



DISCLAIMER: These views are my own, derived from research and writing about the Korean War. They do not represent necessarily those of the US Army or the US Military Academy.

Unlike previous major conflicts, American policy and strategy during the Korean War was tested by ambiguous war aims and constrained to a great degree by America's allies who joined a United Nations coalition—the United Nations Command (UNC)—and who desperately wanted to avoid a wider war. The effort to shape public opinion was also a difficult balancing act to restrain the urge to escalate when circumstances appeared to limit American prospects for military victory. President Harry Truman's explicit desire to limit the conflict ensured that nearly

every military decision would have a diplomatic or political component.¹ Consequently, Truman's Secretary of State, Dean Acheson, tended to be the most influential advisor to the president. This was certainly true when Louis Johnson was the Secretary of Defense, but even George Marshall as Secretary of Defense was not consulted when Truman was making his most important policy decision affecting war termination: the voluntary repatriation of prisoners of war.²

The United States had three chances to win in Korea: immediately after Inchon, at the initiation of truce talks, and when settling the POW repatriation question. In all three cases, US policy goals clashed with military strategy. Attempts by field commanders to generate a military victory were doomed by virtue of a failure to establish a coherent strategic narrative between executive policy makers and military leaders. This is the crucial point: policy matters. How wars start will determine to a large degree how they are fought, and how they are fought will determine the conditions that influence the final settlement or the conflict's termination. If there is a lesson to Korea, it is that strategy must support policy; for its part, policy must be clear to support a strategic narrative of what can be accomplished, and what it will take to accomplish it.³

¹ J. Lawton Collins, *War in Peacetime* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1969), 32-35; Matthew B. Ridgway, *The Korean War* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967), 43-45; and Dean Acheson, *Present at the Creation* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1969), 445-46, 451-55.

² Harry S. Truman, *Memoirs*, vol. 2, *Years of Trial and Hope* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1956), 460-62 lays out the president's thinking of how the prisoner of war issue factored into the resolution of the Korean conflict.

³ This line of argument is more fully analyzed in Bryan R. Gibby, *Korean Showdown: National Policy and Military Strategy in a Limited War, 1951-1952* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2021), 274-89.

President Harry Truman Commits to War



UN Security Council votes on Korea Resolution
The Soviet seat is empty



In many respects, Korea was President Truman's war. He chose how it would begin, and he chose how it would end. Prior to June 1950, from a strategic and budgetary viewpoint, Korea was simply not that important to the Joint Chiefs of Staff or the Defense Department. Korea was considered a Department of State problem.⁴ Unexpectedly, the surprise North Korean attack across the 38th parallel appeared to throw down the gauntlet: was this the much-feared Soviet thrust to eliminate American influence in Asia? Was it a feint to draw American attention away from Europe? Was this a diplomatic problem to be solved through the United Nations? Was this a military challenge requiring a forceful response? These were among the many questions that

⁴ Collins, *War in Peacetime*, 36-41 and Dean Acheson, *Present at the Creation: My Years at the State Department* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1969), 344-45, 349-53 for an account of American Far East policy fluctuations in the wake of the Chinese Revolution and Civil War.

Truman contemplated when he gathered with his close advisors in the evening hours of June 25th (Washington time), 1950. How these questions were answered would condition the American strategy, constraining decisions about military commitments, objectives, and definitions of success.⁵

Crucially, the United States did not have a clearly identifiable strategic interest in Korea. Therefore, as the president decided on whether to intervene, he simultaneously decided on the strategic goals of that intervention. Throughout his leadership of the war, Truman invented American strategy on the fly, to suit his policy desires and political interests.⁶ Further, it would be his chief diplomat, Dean Acheson who would put contours to American policy decision-making. It was Acheson who set in motion the essential decisions that led to American military intervention in Korea. As the president met with the Joint Chiefs and the secretaries of state and defense, without congressional representation, Acheson had already obtained a United Nations Security Council resolution condemning the violation of the Republic of Korea's sovereignty and declaring the North Korean incursion as "a breach of the peace." The resolution requested member states "to render every assistance to the United Nations in the execution of this resolution." Although Truman validated Acheson's actions, the president allowed himself to be put into a box.⁷

Acheson's views and the Security Council resolution defined the violent outbreak in Korea in the language of classic interstate warfare: North Korea had crossed an international

⁵ See the primary sources: Truman, *Years of Trial and Hope*, 331-40; Acheson, *Present at the Creation*, 402-13; and Collins, *War in Peacetime*, 41-44. An excellent scholarly analysis of the first week of the crisis is Steven Casey, *Selling the Korean War: Propaganda, Politics, and Public Opinion, 1950-1953* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 19-40. Burton I. Kaufman, *The Korean War: Challenges in Crisis, Credibility, and Command* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986), 25-40, a more traditional approach, remains valuable.

⁶ Gibby, *Korean Showdown*, 9-35, assesses the several iterations of military strategy that tracked with changes in the administration's policy toward East Asia generally and Korea specifically.

⁷ Acheson, *Present at the Creation*, 405-22, describes the Secretary of State's role in guiding policy decisions. The United Nations Security Council resolution can be found here: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/112025?ln=en>.

boundary at the 38th parallel to attack South Korea. By imposing on the international community the definition of the conflict as a conventional war, Truman's decision making was now constrained to treat it as a war—requiring recognizable outcomes such as victory and defeat—with significant implications for how American policy would be constructed in the conduct and termination of the conflict. Unfortunately, neither the president nor his advisors—military or civilian—forced a dialogue to determine the concrete limits of an acceptable end-state that guaranteed the principle of collective security *and* avoided WWII. It was a failure of the first test of war leadership.

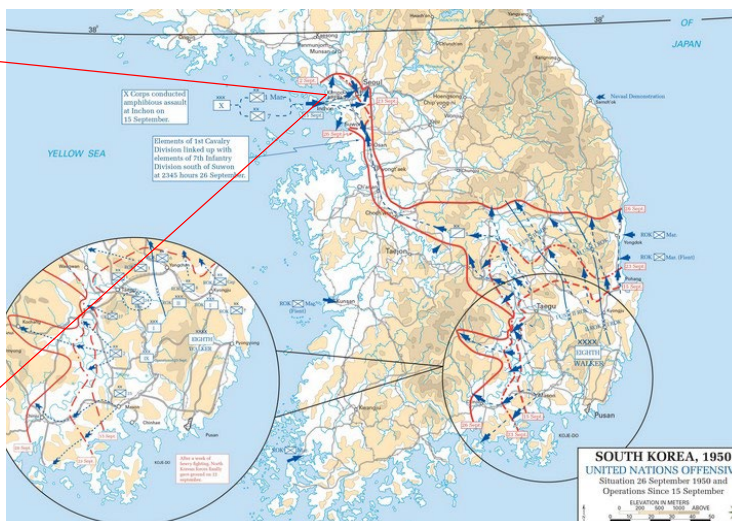
Further, by failing to involve substantially Congressional leadership in his deliberations, Truman isolated himself from input that may have shaped his domestic approach to this momentous decision. The theater commander, Gen. Douglas MacArthur, likewise was not called upon to provide much strategic advice. His two observational reports shifted wildly in tone, from “everything is fine” to “Korea is about lost.” His doomsday projection, sprinkled with elongated eloquence, may have been the decisive factor to convince the president to take the next step beyond air and naval support below the 38th parallel. American ground combat forces would be going to Korea.⁸

Thus, on June 30, 1950, having only informed the Congress of his intention to intervene in the Korean conflict, Truman directed MacArthur to employ American air, sea, and ground forces to execute the Security Council's resolution to defend the ROK and expel the North Korean invaders. The United States was once again at war.

