

# The Korean War

## READING FOCUS

- How did Communist expansion in Asia set the stage for the Korean War?
- Who fought in the Korean War, and what were the three stages of the war?
- What were the effects of the Korean War?

## MAIN IDEA

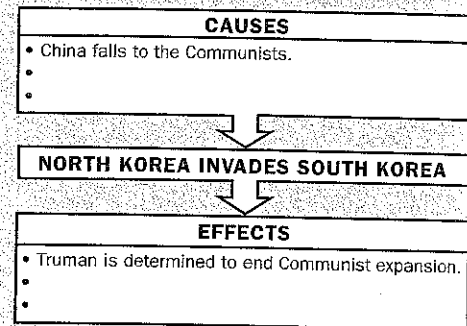
To repel a North Korean invasion of South Korea, American and other UN troops fought against Communist forces for three years. The result was a return to prewar Korean borders.

## KEY TERMS

38th parallel  
Korean War  
military-industrial  
complex

## TAKING NOTES

Copy the diagram below. As you read, fill in the causes and effects of the Korean War.



**Setting the Scene** The Korean War is sometimes called America's forgotten war, but the soldiers who fought in Korea never forgot it. In June of 1950, American troops struggled to push back the Communists, who had made huge advances. One American marine recalled the fierce fighting:

*“To push the North Koreans back across the river we had to kick them off a series of ridges. . . . It was straight uphill. No cover. There were machine guns, mortars, grenades going off. The volume of fire was terrific. They were pouring everything they had into us. Guys were cursing and yelling and dropping all around me. . . .”*

—Arnold Winter

Later in 1950, both sides dug in to hold their positions. Infantryman Tom Clawson said later, “I didn’t realize it at the time, but when I got to Korea the war of movement had just ended. What they called the sitting war had taken its place.” He described what “the sitting war” was like:

*“You spent hours every day improving your position, working on the foxholes and trenches and bunkers. But I never liked to get too fancy, because sooner or later we’d be shifted to a different position. . . . Most times [after going on patrol] you’d return to the place you started from, but the day would always come when you wouldn’t. You’d come back and move directly to a new position. But all the positions were always somewhere on the same ridgeline.”*

—Tom Clawson

American soldiers dig in during the Korean War.



Although it lacked the glory of World War II and the turmoil of the Vietnam War, the Korean conflict had important effects on the United States.

## Communist Expansion in Asia

While the attention of most Americans was focused on the Communist threat in Europe, events were unfolding in Asia that would cause the Cold War to flare up into a “hot” military confrontation. The roots of this armed conflict were found in the Chinese Civil War and in Japanese aggression in both China and Korea before and during World War II.

**The Chinese Civil War** As you recall, before World War I, foreign powers exerted considerable influence in China and even held some Chinese territory. One of these powers was Japan. Another was Germany. After Germany was defeated in World War I, the Allies gave Japan control over former German possessions, thus increasing Japanese power in China. In 1919, Chinese protesters began calling for a stronger, more independent China. Some demanded democracy and nationalism. Others, impressed by the results of the Russian Revolution of 1917, thought that communism was the way to build a strong nation.

In the mid-1920s, the Nationalist Party led by Jiang Jieshi gained strength in northern China and captured Beijing. Meanwhile, the Communists had made gains around Shanghai. In 1927, Jiang sent troops to attack the Communists and their supporters. The result was a massacre that would lead to civil war.

The Communists were led by Mao Zedong. He gained support for the Communist cause in southeastern China by redistributing land to the peasants and offering them schooling and health care. Determined to consolidate his power, Jiang continued to pursue the Communists. In 1934, Mao and his followers began retreating before Jiang’s forces. After the Long March, Mao began rebuilding his forces in the north of China.

As you read in Section 2, the Nationalists and the Communists had cooperated to resist invading Japanese forces, but after World War II the Chinese Civil War became more intense. The Nationalists lost support because of their harsh treatment of the population, high taxes, and corruption. Mao’s land reforms and his promise of equality, as well as his military victories, led the Communists to power in 1949. The Nationalists fled to Taiwan, where they still claimed to be the legitimate government of China.

**Dividing Korea** In addition to seeking territory and influence in China before World War I, Japan had also annexed the Korean peninsula. Japanese rule of Korea was harsh, and Koreans hoped that their nation would be restored after the Japanese were finally defeated in World War II. However, the war ended before careful plans for Korean independence could be worked out. In 1945, the Allies agreed on a temporary solution. Soviet soldiers accepted the surrender of Japanese troops north of the **38th parallel**, the latitude line running across Korea at approximately the midpoint of the peninsula; American forces did the same south of the parallel. While the dividing line was never intended to be permanent, Korea was divided—temporarily—into a Soviet-occupied northern zone and an American-occupied southern zone. Soon a pro-American government formed in South Korea and a Communist regime was established in North Korea. Occupying forces withdrew from both zones in 1948 and 1949.

