is concerned, it must be clear that no person can guarantee these areas against military attack. But it must also be clear that such a guarantee is hardly sensible or necessary within the realm of practical relationship.[3]

In 1949, President Truman, acting on the advice of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, had withdrawn all American military forces from Korea. The South Korean army was trained and equipped for little more than police functions, because Washington feared that South Korea would be tempted to unify the country by force if it were given the slightest capacity to do so.

Khrushchev's memoirs claim that the invasion of Korea was the brainchild of Kim Il Sung, the North Korean dictator. Stalin, initially wary, had allegedly gone along with the plan because he permitted himself to be convinced that the enterprise would succeed easily.[4] Both Moscow and Pyongyang had failed to understand the role of values in America's approach to international relations. When MacArthur and Acheson spoke about American strategy, they were thinking of general war with the Soviet Union, the only kind of war America's leaders had ever systematically contemplated. In such a war, Korea would indeed have been outside America's defense perimeter, and the decisive battles would have been fought elsewhere.

America's leaders had simply never thought about how they would react to an aggression confined to Korea, or to any comparable area. When they were obliged to confront such a situation so soon after the Berlin blockade, the Czech coup, and the communist victory in China, they interpreted it as proof that communism was on the march and had to be stopped on principle even more than on the basis of strategy.

Truman's decision to resist in Korea had a solid foundation in traditional concepts of national interest as well. Expansionist communism had been escalating its challenge with each postwar year. It had gained a foothold in Eastern Europe in 1945 as a byproduct of occupation by the Red Army. It had prevailed in Czechoslovakia by means of a domestic coup in 1948. It had taken over China in a civil war in 1949. If commmunist armies could now march across internationally recognized boundary lines, the world would have returned to the conditions of the prewar period. The generation which had lived through Munich was bound to react. A successful invasion of Korea would have had a disastrous impact on Japan, right across the narrow Sea of Japan. Japan had always considered Korea as the strategic key to Northeast Asia. Unopposed communist control would have introduced the specter of a looming Asian communist monolith and undermined Japan's pro-Western orientation.

Few foreign policy decisions are more difficult than to improvise military actions which have never been foreseen. Yet Truman rose to the occasion. On June 27, two days after North Korean troops crossed the 38th Parallel, he ordered American air and naval units into action. By June 30, he had committed ground troops from occupation duties in Japan.

Soviet rigidity eased Truman's task of leading his country into war. The Soviet Ambassador to the United Nations had been boycotting the Security Council and other United Nations institutions for months in protest against the world organization's refusal to turn China's seat over to Beijing. Had the Soviet Ambassador been less terrified of Stalin or been able to obtain instructions more rapidly, he would surely have vetoed the Security Council resolution proposed by the United States asking North Korea to cease hostilities and to return to the 38th Parallel. By failing to attend the session and to cast the veto, the Soviet Ambassador gave Truman the opportunity to organize resistance as a decision of the world community and to justify the American role in Korea in the familiar Wilsonian terms of freedom versus dictatorship, good versus evil. America, said Truman, was going to war to uphold the orders of the Security Council.[5] It was not, therefore, intervening in a faraway local conflict but opposing an assault against the entire free world:

> The attack upon Korea makes it plain beyond all doubt that Communism has passed beyond the use of subversion to conquer independent nations and will now use armed invasion and war. It has defied the orders of the Security Council of the United Nations issued to preserve international peace and security.[6]

Though Truman had powerful geopolitical arguments in favor of intervention in Korea, he appealed to the American people on the basis of their core values, and described intervention as a defense of universal principle rather than of the American national interest: "A return to the rule of force in international affairs would have far-reaching effects. The United States will continue to uphold the rule of law."[7] That America defends principle, not interests, law, and not power, has been a nearly sacrosanct tenet of America's rationale in committing its military forces, from the time of the two world wars through the escalation of its involvement in Vietnam in 1965 and the Gulf War in 1991.