⁸ Acheson recalled that *after* Truman authorized a limited military intervention (with near certainty to escalate to some level of ground commitment), “he then raised the question of consultation with congressional leaders.” Acheson, *Present at the Creation*, 408; 411-13 for how MacArthur's communiques affected presidential deliberations.

From this point forward, nearly every significant action taken in Korea by American forces was driven by President Truman's policy-orientation, which in turn was driven by his conception of the conflict's nature. Consequently, when policy shifted, as it did when

From Defeat to Victory



The last triumphal march



Imaginary line or international border?

MacArthur's successful Inchon landing appeared to unbalance the military equation so completely that an invasion of North Korea looked profitable, American military strategy was caught short. There was no plan to invade and occupy North Korea, *until after Inchon had made such a move imaginable*. In fact, the JCS had been so pessimistic about Inchon that all future thinking revolved around how to evacuate Pusan and then defend Japan if MacArthur suffered a catastrophic defeat.

Destiny now seemed to beckon impatiently. MacArthur's deep envelopment attack recaptured Seoul, severed the North Korean lines of communication, isolated the best part of the

communist army deep in southern Korea, and destroyed the Kim Il-sung regime's ability to resist an invasion. By the Americans' own measure as expressed in UN security council resolutions, it was a win. Aggression had been repelled. The sovereignty of the Republic of Korea restored. Mission accomplished.

The Truman administration and the national security apparatus then proceeded to botch the war's termination. Washington now saw an opportunity to capitalize on MacArthur's stroke and punish aggression, not merely repel it. The Americans deliberately ignored the interests of Communist China. MacArthur, along with Acheson, Marshall, and the president, was willing to suspend realism in favor of a leap of faith into *a new war* for Korean unification. If there were naysayers, they had been silenced by tactical success. In the glow of victory, there was no time to consider a new strategy appropriate for a new war. There was no effort, or desire, to question MacArthur on his plans to consolidate gains, reorganize tired units, or even to think through what a UN occupation of northern Korea would look like.⁹

It was, in fact, the perfect time to remember the Clausewitzian aphorism: "No one starts a war—or rather, no one in his senses ought to do so—without first being clear in his mind what he intends to achieve by that war and how he intends to conduct it."¹⁰ If the American objective had truly been restoration of ROK sovereignty and repelling aggression, MacArthur should have been held in place south of the 38th parallel. Further military operations should have been left to Korean troops and designed to support a political settlement to NK aggression. The Americans' political failure to ensure military strategy served policy purposes is what was responsible for

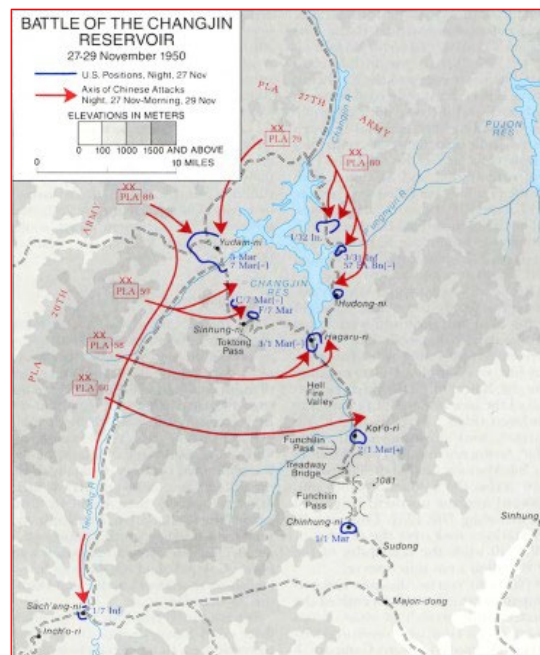
⁹ For the military assessment, see Matthew B. Ridgway, *The Korean War* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967), 43-45; for a blended military-political analysis, see Collins, *War in Peacetime*, 143-49; for the political viewpoint, consult Truman, *Years of Trial and Hope*, 360-62.

¹⁰ Carl von Clausewitz, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret, *On War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 579.

what followed. Just as the Americans were drawn to fill the vacuum in North Korea, so were the Communist Chinese.

With Defense Secretary George C. Marshall's approval, the JCS radioed new instructions to MacArthur on September 27, 1950, to conduct operations against the North Korean army without regard for the 38th parallel, subject to conditions of non-escalation and non-intervention by Chinese or Soviet forces. But because the JCS was literally playing catch-up to events unfolding on the ground, unclear guidance allowed, maybe even encouraged, MacArthur to devise a simplistic operational plan that lacked strategic context. Other than to chase remnants of Kim Il-sung's army, no one knew what purpose was served by an advance to the Yalu River and the Chinese border.¹¹

¹¹ See James F. Schnabel and Robert J. Watson, *The Joint Chiefs of Staff and National Policy*, vol. 3, part 1, *The Korean War* (Washington, DC: Office of Joint History, 1998), 98-101.



The Chinese Intervention: Assault and pursuit to Han River (25 Nov 50 – 7 Jan 51)

This policy-strategy incoherence jeopardized all that the United States had accomplished in Korea by failing to settle the conflict when the adversary had no means to resist. Rather, by pursuing an escalation of the end-state, the Americans openly courted third-party intrusion, which was not long in coming. The Chinese intervention, which unfolded over the months of October and November, threatened MacArthur's forces with destruction. MacArthur can easily be blamed for the debacle at the end of 1950, but he was not solely responsible. Truman and the Joint Chiefs had sought to win in Korea on the cheap. Their real strategic attention had always been tuned to Europe, where the showdown with the Soviet Union was expected. MacArthur was

resourced only to fight a holding action in Asia. The Chinese intervention simply exposed Washington's global bluff of mismatched ends and means.¹²

Policy Confusion . . . Strategy Revision



Truman-Attlee Conference, 4-10 Dec 50



Breaking contact with the enemy
Last bridge over Han River, 4 Jan 51



Crossing the Imjin River, Apr 1951



"That includes every weapon we have . . .
always been active consideration of its use."
HST, 30 Nov 50