## Focus on WORLD EVENTS

**The Long March** In the fall of 1934, some 85,000 Communist troops found themselves surrounded by Nationalist



forces in southeastern China. They broke through the Nationalist lines and began a 6,000-mile, year-long trek to Northwest China, near the Soviet border. Constantly under both air and ground attack by the Nationalists, they crossed 24 rivers and 18 mountain ranges. In the first three months, the Communists lost more than half their army, and only about 8,000 survivors

finally reached their destination. During the Long March, Mao Zedong’s leadership made him the undisputed head of the Chinese Communist Party. In spite of their often desperate circumstances, the Communist troops treated the peasants with respect, paid for goods they needed, and did not damage crops. This behavior—and the heroic ordeal of the Long March itself—inspired many young Chinese to join the Communist cause.

### READING CHECK

How did Korea become a divided nation?

## The Korean Conflict

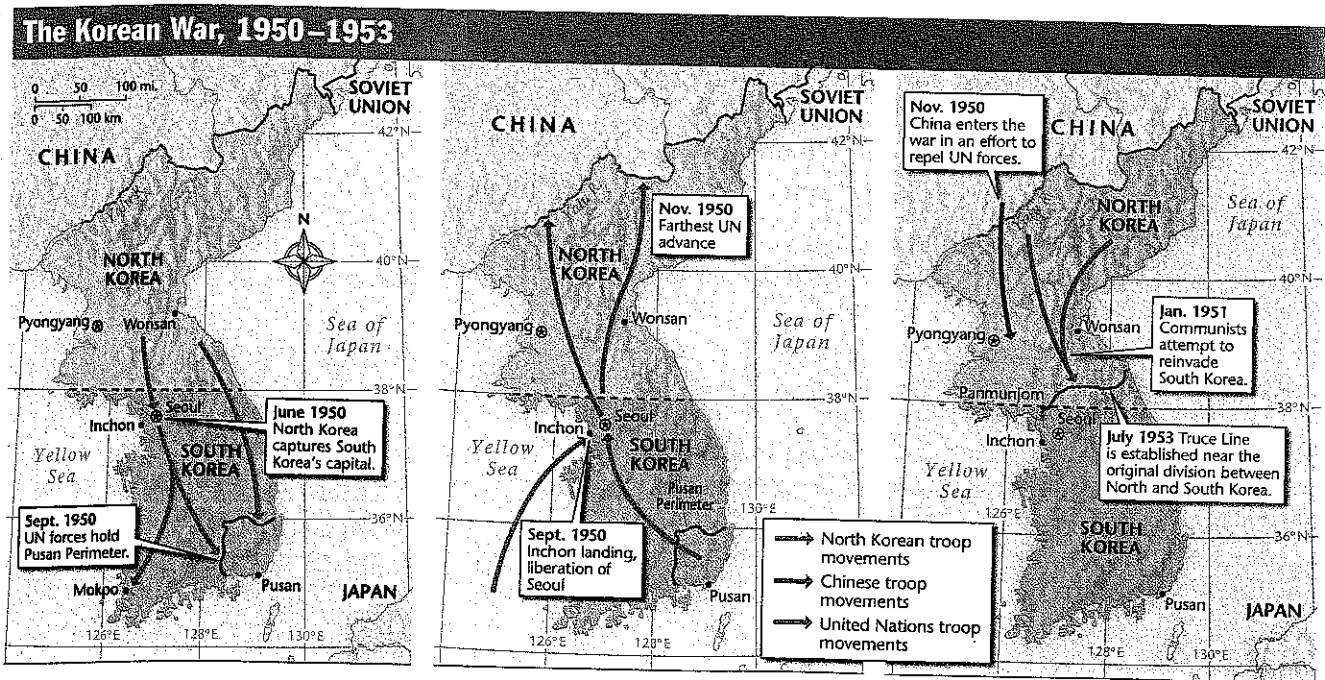
Koreans on both sides of the dividing line wanted to unify their nation. In June 1950, the **Korean War** broke out when North Korean troops streamed across the 38th parallel, determined to reunite Korea by force. The invasion took the United States by surprise. It also alarmed Americans, who were sure—wrongly, it turned out—that the action had been orchestrated by the Soviet Union. The fall of China to the Communists had been a shock to the United States; now it seemed as though communism was on the advance again. Faced with what he viewed as a clear case of aggression, President Truman was determined to respond. He recalled earlier instances “when the strong had attacked the weak.” Each time that the democracies failed to act, Truman remembered, it had encouraged the aggressors. “If this [invasion of South Korea] was allowed to go unchallenged, it would mean a third world war, just as similar incidents brought on the second world war,” Truman said.