Once the issue had been raised as being beyond power politics, it became extraordinarily difficult to define practical war aims. In a general war, which was what American strategic doctrine had contemplated, the quest was for total victory and for the unconditional surrender of the

adversary, as it had been in World War II. But what was the political objective of a limited war? The simplest and most easily comprehensible war aim would have been a literal application of the Security Council resolutions—to push North Korean forces back to their starting point along the 38th Parallel. But if there was to be no penalty for aggression, how was future aggression to be discouraged? If potential aggressors came to understand that they would never do worse than the *status quo ante,* containment might turn into an endless progression of limited wars that would deplete America's strength—much as Lippmann had predicted.

On the other hand, what sort of penalty was compatible with commitment to a limited war? Inherent in the strategy of limited wars involving the superpowers—directly or indirectly—is the physical ability of either side to raise the stakes: this is what defines them as superpowers. A balance must therefore be struck. Whichever side convinces the other that it is willing to run the greater risk will have the advantage. In Europe, Stalin, contrary to any rational analysis of the relationship of forces, had managed to bluff the democracies into believing that his readiness to go to the brink (and beyond) exceeded theirs. In Asia, the communist side was reinforced by the looming menace of China, which had just been taken over by the communists and had the potential of raising the stakes without the direct involvement of the Soviet Union. The democracies were therefore more afraid of escalation than their adversaries—or at least so the democracies believed.

Another factor inhibiting American policy was the commitment to a multilateral approach via the United Nations. At the start of the Korean War, the United States enjoyed wide support from NATO countries like Great Britain and Turkey, which sent sizable troop contingents. Though indifferent to the fate of Korea, these countries supported the principle of collective action that they might later invoke in their own defense. Once this purpose was fulfilled, the majority of the General Assembly of the United Nations was far less eager to run the additional risks inherent in inflicting further penalties. America thus found itself in a limited war for which it had no doctrine and in defense of a distant country in which it had declared it had no strategic interest. Beset by ambivalence, America perceived no national strategic interest in the Korean peninsula; its principal aim was to demonstrate that there was a penalty for aggression. To make North Korea pay a price without triggering a wider war, America needed to convince those countries with a capacity to escalate, especially the Soviet Union and China, that American objectives were indeed limited.

Unfortunately, the containment theory, in the name of which America had engaged itself, produced precisely the opposite temptation: it induced Truman and his colleagues to expand the political battlefield. Without exception, the key members of the Truman Administration believed in a global communist design and treated Korean aggression as the first move in a coordinated Sino-Soviet strategy which might well be the prelude to a general assault. As American troops were deployed into Korea, they therefore looked for ways to convey America's determination to resist communist aggression throughout the Pacific area. They coupled the announcement of the dispatch of troops with an order to the Seventh Fleet to protect Taiwan against Communist China: "The occupation of Formosa by Communist forces would be a direct threat to the security of the Pacific area and to United States forces performing their lawful and necessary functions in that area."[8] Furthermore, Truman increased military aid to French forces opposing the communist-led independence struggle in Vietnam. (Governmental decisions usually have more than one motive; these actions had the added advantage from Truman's point of view of co-opting the so-called China Lobby in the United States Senate, which had been highly critical of his Administration's "abandonment" of mainland China.)

To Mao Tse-tung, fresh from his triumph in the Chinese civil war, Truman's announcements were bound to appear as the mirror image of America's fear of a communist conspiracy: he construed them as the opening move in an American attempt to reverse the communists' victory in the Chinese civil war. In protecting Taiwan, Truman was supporting what America still recognized as the legitimate Chinese government. The stepped-up aid program to Vietnam appeared to Beijing as capitalist encirclement. It all added up to giving Beijing the incentive to do the opposite of what America should have considered desirable: Mao had reason to conclude that, if he did not stop America in Korea, he might have to fight America on Chinese territory; at a minimum, he was given no reason to think otherwise. "The American imperialists fondly hope," wrote the *People's Daily,* "that their armed aggression against Taiwan will keep us from liberating it. Around China in particular their designs for blockades are taking shape in the pattern of a stretched-out snake. Starting from South Korea, it stretches to Japan, the Ryukyu Islands, Taiwan and the Philippines and then turns up at Vietnam."[9]

The American military strategy compounded China's misperception of America's intentions. As noted earlier, American leaders have traditionally viewed diplomacy and strategy as being separate activities. In the conventional view of the American military, they first achieve an outcome and

then the diplomats take over; neither ever tells the other how to pursue its objectives. In a limited war, if military and political goals are not synchronized from the very beginning, there is always a danger of doing either too much or too little. Doing too much and allowing the military element to predominate erodes the dividing line to all-out war and tempts the adversary to raise the stakes. Doing too little and allowing the diplomatic side to dominate risks submerging the purpose of the war in negotiating tactics and a proclivity to settle for a stalemate.