The crisis of Chinese intervention at last focused the minds of Washington's officials to think seriously about war termination. As the Chinese second phase offensive began to crest in early December 1950, State Department officials were working on an exit strategy that did not envision a military victory, but rather a negotiated truce to be followed by a political conference to solve the Korea question. But on December 23, Eighth Army's commander, General Walton B. Walker, died in a motor accident. Maj. Gen. Matthew B. Ridgway, a dashing paratrooper and an outsized military personality who wore a hand-grenade on his harness "just in case,"

¹² See Gibby, *Korean Showdown*, 11, 17-23 for analysis of the impact Chinese intervention had on Korean War strategy in the fall of 1950.

immediately reported to MacArthur's headquarters to assume command. As Ridgway recalled, MacArthur simply said, "The Eighth Army is yours, Matt. Do what you think best."¹³

Secretary Acheson believed Walker's accidental death in the last week of the year provided an opportunity to rebalance American policy and strategy. Handing over the Eighth Army to Ridgway, MacArthur essentially ceded operational control of the war. No wonder Acheson slept more easily.

Although showing a high degree of confidence in his new subordinate, MacArthur in fact was revealing a complete lack of strategic perspective. Ridgway did not get any guidance to critical questions of attack or defense. Fortunately, Ridgway was a competent soldier and an intelligent commander. On his own he recognized what American strategy in Korea needed to be: offensive action to stabilize the lines in a position that would be advantageous to American diplomacy. Ridgway also showed great sensitivity to the policy preferences in Washington, and he would be the most successful battlefield commander to make American operations supportive of strategic goals to limit the war in Asia while inflicting as much punishment on Communists armies as possible.

¹³ Ridgway's recollection is in Ridgway, *The Korean War*, 82-83. Collins, *War in Peacetime*, 238-43, is effusive in praising Ridgway and his ability to retrieve the situation from the jaws of catastrophe.



Lt. Gen. Matthew Ridgway's
Attrition Strategy
(Jan - Apr 1951)

Directed Operations:
 Wolfhound, 15 -17 Jan
 Thunderbolt, 25 -31 Jan, 1 -11 Feb
 Killer, 21 Feb – 6 Mar
 Ripper, 7 -31 Mar
 Courageous, 22-28 Mar
 Rugged/Dauntless, 1-22 Apr



Send a shell . . . save a soldier



Recrossing the Han River, Op Ripper



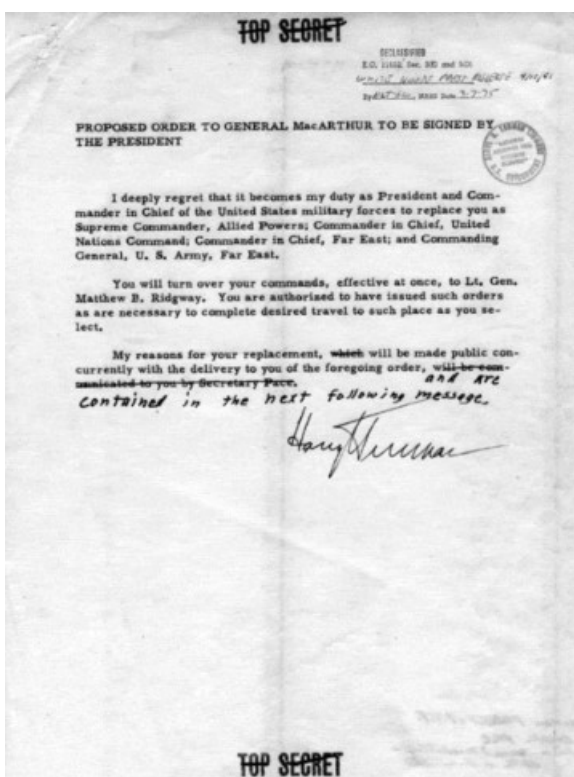
Chinese prisoners taken during Op Killer

Ridgway came to Korea from the Pentagon, as the Army's Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations and Administration. He had witnessed how MacArthur's operational approach had magnified American difficulties in East Asia. He resolved to try something else. Ridgway's genius was two-fold. He first realized that Eighth Army suffered from defeatism, and that to be relevant strategically the army would have to demonstrate aggressiveness and resilience tactically. He had to revitalize its morale and fighting spirit. Simultaneously, he reassured and encouraged his military and political superiors – to dissipate *their* defeatism. Whereas MacArthur publicly contemplated an immediate evacuation from Korea, Ridgway confidently stated that he could hold Korea for at least two to three months. General J. Lawton Collins, army chief of staff, later remembered, "Responsible authorities in Washington were no longer

pessimistic about our being driven out of Korea and . . . no longer was there much talk of evacuation. General Ridgway alone was responsible for this dramatic change.”¹⁴

Although forced to abandon Seoul, Eighth Army survived and gained reinforcements. Ridgway capitalized on these assets, especially artillery, to begin a patient but overwhelming advance across the Korean front. In a series of controlled and limited offensives, Eighth Army ground forward destroying communist forces wherever and whenever they stood to fight. Operations Thunderbolt, Killer, and Ripper lived up to their names. Seoul was liberated (never to be lost again) on March 15, and by early April the Eighth Army settled along an imaginary line

The Relief of General MacArthur



The order, 11 April 1951



At Wake Island, October 1950



“There is no substitute for victory.”

¹⁴ Gibby, *Korean Showdown*, 25-27. Quotation is in Collins, *War in Peacetime*, 255.

known as “Kansas.” Line Kansas was considered the least northward position that had to be held to ensure the ROK’s future security. Ridgway paused along this line in anticipation of a fifth Chinese offensive.¹⁵

Meanwhile, MacArthur finally figured out there was a disconnect in American strategy and military operations in Korea that he decided to solve by influencing a change in policy. A series of public relations missteps culminated with MacArthur publicly announcing on March 24, 1951, an ultimatum for the communists to cease fighting or risk destruction of the Chinese homeland. He had knowingly undermined the president’s prerogative to seek expanded allied support in exchange for assurances that the United States sought a negotiated settlement. When MacArthur wrote a personal letter to Congressman Joseph W. Martin, Jr., (made public on April 5) where his expression “there is no substitute for victory” again appeared to contradict and undermine the president’s policy to settle the war by political means, it was the last straw. Acheson and Marshall both agreed that MacArthur’s behavior had crossed constitutional bounds. On April 9, Truman decided to recall MacArthur and relieve him of all his commands.¹⁶

¹⁵ Gibby, *Korean Showdown*, 27.

¹⁶ Truman, *Years of Trial and Hope*, 438-50 lays out the president’s case against MacArthur. The Joint Chiefs viewpoint of this civil-military crisis is represented in Collins, *War in Peacetime*, 280-87.