**The UN Police Action** After the defeat of the Chinese Nationalists in 1949, the United States had blocked Communist China’s admission to the United Nations. The Soviet delegation had walked out in protest, and thus could not exercise its veto when President Truman brought the issue of North Korean aggression to the UN. The United States gained unanimous approval for resolutions that branded North Korea an aggressor and that called on member states to help defend South Korea and restore peace.

President Truman wasted no time. He commanded the American Seventh Fleet to protect Taiwan, and he ordered American air and naval support for the South Koreans. Later he sent ground troops as well. Although Truman did not go to Congress for a declaration of war as required by the Constitution, both Democrats and Republicans praised him for his strong action. Members of the House stood and cheered when they heard of it.

The UN set up the United Nations Command and asked the United States to choose the commander of the UN forces. Eventually, 16 member nations contributed troops or arms, but Americans made up roughly 80 percent of the troops that served in the UN police action in Korea.

**MAP SKILLS** These maps show the back-and-forth nature of the fighting in the Korean War. **Movement** Examine the maps and the movements of UN troops. Why do you think China entered the war when it did?



**Waging the War** A hero of two world wars and a strong anti-Communist, General Douglas MacArthur was Truman's choice to lead the UN forces in Korea. MacArthur was based in Japan, where he headed the postwar occupation. He was responsible for establishing Western democracy there and for creating Japan's new democratic constitution. He had been less successful in implementing democracy in South Korea, where he also commanded American occupation forces. There, MacArthur had supported Korean president Syngman Rhee, despite Rhee's brutal elimination of his opponents.

Despite a difficult personality, MacArthur was an excellent military strategist, and he developed a bold plan to drive the invaders from South Korea. With Soviet tanks and air power, the North Koreans had swept through South Korea in just weeks. Only a small part of the country, near the port city of Pusan, remained unconquered.

MacArthur suspected that the North Koreans' rapid advance had left their supply lines stretched thin. He decided to strike at this weakness. After first sending forces to defend Pusan, in September 1950 he landed troops at Inchon in northwestern South Korea, and attacked enemy supply lines from behind.

MacArthur's strategy worked. Caught between UN forces in the north and in the south, and with their supplies cut off, the invaders fled back across the 38th parallel. UN troops pursued them northward. American and South Korean leaders began to boast of reuniting Korea under South Korean control. Such talk alarmed the Chinese Communists, who had been in power less than a year and who did not want a pro-Western nation next door.

As UN troops approached North Korea's border with China, the Chinese warned them not to advance any farther. MacArthur ignored the warning. On November 24, 1950, the general announced his "Home by Christmas" offensive, designed to drive the enemy across the North Korean border at the Yalu River into China and end the war. However, Chinese troops poured across the Yalu to take the offensive. The Chinese and the North Koreans pushed the UN forces back into South Korea. A stalemate developed.

MacArthur favored breaking the stalemate by opening a second front. He wanted the Chinese opposition forces of Jiang Jieshi on the island of Taiwan to return to the mainland to attack the Chinese Communists. Truman opposed this strategy, fearing it could lead to a widespread war in Asia. Unable to sway Truman, MacArthur sent a letter to House Minority Leader Joseph Martin in March 1951, attacking the President's policies. Martin made the letter public. On April 11, Truman fired MacArthur for insubordination.

MacArthur returned home to a hero's welcome. In an address to a joint session of Congress on April 19, he made an emotional farewell:

*"Since I took the oath at West Point, the hopes and dreams [of youth] have all vanished. But I still remember the refrain of one of the most popular barracks ballads of that day, which proclaimed most proudly that old soldiers never die, they just fade away. And like the old soldier of that ballad, I now close my military career and just fade away, an old soldier who tried to do his duty as God gave him the light to see that duty. Good-bye."*

—General Douglas MacArthur, 1951

## AMERICAN BIOGRAPHY



Douglas  
MacArthur  
1880-1964

The son of an army officer, Douglas MacArthur graduated from West Point at the top of his class. Cited for bravery in World War I, he became a general by the time he was 38, and Army Chief of Staff in 1930.