In Korea, America fell into both of these traps. In the early stages of the war, the American expeditionary force was confined to a perimeter around the port city of Pusan at the southernmost tip of the Korean peninsula. Survival was the principal goal; the relationship between war and diplomacy was far from the minds of America's leaders. Douglas MacArthur, America's most talented general of this century, served as the Commander. Unlike most of his colleagues, MacArthur was not a devotee of the preferred American strategy of attrition. During the Second World War, despite the priority given to the European theater, MacArthur had developed the strategy of "island hopping," which bypassed the Japanese strong points and concentrated on weakly defended islands, bringing American forces from Australia to the Philippines in the space of two years.

MacArthur now applied the same strategy to Korea. Against the advice of his more orthodox superiors in Washington, he landed American forces at Inchon (the port of Seoul), well over 200 miles behind enemy lines, cutting North Korean supply lines with Pyongyang. The North Korean army collapsed and the road north lay open.

Victory led to perhaps the most fateful decision of the Korean War. If America was ever going to relate its military objectives to its political goals, this was the time. Truman had three choices. He could order a halt on the 38th Parallel and restore the *status quo ante.* He could authorize an advance farther north to exact a penalty for aggression. He could authorize MacArthur to unify Korea up to the Chinese border; in other words, to let the outcome of the war be dictated entirely by military considerations. The best decision would have been to advance to the narrow neck of the Korean peninsula, a hundred miles short of the Chinese frontier. This would have been a defensible line which would have included 90 percent of the population of the peninsula as well as the capital of North Korea, Pyongyang. And it would have achieved a major political success without challenging China.

Although MacArthur was a brilliant strategist, he was less perceptive as a political analyst. Ignoring China's historic memory of the Japanese inva-

sion of Manchuria, which had taken the same route through Korea, MacArthur pressed for an advance to the Chinese frontier at the Yalu River. Blinded by his commander's unexpected success at Inchon, Truman acquiesced. In abandoning any middle ground between the *status quo ante* and total victory, Truman gave up the geographic and demographic advantages of the narrow neck of the Korean peninsula. He traded a 100-mile-long defensive line located a considerable distance from the Chinese border for the necessity of protecting a 400-mile front right next to the main concentrations of Chinese communist power.

It could not have been an easy decision for China to challenge the world's greatest military power after the suffering, the devastation, and the casualties wrought by a Japanese invasion and a bitter civil war. Until Chinese archives are opened, it will not be known whether Mao would have intervened once American forces crossed the 38th Parallel, regardless of how limited their advance or how far north he would have allowed them to advance. But the art of policy is to create a calculation of the risks and rewards that affect the adversary's calculations. One way of influencing the Chinese decision to intervene would have been to stop the American advance at the narrow neck of the Korean peninsula, and to offer to demilitarize the rest of the country under some form of international control.

Washington was feeling its way in that direction when it ordered MacArthur not to approach the Yalu River with non-Korean forces. But the order was never translated into a political proposal to Beijing, nor was it ever made public. In any event, MacArthur disregarded the directive as being "impractical." And Washington, true to its tradition of not second-guessing a field commander, did not insist. MacArthur had been so unexpectedly successful at Inchon that America's political leaders were more than half convinced that he understood Asia better than they did.

When the Chinese People's Army struck, the shock of surprise induced a nearly panicky retreat of American forces from the Yalu to south of Seoul, which was abandoned for the second time in six months. Without a doctrine for limited war, the crisis caused the Truman Administration to lose control over the political aims. Depending on the fluctuations of combat, the political objectives were stated as stopping aggression, unifying Korea, maintaining the security of United Nations forces, guaranteeing a cease-fire along the 38th Parallel, and keeping the war from spreading.