Figuring out the Strategy: NSC 48/5, Ground and Air Campaigns

“United States objectives . . . should seek to avoid a general war . . . deter further aggression . . . seek firm establishment of collective security”



Two days later, Ridgway assumed MacArthur's position in the Far East. MacArthur's relief, dramatic and contentious as it was, did prove beneficial in that the commotion provided political space for a strategy to be developed that conformed to the national policy limiting the war through negotiations. Fortunately, Ridgway proved equal to the task. He was a much more astute and politically attuned theater commander. He was careful to avoid public statements on policy. Militarily, Ridgway was successful because he recognized that a traditional application of ground combat power seeking to destroy the communist army was too hard, too costly, and too unpredictable for the means he had available. He would have to reduce risk, limit casualties, and hurt the Chinese just enough, but not so much that they might escalate the conflict. It was a delicate balancing act that contrasted sharply with MacArthur's all-or-nothing approach. Consequently, Ridgway planned to keep ground and air operations active and strategically

relevant through a series of short and limited offensive thrusts. It was an approach we may be tempted to call “attritional,” but we should avoid considering this lesser form of “annihilation” as a pejorative. In his mind, the only thing that counted was to kill as many communist soldiers as possible while preserving UNC and ROK troops. Any ground gained as a result of these limited operations would provide Washington with leverage.

Additionally, he went out of his way to tell the joint chiefs and civilian authorities what they wanted to hear, that the fighting conditions not only supported but warranted a political solution. In this way, the new UNC commander reassured allies, reduced the danger of an expanded war, and aligned military operations with his president’s political objectives, all the while inflicting terrific casualties on communist forces, eventually leading them to agree to negotiations for an armistice.¹⁷

About the time the Chinese were impaling themselves during their final assault in May 1951, National Security Council memorandum 48/5 (NSC 48/5) was drafted and approved. Significantly, NSC 48/5 laid out desired conditions for success in Korea and appropriate authorities for the theater commander. United States policy should “continue as an ultimate objective to seek by political, as distinguished from military means, a solution of the Korean problem.” At the end of May 1951, NSC 48/5 was operationalized by separate instructions from the JCS, directing Ridgway “to create conditions favorable to a settlement of the Korean conflict . . . under appropriate armistice arrangements.” General Collins acknowledged, “For the first time since he [the Commander in Chief, Far East] had assumed overall command he knew clearly his responsibilities and the limits of his authority.”¹⁸

¹⁷ Gibby, *Korean Showdown*, 32-33.

¹⁸ Collins, *War in Peacetime*, 301-2.

Now, for the first time in the conflict, the ends, means, and ways were not only balanced, they were synchronized in a way that the JCS had not been able to do in the previous twelve months. Ridgway was directed to limit operations sufficiently to create conditions favorable to a settlement that would terminate hostilities, establish the authority of the ROK over all terrain south of an undetermined line that was in no case to be south of the 38th parallel, provide for the withdrawal of non-Korean forces from the peninsula, and permit the building of sufficient ROK military power to maintain any armistice achieved. However, this newly articulated responsibility and limits on military authority did have a weakness. The strategic goals remained negative: defend the territory of the ROK, prevent escalation or expansion of the fighting, minimize American and allied casualties. Ridgway was not fighting to win, if winning meant the destruction of communism in Korea, nor was he fighting to humble China with a grand battlefield defeat. Further, American strategy did not suggest a straightforward path to achieve a settlement once the communists did agree to negotiate.



Van Fleet's War (Apr – Jun 51)

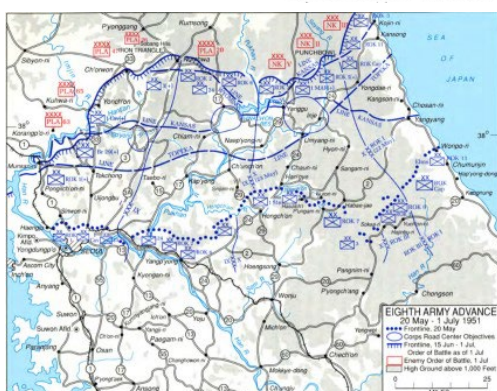
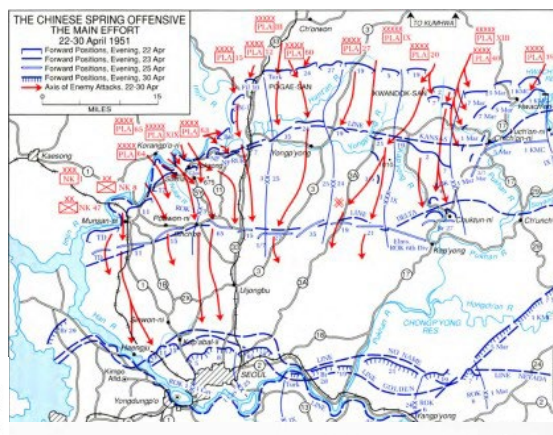
Eighth Army Ammo delivery
(Aug – Sep 51)/weapon

105 mm: 3,092 shells
155 mm (How) 2,579 shells
155 mm (Gun) 1,830 shells
8-inch: 1,631 shells
M1 rifle: 546 rounds

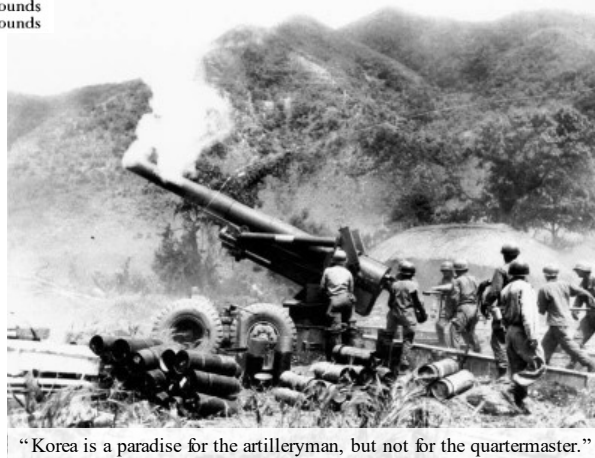
“The transcending value of firepower”

Van Fleet Day of Fire per Tube

105-mm. howitzer	300 rounds
155-mm. howitzer	250 rounds
155-mm. gun	200 rounds
8-inch howitzer	200 rounds
75-mm. howitzer	250 rounds



“May is the month in which to defeat him”



“Korea is a paradise for the artilleryman, but not for the quartermaster.”

One officer who, probably more than most, struggled with this new kind of war was Lt. Gen. James A. Van Fleet, who replaced Ridgway as Eighth Army commander on April 14, 1951. Though Van Fleet contrasted sharply with Ridgway, he was also a fighter. He was a solid commander for Eighth Army, displaying an uncanny sense of the battlefield's tempo, and he possessed all the qualities of a great captain—cool under pressure, aggressive, and with a fertile mind determined to win.¹⁹

Which was a problem because American policy was not to win a military victory in Korea. Van Fleet ran afoul of this stricture early, in late May and early June 1951, during the second phase of the Chinese Fifth Campaign and its aftermath. Van Fleet had welcomed a

¹⁹ Van Fleet's best biographer is Paul F. Braim, *The Will to Win* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2001).

