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The Korean War

Stage 1: North Korea attacks

The Korean War began in the predawn darkness of June 25, 1950 as Kim Il Sung's heavily armed and well-trained North Korean army crossed the 38th parallel -- the border between the two Koreas at the end of World War II. As MacArthur biographer, D. Clayton James describes it, "North Korean artillery and mortar barrages began hitting South Korean positions along the 150-mile width of the peninsula, shortly followed by invasion forces totaling over 90,000 troops and 150 Soviet-built tanks that struck in smoothly coordinated assaults into South Korea."

By the night of June 28, Seoul had fallen and the South Korean forces were in disarray. The United Nations had just passed a resolution recommending that "the members of the United Nations furnish such assistance to the Republic of Korea as may be necessary to repel the armed attack and to restore international peace and security to the area."



On July 30, President Truman announced that he had "authorized the United States Air Force to conduct missions on specific military targets in northern Korea [and] a naval blockade of the entire Korean coast," adding almost as an afterthought, "General MacArthur has been authorized to use certain supporting ground units." Army Secretary Frank Pace's assessment was more realistic: "We were into Korea deep."

Stage 2: Americans pushed to the Pusan Perimeter

July 5 saw the first battle between American and North Korean troops, and the Americans did not fare as well as they expected. Unable to slow the enemy advance below Suwon, the Americans and South Koreans fought desperate delaying operations, buying time with blood as more American units were rushed to Korea. By the end of July, the North Koreans had pushed the U.N. forces to the southeast corner of the peninsula, where they dug in around the port of Pusan. On July 27, a "grim-faced and business-like" MacArthur visited Eighth Army commander Walton Walker. A witness said that MacArthur told Walker, "There will be no Dunkirk in this command. To retire to Pusan will be unacceptable." Gen. Walker gave the "stand or die" order, and over the next six weeks a desperate, bloody struggle ensued as the North Koreans threw everything they had at American and ROK (South Korean) forces in an effort to gain complete control over Korea.



Stage 3: Inchon

With what is widely considered the crowning example of his military genius, MacArthur completely changed the course of the war overnight by ordering -- over nearly unanimous objections -- an amphibious invasion at the port of Inchon, near Seoul. Evidence has indicated that the Chinese Communists, having studied MacArthur's tactics in World War II, warned the North Koreans to expect such an attack. Still, they were not prepared. The Americans quickly gained control of Inchon, recaptured Seoul within days, and cut the North Korean supply lines. American and ROK forces broke out of the Pusan Perimeter and chased the retreating enemy north. On September 27, after Washington had consulted with its allies regarding war aims, MacArthur received permission to pursue the enemy into North Korea. ROK forces crossed the 38th parallel on October 1, opening a fateful new chapter in the conflict.



Stage 4: Approaching the Yalu

Despite warnings from the Communist Chinese through an Indian diplomat that "American intrusion into North Korea would encounter Chinese resistance," MacArthur's forces continued to push north. In their meeting at Wake Island on October 15, both Truman and MacArthur took comfort in the General's assertion that "We are no longer fearful of their intervention,...if the Chinese tried to get down to Pyongyang there would be the greatest slaughter."

On October 25, however, things turned ominous. The Chinese army, which had been massing north of the Yalu River after secretly slipping into North Korea, struck with considerable force. After suffering setbacks, the U.N. forces stabilized their lines by November 5, only to watch the Chinese withdraw northward as quickly as they had struck. MacArthur was now worried enough to press Washington for greater latitude in taking the fight into China. He nevertheless launched a great offensive toward the end of November, which he optimistically hoped would end the war in Korea and "get the boys home by Christmas." It proved a terrible miscalculation.



Stage 5: An entirely new war

MacArthur's "all-out offensive" to the Yalu had barely begun when the Chinese struck with awesome force on the night of November 25. Roughly 180,000 Chinese troops shattered the right flank of Walker's Eighth Army in the west, while 120,000 others threatened to destroy the X Corps near the Chosin Reservoir. On November 28, a shaken MacArthur informed the Joint Chiefs, "We face an entirely new war."

MacArthur's men fought courageously and skillfully just to avoid annihilation, as they were pushed back down the peninsula. Seoul changed hands yet again on January 5. But under the able and energetic leadership of General Matthew Ridgway, who took over the Eighth Army after the death of Walker, the U.N. retreat ended about 70 miles below Seoul.



Stage 6: Stalemate

Beginning January 15, Ridgway led the U.N. in a slow advance northward, in what his troops began to call the "meatgrinder." Inflicting heavy casualties on the Chinese and North Koreans, the U.N. re-recaptured Seoul (the fourth and final time it changed hands!) on March 15, and had patrols crossing the 38th parallel on March 31. In the meantime, General MacArthur had been steadily pushing Washington to remove the restrictions on his forces. Not only did Truman decline for fear of widening the war, but he fired MacArthur, who had been publicly challenging him for months, for insubordination on April 11.

Although MacArthur's dismissal ignited a political firestorm, most historians have agreed that Truman had little choice but to uphold the doctrine of civilian control of the military. But on military grounds, the picture is less clear. Whether or not his proposals would have ended the war -- or started World War III -- they probably would

have avoided the stalemate, which lasted for another two years. Not until nearly two million more had died did the Korean War end, when an armistice was signed on July 27, 1953.