When American ground troops entered combat in early July 1950, the objective was stated as "repelling aggression," though that term was never given a concrete meaning. After the landing at Inchon in September and the collapse of the North Korean army, the objective changed to

"unification." Truman proclaimed it on October 17, 1950, but without putting forward a political framework for dealing with China. Truman's communications intended for Beijing never went beyond repeating sacramental protestations of good faith, which, to Mao, were precisely what was at issue: "Our sole purpose in Korea," said Truman in ordering the advance north,

> is to establish peace and independence. Our troops will stay there only so long as they are needed by the United Nations for that purpose. We seek no territory or special privilege in Korea or anywhere else. We have no aggressive designs in Korea or in any other place in the Far East or elsewhere.[10]

Mao was incapable of relying on such assurances from his principal capitalist adversary, who was at that moment protecting his mortal enemies in Taiwan. Nor did Truman concretely define the "aggressive designs" he was renouncing, or set a time limit on the removal of American troops from North Korea. The only way the United States could have kept Mao from intervening, if indeed that was possible, was by proposing the creation of some kind of buffer zone along the Chinese border. That was never attempted.

Over the next months, American forces would prove just how great a risk the Chinese leaders had run. Their early victories along the Yalu had been due to surprise and to the dispersal of American forces. It soon became apparent that the Chinese army did not have the firepower to overrun entrenched American positions and that, deprived of the element of surprise, it could not breach a well-established line—for example, along the narrow neck of the peninsula. Once American forces were reorganized, they proved that, at that stage of China's development, its forces were no match for American firepower.

No sooner had China entered the war than American objectives changed again, and literally within days. On November 26, 1950, the Chinese launched their counterattack; by November 30, Truman had issued a statement abandoning unification as a war aim and leaving it to "later negotiations." The vague concept of "halting aggression" again became America's principal goal:

> The forces of the United Nations are in Korea to put down an aggression that threatens not only the whole fabric of the United Nations, but all human hopes of peace and justice. If the United Nations yields to the forces of aggression, no nation will be safe or secure.[11]

By early January 1951, the front line was some fifty miles south of the 38th Parallel and Seoul was once again in communist hands. At that point, the Chinese repeated MacArthur's mistake of three months earlier. Had they offered to settle along the 38th Parallel, Washington would surely have accepted, and China would have gained the credit for defeating the United States Army a year after winning its own civil war. But, like Truman six months earlier, Mao was carried away by his unexpected successes and sought to expel American forces from the peninsula altogether. He too suffered a major setback. The Chinese incurred punishing casualties when they attacked fixed American positions south of Seoul.

By April 1951, the battle had turned once more, and American forces crossed the 38th Parallel for the second time. But the battle was not the only aspect of the war that had turned. For the Truman Administration was by now so traumatized by the shock of Chinese intervention that the avoidance of risk turned into its principal objective.

Washington's assessment of risks was based on a number of misconceptions, however. America assumed—as it would do a decade later in Vietnam—that it was facing a centrally controlled communist conspiracy to take over the world. And if Moscow called the shots, it followed that neither China nor Korea would have entered the war without being assured of Soviet backing. The Kremlin, Washington now believed, would not accept defeat; it would raise the ante after every setback for its clients. By aiming for limited victory, America might trigger a general war with the Soviet Union. America therefore could not afford to win even a limited victory because the communist bloc would pay any price in order not to lose.

The reality was quite different. Stalin had gone along with the North Korean attack only after Kim Il Sung had assured him that it would involve little risk of war. Insofar as Stalin encouraged the Chinese to intervene, it was probably to increase China's dependence on the Soviet Union. The real fanatics on the issue were in Beijing and Pyongyang; the Korean War was not a Kremlin plot to draw America into Asia so that it could then attack Europe. The deterrent to a Soviet attack on Europe was the Strategic Air Command, which was not used in Korea. The Soviet Union had little, if any, nuclear striking power. Given the disparity in nuclear strength, Stalin had far more to lose from general war than the United States. No matter how great the disparity in ground forces in Europe, it is highly improbable that Stalin would have run the risk of war with the United States over Korea. As it was, Stalin's aid to China was grudging, and he demanded cash payment for it, sowing the seeds of the Sino-Soviet rift.