Chinese attack. He told his corps commanders, “May is the month in which to defeat him. We can do it better in this area than in any other. Now is the time.” Operationally, Van Fleet intended to fight a decisive battle to destroy the Chinese army in Korea.²⁰

He nearly pulled it off. Just four days into the Chinese attack, which began 16 May, it was clear that Eighth Army had the advantage. Sensing the Chinese were off-balance, Van Fleet ordered an immediate counter-offensive. Whole units disintegrated, resulting in nearly 20,000 Chinese captured. Prisoner interrogations confirmed casualties were high, morale low, and Chinese troops at the end of a long and failing supply line. UNC air attacks combined with aggressive maneuver produced the worst military setback for the Communists in Korea since Inchon. At the end of May, Van Fleet urged Ridgway to approve a general offensive with an amphibious landing on the east coast to encircle and complete their destruction. He further advised Ridgway, “the potentiality of enemy defeat should over-ride any objections,” by which he meant “political” objections.²¹

Yet, on May 30, just after receiving Van Fleet’s request to expand operations against the retreating Chinese, Ridgway transmitted to Washington a thorough report that did not include Van Fleet’s proposal but did include an assessment that reflected the NSC 48/5 goal to seek a political solution in Korea. He stated, “The enemy has suffered a severe major defeat. Within the past few days there has been a rapidly increasing deterioration of the Chinese forces . . . Eighth Army [is] . . . inflicting maximum casualties on a defeated and retiring enemy. *I therefore believe that for the next 60 days the United States government should be able to count with reasonable*

²⁰ James A. Van Fleet, “The Truth about Korea,” *Life* 34 (May 11, 1953): 132 and Gibby, *Korean Showdown*, 29-30.

²¹ Robert B. Bruce, “Tethered Eagle: Lt. Gen. James A. Van Fleet and the Quest for Military Victory in the Korean War, April – June 1951,” *Army History* 82 (Winter, 2012): 19-20.

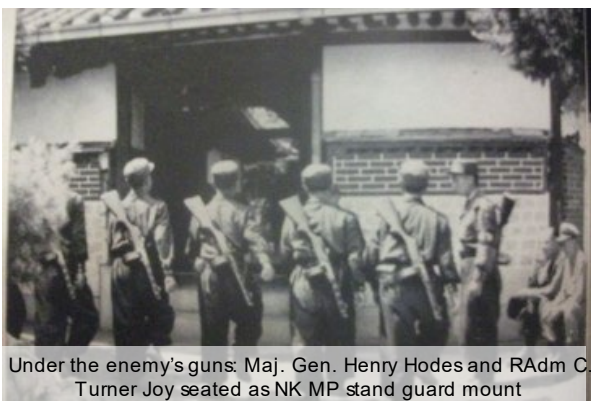
*assurance upon a military situation in Korea offering optimum advantages in support of its diplomatic negotiations.”*²²

The JCS agreed and encouraged Ridgway to freeze the tactical situation while Eighth Army held the advantage. All operations after June 1, 1951, had one objective: maintain an equilibrium supportive of a military armistice. In the last week of June 1951, Van Fleet reported to Ridgway that Eighth Army was secure on its main line of resistance. But Van Fleet realized his fears had come to pass. Although severely beaten following their May offensive, after only three weeks the Communists had regained their own equilibrium. The great vision of a decisive pursuit was over. Subsequent plans produced by Van Fleet’s staff, which Ridgway rejected out of hand, to achieve a military victory or to establish a better defensive line just a bit farther north all collided with Truman’s decision to limit American military commitment in Korea and to avoid thousands of unnecessary casualties.

²² Gibby, *Korean Showdown*, 32.

Negotiations

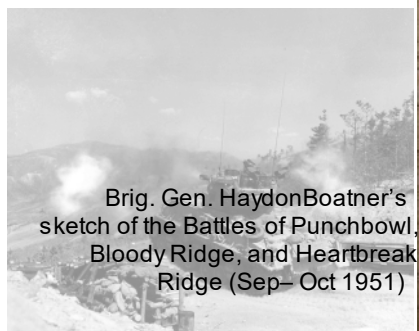
Kaesong: 10 July- 23 August 1951
Panmunjom: 25 Oct 1954- 27 July 1953



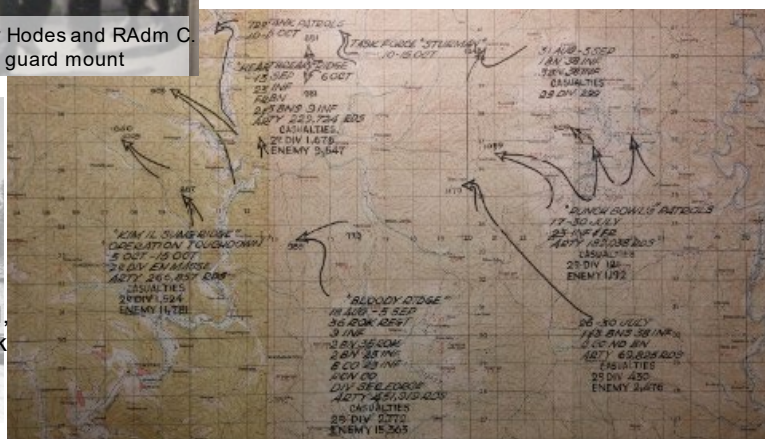
Under the enemy's guns: Maj. Gen. Henry Hodes and RAdm C. Turner Joy seated as NK MP stand guard mount



Marking the future DMZ



Brig. Gen. Haydon Boatner's sketch of the Battles of Punchbowl, Bloody Ridge, and Heartbreak Ridge (Sep- Oct 1951)



On July 1, 1951, the communists agreed to negotiate. Ridgway had pulled it off—he had conducted military operations in such a manner as to avoid losing while winning just enough to achieve the policy objective to bring the enemy to the negotiation table. Unfortunately, once again, US policy was to fail its military commanders in Korea. No one in Washington had thought through what an armistice was supposed to achieve other than to stop the fighting. Ridgway received no instructions on settling the political basis of the conflict, nor was he guided on what level of commitment the US would make to get a truce and then enforce it.²³ Ominously, while the Communist delegation was full of politically-minded and experienced

²³ Kaufman, *The Korean War*, 183-214 sets the negotiations within their global and US domestic political contexts.

negotiators in uniform, the State Department pointedly declined to provide Ridgway with a political advisor. Ridgway was supposed to stick strictly to military issues.²⁴