During World War II, MacArthur commanded American forces in Asia. He organized the defense of the Philippines and the island-hopping campaign against the Japanese in the Pacific. After commanding American Occupation forces in both Japan and South Korea, MacArthur led the UN forces in the Korean War. His dispute with President Truman led the President to fire him for insubordination.

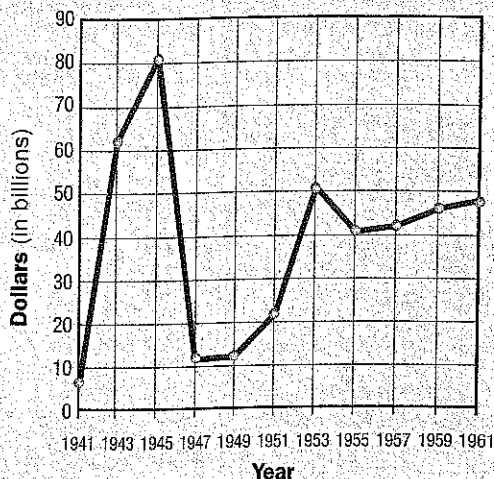
Although a hero to those he commanded and to much of the American public, MacArthur was disliked by many political leaders, who viewed him as overly ambitious. MacArthur, in turn, had little respect for either Roosevelt or Truman; he thought both were soft on communism. His attitude made MacArthur an anti-Communist hero. Yet his characteristic contempt for anyone with authority over him led him to take actions that undermined his otherwise brilliant career.



### Sounds of an Era

Listen to MacArthur's speech to Congress and other sounds from the Cold War period.

### U.S. Defense Spending, 1941–1961



SOURCE: *Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970*

#### INTERPRETING GRAPHS

The competition for world leadership led to an arms race between the United States and the Soviet Union. **Recognizing Cause and Effect** What was the cause of the sharpest rise in American defense spending in the post-World War II era? Why do you think spending did not drop off abruptly again, the way it did after World War II?

Once tempers cooled, MacArthur did, in fact, fade from view, and Truman was able to keep the war limited. However, the struggle dragged on for over two more years, into the presidency of Dwight D. Eisenhower. When peace talks stalled, Eisenhower's threat to use atomic weapons got the talks going again. Finally, a truce was signed in 1953, leaving Korea divided at almost exactly the same place as before the war, near the 38th parallel.

### The Effects of the Korean War

The Korean War caused enormous frustration in the United States. Americans wondered why roughly 54,000 of their soldiers had been killed and 103,000 wounded for such limited results. They questioned whether their government was serious about stopping communism. On the other hand, Communist forces had been pushed back beyond the 38th parallel. What's more, this containment had occurred without nuclear war. It seemed that Americans would have to get used to more limited wars and more limited victories.

Americans would have to get used to other changes as well.

One change was in the military itself. Although President Truman had ordered the integration of the armed forces in 1948, the Korean War was the first war in which white Americans and African Americans served in the same units.

The Korean War also led to a huge increase in military spending. The military had taken less than a third of the federal budget in 1950; a decade later, military spending made up about half of federal expenditures. At the same time, the United States came to accept the demands of permanent mobilization. Over a million American soldiers were stationed around the world. At home, the military establishment became more powerful as it developed links to the corporate and scientific communities. These ties created a powerful **military-industrial complex** that employed 3.5 million Americans by 1960.

The Korean War also helped to shape future U.S. policy in Asia. Hoping that Japan could help to maintain the balance of power in the Pacific, the United States signed a peace treaty with that nation in September 1951. In addition, the Korean War further poisoned relations with Communist China, leading to a diplomatic standoff that would last more than 20 years.

## Section

## 3

## Assessment

### READING COMPREHENSION

1. What was the importance of the 38th parallel?
2. (a) How did the Korean War begin?  
(b) Who fought on each side?
3. Why did President Truman fire General MacArthur?
4. Name two effects of the war.

### CRITICAL THINKING AND WRITING

5. **Drawing Conclusions** Considering containment and the Truman Doctrine, do you think the Korean War was a success or a failure? Why?
6. **Creating a Time Line** Make a time line of the important events of the Korean War.



### Take It to the NET

#### Activity: Creating a Collage

Make a collage about one aspect of the Korean War. Download or copy maps, photos, newspaper headlines, and quotes from soldiers. Use the links provided in the *America: Pathways to the Present* area of the following Web site for help in completing this activity.

[www.phschool.com](http://www.phschool.com)