America's leaders believed that they had learned the dangers of escalation, but they failed to consider the penalties of stalemate. "We are fighting to resist an outrageous aggression in Korea," said Truman in April 1951.

> We are trying to keep the Korean conflict from spreading to other areas. But at the same time, we must conduct our military activities so as to ensure the security of our forces. This is essential if they are to continue the fight until the enemy abandons its ruthless attempt to destroy the Republic of Korea.[12]

But fighting a war on behalf of the "security of our forces" is strategically vacuous. Since the war itself is what is risking their security, making "security of our forces" the objective must turn into a tautology. Since Truman offered no war aim other than inducing the enemy to abandon its efforts—in other words, at best a return to the *status quo ante*—the resulting frustrations generated pressures for victory. MacArthur did not consider stalemate a meaningful objective. He argued strenuously and eloquently that the danger of escalation had been inherent in the initial decision to intervene, and that it could not be mitigated by restraint in the conduct of military operations. If anything, they would increase these risks by prolonging the war. In testifying in 1951, MacArthur insisted: "You have got a war on your hands, and you can't just say, 'Let that war go on indefinitely while I prepare for some other war. . . .' "[13] Because he would not accept the Administration's view that the Korean War had to be conducted in a manner that avoided giving the Soviets a pretext for launching a full-scale attack, MacArthur advocated a strategy to defeat the Chinese armies, at least in Korea.

MacArthur's proposals included "an ultimatum that she [China] would either come and talk terms of a cease-fire within a reasonable period of time or her actions in Korea would be regarded as a declaration of war against the nations engaged there and that those nations would take such steps as they felt necessary to bring the thing to a conclusion."[14] At various times, MacArthur urged bombing Manchurian bases, blockading China, reinforcing American troops in Korea, and introducing Chinese Nationalist forces from Taiwan into Korea—based on what MacArthur considered "the normal way" to "bring about just and honorable peace at the soonest time possible with the least loss of life by utilizing all of your potential."[15]

Several of MacArthur's recommendations went far beyond the province of a theater commander. For example, introducing Chinese Nationalist forces into Korea would have amounted to a declaration of all-out war

against the People's Republic of China. Once the Chinese civil war was transferred to Korean soil, neither Chinese side could end it before achieving total victory; and America would have enmeshed itself in an open-ended conflict.

Yet the fundamental issue was not so much the adequacy of MacArthur's specific recommendations as that he had posed the key question: was there any choice between stalemate and all-out war? By April 11, 1951, when Truman dismissed MacArthur, the debate broke out into the open. Characteristically courageous, Truman had no alternative except to dismiss a publicly insubordinate commander. But he also committed America to a strategy which left the initiative in the hands of the adversary. For in making the announcement, Truman modified American objectives once more. For the first time, "repelling aggression" was defined as reaching a settlement along the existing cease-fire line, wherever that might be—thereby creating another incentive for the Chinese to *increase* their military effort in order to obtain the best possible line:

> Real peace can be achieved through a settlement based on the following factors:
>
> One: The fighting must stop.
>
> Two: Concrete steps must be taken to insure that the fighting will not break out again.
>
> Three: There must be an end to the aggression.[16]

Unification of Korea, which the United States had sought six months earlier by force of arms, was relegated to the future: "A settlement founded upon these elements would open the way for the unification of Korea and the withdrawal of all foreign forces."[17]

MacArthur returned to a hero's welcome and a series of widely publicized Senate hearings. MacArthur based his case on what he described as the traditional relationship between foreign policy and military strategy:

> The general definition which for many decades has been accepted was that war was the ultimate process of politics; that when all other political means failed, you then go to force; and when you do that, the balance of control, the balance of concept, the main interest involved, the minute you reach the killing stage, is the control of the military.... I do unquestionably state that when men become locked in battle, that there should be no artifice under the name of politics, which should handicap your own men, decrease their chances for winning, and increase their losses.[18]

MacArthur had a point when he railed against stalemate as national policy. He had made political restrictions inevitable, however, by arguing against putting forward any political goals whatsoever, even those needed to support a local victory. If diplomacy were to be prevented from defining war aims, every conflict would automatically become an all-out war, regardless of the stakes and the risks, not a negligible consideration in the age of nuclear weapons.