This short-sightedness, which was borne of a reluctance to engage politically with “outlaw” Communist regimes, threatened to overturn what had been a successful military strategy to end the Korean War on an advantageous basis. The American failure to seize success allowed the Communists to demonstrate the truth of the Clausewitzian adage, in war the result is never final. The communists would show how unprepared the Americans were for the opening of a “second front” that enabled the Communists to attempt to gain at the truce talks—essentially a third war for Korea—what Chinese armies failed to deliver on the battlefield during the “Second War for Korea.” Over the next two years, Ridgway, and his successor Gen. Mark W. Clark, wrestled with yet another policy-strategy disconnect of how to compel the enemy now to accept an unfavorable armistice.²⁵

This stance was problematic as it deliberately obscured political opportunities to end the war quickly while still maintaining a favorable military situation. The American position, focused as it was on military matters, determined to retain “defensible terrain” that was well north of the 38th parallel, in response to the Communists’ demands to return to the *status quo ante bellum*. A political perspective may have softened the American military position sufficiently to give the Communists some ground while still maintaining a sufficient buffer region to guard against a renewal of hostilities. Unfortunately, trust was in short supply, and this method of “bargaining” to a settlement was left untried. Consequently, for the next two years, as much negotiating was done by gunfire as by verbal argument.

²⁴ C. Turner Joy, *How Communists Negotiate* (New York: Macmillan, 1955), 10-18.

²⁵ See Joy, *How Communists Negotiate*, 18-29 for how the communist delegation did their best to frame the talks to suit their military interests.

The negotiations represented a serious constraint on the theater commander. He was not authorized to break off truce talks without explicit permission from Washington; he was also not authorized to increase military operations beyond local engagements. A further implied constraint was casualties. UNC members became increasingly impatient for a settlement and sensitive to losses in further tactically dangerous and costly fighting.

Generals Ridgway and Van Fleet ran into this phenomenon at the conclusion of a successful, peninsula-wide, limited attack in September and October of 1951. The background was that negotiations at Kaesong had been going poorly. The communists controlled the site and the surrounding terrain, and engineered a number of “incidents,” attempting to embarrass and coerce the UNC to concede that the 38th parallel would become, again, the de facto boundary between the two Koreas.²⁶ Since Eighth Army was well above the parallel across most of the peninsula, this was a ridiculous demand. Seeing they would not get their way, the communists broke off the talks in late August.

In response, Van Fleet ordered his three US corps to make a limited attack to kill the enemy and seize important terrain features. That was the military objective. The political objective was to get the communists to come back to the table, preferably at a more neutral location. These attacks, the most famous of which were those for the Punchbowl and Heartbreak Ridge, were successful. Important ground was gained, forcing the communists to reconvene talks at Panmunjom, a much better location. It appeared that the Americans were getting results through military action. Chief UNC delegate Vice Admiral C. Turner Joy saw the effect of Van Fleet’s blitz. Joy remembered one of these days in early November, when he sat in his tent listening to “the sound of our shells and bombs crunching against Communist positions.” Those

²⁶ See Gibby, *Korean Showdown*, 48-54 for analysis of the manipulation of “incidents” to gain concessions from the United Nations Command delegates.

were the Americans' most effective arguments, as both Joy and Ridgway knew the Chinese were inured to casualties but very sensitive to loss of real estate.²⁷

But some estimates put the price for this successful advance as high as 60,000 Korean, American, and allied killed and wounded. Throughout the month of August, which saw most of the Eighth Army static, the American fatality rate was 9.9 men per day. In September, as the battles for Bloody Ridge, Heartbreak Ridge, and the Punchbowl reached their climax, American soldiers and marines were dying at a rate of 36.7 per day. In early October, when all three corps were fighting offensively, Eighth Army endured a fatality rate of 51.5 soldiers and marines per day. These accelerating figures stunned the American public and Truman's administration. Based on directions from the JCS, Ridgway ordered Joy in mid-November 1951 to accept communist proposals to freeze the line of contact and for Van Fleet to refrain from any offensive action not directed from Ridgway's HQ in Tokyo.²⁸

From Washington's perspective, if the Communists were prepared to accept the current line of contact as the final demarcation line, as they claimed they were, that was good enough. Other armistice issues could be resolved in further negotiations. The president was under significant pressure that was transparent to Ridgway and his field commanders. Gallup polling in late 1951 revealed the president's popularity barely above 25%—a reflection of growing frustration and ambivalence toward Truman's limited war policy objectives. The offensive war was about to come to an end.²⁹

²⁷ Joy, *How Communists Negotiate*, 139-40.

²⁸ The major tactical offensives undertaken during this time period, including the military and political consequences, are addressed in Gibby, *Korean Showdown*, 107-29.

²⁹ American Institute of Public Opinion, *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion, 1935-1971*, vol. 2, 1949-1958 (New York: Random House, 1972), 1019, 1027.

The Air War



From the beginning of the Korean War, air power had played a key and at times decisive role to maintain United Nations military power on the peninsula. American airmen in Korea believed in strategic attack both to destroy war-making potential and the enemy's will to continue fighting. This doctrine was the product of education and experience that conditioned a generation of airmen to think of air power as indivisible and inherently strategic in effects. Immediately after the North Korean attack in June 1950, MacArthur defaulted to his most recent experience as a joint-force commander fighting a mostly unlimited war to destroy the Empire of Japan. Shortly after the commitment of ground forces to Korea, MacArthur's Far East Air Forces immediately began to prosecute the war they knew. Far East Bomber Command started a strategic campaign whose "primary consideration . . . [was] the vital necessity of destruction of

North Korean objectives north of the 38th parallel.”³⁰ On July 13, B-29s flew the first strategic strikes of the war targeting ports and harbors, railways, oil and lubricant factories and storage, weapons arsenals, and raw materials. By August Bomber Command was engaged in a comprehensive effort to wipe out North Korea’s infrastructure. Within six weeks, all eighteen targets nominated had been severely damaged or destroyed. By September 15, 1950, Lt. Gen. George Stratemeyer, MacArthur’s senior airman, boasted that practically all-important industrial targets had been neutralized. There was literally nothing worthwhile left to bomb.³¹

The destruction of North Korea’s scanty industrial and agrarian infrastructure, combined with the physical disintegration of the North Korean army following the Inchon landing may have tended to validate the Americans’ “total war” approach, but the Chinese intervention exposed the limitations of strategic bombing doctrine and prompted an immediate recast of air power’s contribution to the war. Once the negotiations began and the lines stabilized in the summer of 1951, Lt. Gen. Otto P. Weyland, a strong proponent of tactical air power, influenced Ridgway to sanction a comprehensive interdiction plan to coerce the Communists while limiting liability of indecisive battles with long casualty lists.

The trouble for air power in Korea was technological, operational, and doctrinal. American airmen simply lacked the physical abilities to do all they promised through aerial interdiction. Bomb accuracy, nighttime capabilities, intelligence assessment and analysis were all inadequate to target effectively a low-consumption army that was heavily reliant on muscle power and human endurance. The Rail Interdiction Plan, also known as “Operation Strangle,” largely failed because it was impossible to sever enough rail and road arteries long enough to

³⁰ Conrad C. Crane, *American Airpower Strategy in Korea, 1950-1953* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2000), 31-32.

³¹ Robert F. Futrell, *The United States Air Force in Korea* (Washington, DC: Office of the Air Force Historian, 1983), 186, 193.

produce any sense of unsustainability at the front. A subsequent effort, titled “Operation Saturate,” likewise failed for insufficient air frames to provide non-stop coverage over area targets, especially at night.

Experience in World War II suggested that the most effective interdiction operations were run in conjunction with aggressive ground maneuver. The short-lived pursuit phase following the Communists’ May 1951 offensive tended to support this analysis. Frustratingly, the static nature of the negotiations phase saw American airmen fly repeat missions over well-worn approaches to bomb bridges, viaducts, tunnels, and marshalling yards that were increasingly defended and difficult to strike effectively. Pre-positioned construction material, conscripted repair crews, and manually constructed bypasses ensured that logistical bottlenecks rarely developed for more than a few days. Without the threat of major ground action, much pressure on Communist logistics was relieved, despite the tremendous damage done to the North Korean transportation network.

Finally, there was always the question of which targets were more remunerative. Ridgway preferred hitting the North Korean capital of Pyongyang, which had advantages of being easily identified from the air and a militarily important staging and depot area. Unfortunately, it was politically sensitive and weather coverage over the target area frequently reduced the effectiveness of bombing. When General Mark Clark assumed command of the Korean theater in the summer of 1952, negotiations were nearly a year old. Seeing for himself the dead-end of truce talks, Clark felt less constrained and was willing to allow greater latitude to his airmen. FEAF planners developed an Air Pressure Strategy that expanded the target list to include civilian infrastructure, particularly that which supported Chinese industry in Manchuria. Under this targeting program, “the outstanding strategic air strike of the war” according to one

historian, occurred on June 23, 1952, when more than 500 navy, marine, and air force aircraft descended on several hydro-electric dams and power stations. FEAF followed this performance with a July blitz that completed the destruction of nearly all of North Korea's above-ground industry and manufacturing. August was even worse as American bombers and fighter-bombers left a swath of destruction across northern Korea.³²

Despite this unprecedented attack from the sky, the ground war continued. In fact, it was about to explode in a flurry of battle not seen since May 1951. For the first six months of 1952,

Active Defense, Nov 51 – May 52

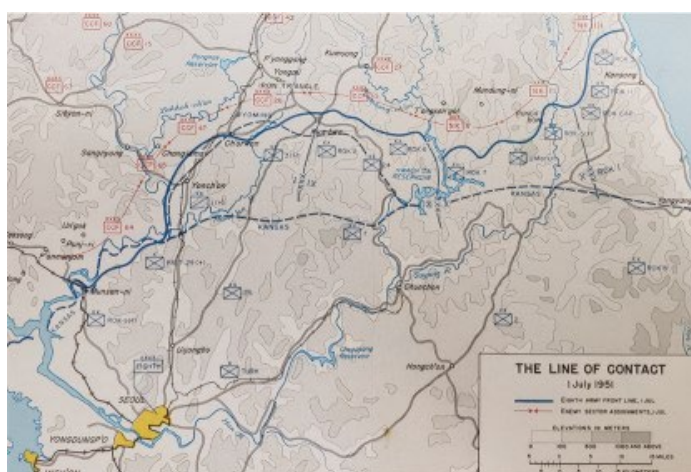
"b. To develop this line in sufficient strength to insure its retention against strong hostile attacks.

"c. To determine and occupy positions forward of this line which are acceptable as an outpost line, particularly with reference to insuring adequate observation and warning. These outpost positions will be the line to which UN Forces will withdraw under armistice terms.

"d. By occupation of the ground or by vigorous patrolling, raids, and reconnoitering in force, make frequent and sufficient contacts to maintain a firm, unquestionable line of contact at least two kilometers forward of the outpost line.

"3. In obtaining the objectives outlined above, any offensive action taken for the purpose of retaining marginal positions will be limited to battalion size attacks unless the commander is directed by lower order. Constant effort will be exerted toward insuring against unnecessary casualties."

"insuring against unnecessary casualties"



Automatic weapons bunker, Heartbreak Ridge



Wounded ROK infantryman loaded onto helicopter litter.

³² The best analysis of air interdiction and the various attempts to apply this technique to the Korean War is Eduard Mark, *Aerial Interdiction: Air Power and the Land Battle in Three American Wars* (Washington, DC: Center for Air Force History, 1994).

Van Fleet and his Eighth Army fought under a new set of tactical limitations, known as “Active Defense.” Ridgway, with JCS approval, specifically limited offensive operations to patrols and local counterattacks to recapture lost outpost positions.³³

It was during this period of Active Defense that President Truman at last determined his final policy position for ending the war satisfactorily. This decision rejected communist demands of an all-for-all POW exchange in favor of voluntary repatriation. In other words, every POW would be screened to determine his repatriation destination. Truman’s resolution ran counter to international law, but it had political merit. Many UNC prisoners were either South Koreans impressed into the North Korean army or were former Nationalist Chinese troops sent to Korea as cannon fodder. Truman recognized the opportunity to gain a humanitarian and propaganda victory, even if he could not win a military one. “We will not buy an armistice by turning over human beings for slaughter or slavery,” he later wrote.³⁴

Unfortunately, the President’s view was at odds with the JCS, Secretary of Defense Robert Lovett, and most of all, General Ridgway and Admiral Joy. The latter two were certain that such a policy would prolong the war, and as the UNC could not expect additional resources to force the communists to give in, they would have to make a number of unwise concessions to sweeten what was an extremely bitter pill for the Chinese to swallow. The communists were happy to take the concessions, but they still refused to accept voluntary repatriation as a basis for settling the armistice.³⁵

While the condition of the communist POWs in UNC custody and the incidents involving the screening and security of non-repatriate POWs are important to the overall story, I want to

³³ The concept of “Active Defense” and its consequences is assessed in Gibby, *Korean Showdown*, 136-39.

³⁴ Truman, *Years of Trial and Hope*, 460.

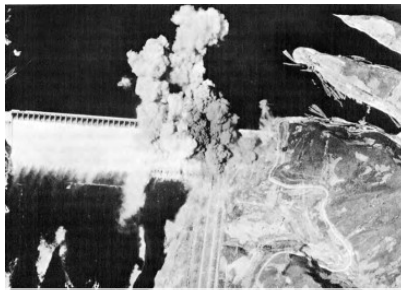
³⁵ Gibby, *Korean Showdown*, 154-59.

underscore here the military problem: by resetting the terms of “victory,” that is gaining an acceptable political outcome in a way that was unacceptable to the communists, Ridgway was placed in a strategic bind. He did not have the resources or the authority to expand military operations to compel the communists to accept the will of the United States. Clausewitz likely would have disapproved of this strategic approach. *This is why 1952 was such a crushing year.* The Americans had fallen into a strategy trap of their own making.