The Truman Administration, however, went further. It not only rejected MacArthur's recommendations but argued that no alternative to its strategy of stalemate could possibly work. General Bradley, now chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, defined three military options:

> Either to get out and forsake South Korea, try to fight it out in general where we are now without committing too great forces, or going to all-out war and committing sufficient forces to drive these people out of Korea. At the present time we are following the second course.[19]

In the American government, option papers nearly always urge the middle among three options. Because the foreign policy establishment tends to position its recommendations between the course of doing nothing and the course of general war, experienced bureaucrats know that the morale of their subordinates is enhanced if they pick the middle road. This was surely the case with Bradley's options, though the phrase "fight it out in general . . . without committing too great forces" simply restated the dilemma of a policy without clear-cut objectives.

Dean Acheson confirmed in the language of diplomacy that America's goal in Korea was indeed stalemate. American objectives in Korea were to "end the aggression, to safeguard against its renewal, and to restore peace."[20] Without defining any of these terms, Acheson went on to deprecate the effectiveness of the measures proposed by MacArthur: "Against the dubious advantages of spreading the war in an initially limited manner to the mainland of China," said the Secretary of State, "there must be measured the risk of a general war with China, the risk of Soviet intervention, and of world war III, as well as the probable effects upon the solidarity of the free world coalition"; it was "difficult to see how the Soviet Union could ignore a direct attack upon the Chinese mainland."[21]

If the United States dared not win but could not afford to lose, what were its options? When all the general phrases were reduced to specifics, it was stalemate on the battlefront and, therefore, at the negotiating table as well. In his memoirs, Truman summed up the views of all his subordinates, military and civilian alike:

> Every decision I made in connection with the Korean conflict had this one aim in mind: to prevent a third world war and the terrible destruction it would bring to the civilized world. This meant that we should not do anything that would provide the excuse to the Soviets and plunge the free nations into full-scale all-out war.[22]

The belief that the Soviet Union stood poised for general war revealed an extraordinary loss of touch with the real power relationships. Stalin was not looking for a pretext to start a general war; he was most eager to avoid it. Had he sought a confrontation, there were more than enough pretexts available in Europe or in the military actions already taking place in Korea. Not surprisingly, at no stage of the war did the Soviet Union threaten to intervene or to take any military action. Nothing in Stalin's cautious and suspicious character suggested a reckless adventurer; he always preferred stealth and indirection to actual confrontation, and had been especially careful not to run a risk of war with the United States—with good reason. Given the disparity in the nuclear capabilities of the two sides, it was the Soviet Union which had everything to lose in a general war.

Amazingly, all administration witnesses stressed the opposite point of view. Marshall claimed that it would take the United States another two to three years to prepare for a general war.[23] Bradley argued that "we are not in the best position to meet a global war."[24] Hence his famous quote that general war over Korea would "involve us in the wrong war, at the wrong place, at the wrong time, and with the wrong enemy."[25] Acheson too considered that more time was needed "to build an effective deterrent force."[26]

Why, in light of the emerging Soviet nuclear capability, America's leaders should have thought that the significance of their deterrent force would increase with the passage of time can only be explained as yet another manifestation of the strange premises of the containment theory—that America was weak when it in fact possessed an atomic monopoly, and that its position of strength could be improved while the Soviet Union was building up its own nuclear arsenal. Stalin was successful in deterring the United States from attempting a limited victory in Korea by capitalizing on this self-induced hypnosis and without having to do anything specifically threatening.

After the Chinese intervened, America never seriously explored the option of limited victory. The Truman Administration's basic postulate, that to try for more than stalemate was either impossible or risked all-out war, did not, in fact, exhaust the range of available options. An intermedi-

ate course such as the one I discussed earlier—a dividing line along the narrow neck of the peninsula, with the rest of the country demilitarized under international supervision—could have been pursued, or imposed unilaterally if it were rejected. China probably would not have had the means to prevent this—as General Matthew Ridgway, MacArthur's successor, also thought—without, however, recommending it.[27]

MacArthur was almost certainly right when he argued that "China is using the maximum of her force against us."[28] As for the Soviet Union, it would have had to decide whether, in light of the vast American nuclear superiority and Soviet economic weakness, an American advance over the relatively short distance between the 38th Parallel and the narrow neck of the peninsula justified the risk of general war. Of course, China might neither have acquiesced nor fought, but maintained a threatening stance wherever the line was established. But that situation would not have been very different from what finally emerged along the 38th Parallel. China would almost certainly have ceased to make any threats once its policy became dominated by the fear of Soviet aggression and had begun to move in the direction of the United States. Had the first communist military challenge against the United States suffered a demonstrable setback, greater caution might subsequently have been exercised by other militants in such areas as Indochina. And the Sino-Soviet split would almost certainly have been accelerated.

In the spring of 1951, a new American offensive under General Ridgway was grinding its way north, using traditional American tactics of attrition. It had liberated Seoul and crossed the 38th Parallel when, in June 1951, the communists proposed armistice negotiations. At that point, Washington ordered an end to offensive action; henceforth, all operations at battalion level and above had to be approved by the Supreme Commander—a gesture the Truman Administration believed would improve the atmosphere for negotiations by demonstrating to the Chinese that Washington was not aiming for victory.

It was a classically American gesture. Because of their conviction that peace is normal and goodwill natural, American leaders have generally sought to encourage negotiations by removing elements of coercion and by unilateral demonstrations of goodwill. In fact, in most negotiations, unilateral gestures remove a key negotiating asset. In general, diplomats rarely pay for services already rendered—especially in wartime. Typically, it is pressure on the battlefield that generates the negotiation. Relieving that pressure reduces the enemy's incentive to negotiate seriously, and it tempts him to drag out the negotiations in order to determine whether other unilateral gestures might be forthcoming.

This was exactly what happened in Korea. American restraint enabled China to end the process by which its army was being ground down by American technical and material superiority. Henceforth, and without significant risk, the Chinese could use military operations to inflict casualties and to magnify America's frustrations and domestic pressures to end the war. During the pause, the communists dug themselves into nearly impregnable positions across forbidding and mountainous terrain, gradually eliminating the American threat to resume hostilities.[29] This led to a drawn-out war of attrition, which was brought to a halt only because a painful equilibrium emerged between China's physical limitations and America's psychological inhibitions. Yet the price of stalemate was that the number of American casualties during the negotiations exceeded those of the preceding period of full-scale war.

The stalemate America sought descended on both the military and diplomatic fronts. The impact of military stalemate on the troops was well described by a British official observer, Brigadier A. K. Ferguson:

> It seems to me that the reputed objective of UN forces in Korea which is "to repel aggression and restore peace and security to the area" is much too vague under present circumstances to give the Supreme Commander in the field a military objective, the attainment of which would bring hostilities to a close. . . . Already many British and American officers and other ranks have asked such questions as "When will the war in Korea end?" "When do you think the UN forces can be withdrawn from Korea?" "What is our object in Korea?" Such questions tend to make me believe that, unless the British and American forces in Korea are given some definite goal at which to aim, the commander in the field will have the greatest difficulty in maintaining morale. . . .[30]

In opting for stalemate, America incurred the first big postwar wrench in its foreign policy consensus. To MacArthur and his supporters, the Korean War was a frustration because its limits guaranteed military and political stalemate. To the Truman Administration, the Korean War was a nightmare because it was too big a war for its political objectives, and too small a war for its strategic doctrine. MacArthur sought a showdown over Korea even if it involved going to war against China, whereas the Administration sought to husband America's strength to resist the Soviet thrust against Europe postulated by the containment theory.

The Korean War thus revealed both the strengths and the limits of containment. In terms of traditional statecraft, Korea was the test case for determining the demarcation lines between the two competing spheres

of influence, then in the process of being formed. But Americans perceived it quite differently, as a conflict between good and evil, and as a struggle on behalf of the free world. That interpretation endowed American actions with an enormous drive and dedication. It also caused containment to oscillate from the technical to the apocalyptic. Great acts of construction, such as the recovery of Europe and Japan, existed alongside a serious lack of appreciation for nuance and an extraordinary overestimation of Soviet capabilities. Issues capable of being encapsuled in moral or legal formulae were well and thoughtfully handled; but there was also a tendency to concentrate on the formula rather than on the purpose it was supposed to serve. In measuring America's success in Korea, Acheson was less concerned with the outcome on the battlefield than with establishing the concept of collective security: "The idea of collective security has been put to the test, and has been sustained. The nations who believe in collective security have shown that they can stick together and fight together."[31] Establishing the principle of collective action was more important than any specific outcome as long as defeat was avoided.