Gen. Mark W. Clark

Groping for a Settlement May – Dec 52



Air Pressure Strategy: Bombing Suiho power dam



Objectives for Op Showdown, Oct -Nov 52



Fortifying Old Baldy, Jun 52



Negotiations at Panmunjom

This was the situation that Gen. Mark Clark faced when he assumed theater command in early May 1952. He would struggle with this problem mostly by tinkering along the margins of acceptable military operations: a limited attack in central Korea by the 45th Infantry Division; an air pressure campaign that produced excellent tactical results in terms of targets destroyed, and

finally a desperate attempt to force a final settlement by launching a two-division limited attack into the Iron Triangle, known as Operation Showdown.

Partly in response to POW riots against repatriation and partly a reaction to enhanced Communist intransigence at Panmunjom and on the battlefield, General Clark approved this attack as a last-ditch effort to gain traction over the deadlock. Even as Operation Showdown, active from October to November 1952, was failing to live up to its promise, Clark thought to present president-elect Dwight Eisenhower with a new plan to win the war, known as OPLAN 8-52.³⁶

OPLAN 8-52 and Military Victory in Korea



Type	Augmentation Required	Total Available to OPLAN 8-52
UN Division	3 (Marine, Infantry, Airborne)	11
ROK Division	2	12
Nationalist Division	2	2
105-mm How Bn	1	4
155-mm How Bn	7	16
8-inch How Bn	4	8
AAA AW Bn	12	16
AAA Gun Bn	8	12

OPLAN 8-52 Force Augmentation

Type	Augmentation Required	Total Available to OPLAN 8-52
Battleship	1	2
Cruisers	6	10
Carriers w/aircraft	2	6
Destroyers	41	91
Minecraft	16	48

Type	Augmentation Required (squadrons)	Total Available to OPLAN 8-52
Fighter-Bomber	3	18
F-80, F-84		
Fighter-Interceptor	9	16
F-86		
Fighter-Interceptor (All Weather)	4	3 (one squadron retained in Japan)
F-91		
Light Bomber	3	9
B-26		
Medium Bomber	6	15
B-29		
TACP (Close air support)	3	8

³⁶ Mark Clark, *From the Danube to the Yalu*, 76-82, lays out the justification for Operation Showdown; pages 230-34 recounts Clark's hope that Eisenhower would be amenable to increased military pressure against the communists.

Eisenhower had campaigned on Truman's mismanagement of Korea, declaring somewhat disingenuously that if elected he would go to Korea. What he would do in Korea was anyone's guess, but Clark saw an opportunity to present OPLAN 8-52, which the JCS had already reviewed back in September and found wanting. Clark's shopping list for additional forces was eye-popping, and the associated scheme of maneuver to seize a line stretching roughly from Pyongyang to Wonsan was delusional. If the capture of Pyongyang did not do the trick, then an advance to the Yalu River was contemplated. Major amphibious and airborne landings would envelop Communist forces on either coast and in their operational depth; expanded sea and air operations would blockade or target industrial and military capacity in Manchuria and north China. A massive frontal assault to break the enemy's lines in the west, followed by a grand encirclement and battle of annihilation would collapse the Communists' defenses. Although atomic weapons were not required, the plan helpfully allowed for up to 600 such weapons to be used against Manchurian and North Korean targets.³⁷

It was a terrible plan, and it revealed the bankruptcy and desperation of American military thinking that was willing to discard outright three of Washington's four policy proscriptions: violating the Manchurian border, employment of Nationalist Chinese forces, and the imposition of a general blockade. An outside observer would have to suspend disbelief that the UNC ground forces would be able to blast their way through prepared defenses—like those encountered in Operation Showdown—using conventional firepower alone. Atomic bombs would be required to destroy enough enemy forces to give the UNC the room to maneuver that the plan envisioned—violating the fourth strategic proscription. OPLAN 8-52 would not only fail to win, it would put Eighth Army in a more disadvantageous position to end the war. This

³⁷ OPLAN 8-52 is analyzed in Gibby, *Korean Showdown*, 276-80.

plan was worse than a MacArthur do-over, and Eisenhower was wise enough to avoid talking with Clark about it.

After a two-day visit, Eisenhower flew away, personally convinced that the road to a “win” in Korea was not through Pyongyang or even Beijing. Van Fleet, for his part, at last accepted the new reality. On December 12, 1952, he announced “every effort to reduce combat losses to an absolute minimum consistent with the proper performance of the Army’s current combat missions.” Additionally, Van Fleet reserved authority to approve all offensive actions larger than company-size. He continued to emphasize the value of patrolling and capturing prisoners. Should the Communists attack, Eighth Army needed to maintain the “necessary strength to throw back every offensive action against our presently held positions.” Van Fleet’s guidance was barely changed since the previous November, except that now he really meant it.³⁸

What then, can be learned from America’s Korean War experience? First, there is a direct linkage between political and strategic aspirations, and the means devoted to back such aspirations with military force. Great risks result if the aspirations are greater than the resources made available to a commander, who is compelled then to fight a war that is unwinnable at an acceptable cost. Second is the question of responsibility: whose role is it to ensure this linkage is rational and realistic? While the political leader has the right to be wrong regarding the solicitation, hearing, and accepting of military advice, the military professional is in a tougher position and bears a greater responsibility. The military professional has the technical expertise, the experience, and the professional education to communicate calculated risk and help political leadership envision what is possible. It is incumbent on the senior military officer to develop a relationship of respect and trust so that advice is baked into the decision-making process. Third,

³⁸ Gibby, *Korean Showdown*, 280-81.

the United States' military forces may be historically, as a joint force, good at breaking things and killing enemy. Translating that potential political power into understandable and cogent strategic narratives that resonate with political leadership has proven to be a challenge of the highest order.

Admiral C. Turner Joy observed that political objectives for the armistice should have been determined prior to negotiations and been independent of the vagaries of battle at any given time.³⁹ The same advice would obtain for the war itself. Good strategy seeks to clarify political objectives before the shooting starts; if that is not possible, then political and military leaders must come together to reach that clarity before engaging the end-game, whether that be a military or diplomatic resolution. Of all the missteps made in the Korean War, the failure of this dialogue between civilian and military leadership to determine compatible goals, resources, and acceptable methods was the most egregious. The president determined policy and expected the military men to figure out how to achieve it. Unfortunately, his decision over POW repatriation, for example—as justified politically as it may have been—was made without regard to the military consequences, and it placed commanders in an untenable position that gave the war its bitter taste. It was the breakdown of this contingent process of policy and strategic decision-making that produced the long stalemate in Korea.

³⁹ Joy, *How Communists Negotiate*, 173.