These aspects of the containment policy imposed a perhaps exorbitant burden on the American people, who were being asked to endure heavy casualties while their political leaders sought to navigate the narrowest of passages between resisting aggression and avoiding general war—without ever giving either term an operational meaning. The consequence of this approach was an outburst of frustration and a search for scapegoats. Marshall, and especially Acheson, were vilified. Alleged communist infiltration in Washington was systematically exploited by such demagogues as Senator Joseph McCarthy.

Nevertheless, the most significant aspect of the American public's reaction to the Korean War was not its restlessness with an inconclusive war but its endurance of it. In the face of all the frustrations, America persisted in bearing the burden of global responsibility in a seemingly endless struggle which imposed heavy casualties without leading to a definitive outcome. In the end, America achieved its goal, if at a higher price and over a longer period of time than was necessary. A decade and a half later, Americans would again experience an even deeper anguish over the conflict in Indochina.

A fundamental difference existed, however, between the Korean domestic challenge and the agony America later experienced over Indochina. The critics of the Korean War were urging victory, whereas the critics of the Vietnam War were advocating the acceptance and sometimes the importance of defeat. The controversy over the Korean War gave the Truman Administration a bargaining lever; Truman and his advisers could

use the domestic opposition as a threat against North Korea and China, since its alternative was a more energetic prosecution of the war. The opposite was true of the war in Indochina. The opponents of the war who promoted unconditional withdrawal of American forces from Vietnam weakened the American bargaining position.

In the final analysis, all of the belligerents in the Korean War drew important lessons from it. The American statesmen of the period deserve to be remembered for the vision with which they committed forces to a distant country which, only a few months earlier, they had declared to be irrelevant to American security. When the challenge came, they had the courage to reverse themselves because they understood that acquiescence to the communist occupation of Korea would undermine the American position in Asia, especially America's crucial relationship with Japan.

At the beginning of a generation of world leadership, America passed its first test, albeit somewhat laboriously. Yet America's innocence was but the reverse side of an extraordinary capacity for dedication, which enabled Americans to endure the death and injury of nearly 150,000 of their own in a war without a conclusive outcome. The crisis in Korea led to an augmentation of strength in Europe and the creation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, which made it possible to sustain the long endurance contest that the Cold War was now sure to become. Where America paid a price was among the revolutionary leaders of Southeast Asia and elsewhere, who discovered a method of warfare that avoided large-scale ground combat yet had the ability to wear down the resolve of a superpower.

China's lessons were more mixed. Despite its substantial material inferiority, China had managed a stalemate with the American superpower through a combination of military and diplomatic maneuvers. But it also learned the price tag of confronting American military power frontally. There were to be no other Sino-American military clashes during the Cold War. And the Soviet Union's grudging and ungenerous support of Beijing planted the seeds for the Sino-Soviet rift.

The biggest loser in Korea turned out to be the Soviet Union, the country which American leaders thought had masterminded the whole enterprise. Within two years of the invasion of Korea, America had mobilized its side of the global dividing line. The United States tripled its defense expenditures and transformed the Atlantic Alliance from a political coalition into an integrated military organization headed by an American Supreme Commander. German rearmament was within view, and an attempt was being made to create a European army. The vacuum which had existed in front of Soviet armies in Central Europe was being filled.

Even if one assumes that America might have achieved more in Korea, the Soviets would henceforth be obliged to measure their successes in terms of mitigating losses and perhaps encouraging later communist adventurers, especially in Indochina. In return, they faced a massive tilt in the mobilized balance of power because of allied rearmament and the strengthening of allied cohesion.

This shift in what the Marxists call the correlation of forces was not lost on the leader who had specialized in basing his policy on such analysis. Within eighteen months of the invasion of South Korea, Stalin initiated a reassessment of Soviet policies that was to culminate in the most significant Soviet diplomatic overture of the immediate postwar period.