Summary Article: Korean War
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On June 25, 1950, North Korean military forces crossed the thirty-eighth parallel and attacked South Korean Army positions in Ongjin. In early July, U.S. forces arrived to aid the South Korean forces under the United Nations Command. The conflict that ensued became known as the Korean War, although President Harry Truman initially referred to it as a “police action.” Lasting for three years, the Korean War was the first “limited war” of the twentieth century. The armed conflict ended with an armistice signed on July 27, 1953, at Panmunjom on the border between North and South Korea. No formal peace treaty was signed, however, and the participants are technically still at the war.

Called the “Forgotten War” because of the relative lack of public concern compared to World War II for it during and after the conflict, the Korean War resulted in the death of 54,229 U.S. soldiers and 103,284 American casualties. The total cost of the war was $30 billion (equivalent to $341 billion in 2011), or 4.2 percent of the gross domestic product for the peak year of the war (1952), according to a Congressional Research Service report.

Historical Background
Relatively unscathed at the end of World War II, the United States emerged as the leader of the free world. The other major powers (England, France, Germany, Russia, Japan, and China) suffered major destruction and loss of life and were financially exhausted. The United Nations (UN) was established to replace the League of Nations to prevent warfare by the use of collective security and deterrence strategies.

In 1945, the Soviet Union invaded Korea, which had been under Japanese control since 1910. The United States moved troops into South Korea in September 1945 to preclude the Soviets from occupying the complete peninsula. Syngman Rhee, the former leader of Korea, returned from the United States to the peninsula in October 1945. Korea was left partitioned along the thirty-eighth parallel and divided into two sovereign nations (North and South Korea).

The Soviet Union and the United States agreed to a joint commission to prepare Korea for the election of a provisional government and trusteeship in December 1945. However, this agreement did not last, and the United States referred the Korean issue of reunion and independence to the UN in 1947.

In October 1947, the United States presented a resolution to the UN calling for separate elections in the American and Soviet zones of the Korean Peninsula. The proposal failed because the Soviets
refused access to their zone by the UN Temporary Commission on Korea (UNTCOK) members in 1948. This led to the UN approving a U.S. resolution giving UNTCOK authority to supervise elections in parts of Korea that might be accessible to the commission.

Syngman Rhee was elected as the first president of the Republic of Korea (South Korea), which was established in 1948. At the same time, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPR)—now called North Korea and known as the Hermit Kingdom, led by Kim Il-Sung—was established. Civil unrest persisted in the peninsula, leading Rhee to impose martial law and the U.S. National Security Council to recommend the withdrawal of all American forces by June 30, 1949.

The Cold War and the Significance of the Korean War

Unrest between the two Koreas continued but did not rouse public or governmental concern in the United States because of the prevalent American belief that the peninsula lacked military and strategic value in the case of a war in Asia. The communist victory in China in 1949 shocked the leaders of the free world. They believed that the main global threat would be a confrontation with the Soviet Union in Europe, not Asia.

Secretary of State Dean Acheson's speech before the National Press Association in January 1950 placed Korea outside of the American defense perimeter. Kim Il-Sung interpreted this as a U.S. decision not to defend South Korea against a communist attack.

Kim Il-Sung visited the Soviet Union and China in the spring of 1950, seeking approval of his plans to attack South Korea. Both Joseph Stalin and Mao Zedong, leaders of the Soviet Union and China, respectively, were hesitant to approve Kim's plan for fear of possible American military intervention. Stalin eventually agreed to the invasion, after receiving assurances it would last only several days, and Mao concurred.

General Douglas MacArthur was in command of the U.S. forces in Korea, and as his troops began to turn back the North Korean invasion, he advocated a strategy of pushing into North Korea for a total defeat of the communist forces. In November 1950, however, Chinese troops moved against the American lines and drove U.S. troops back into South Korea. MacArthur argued for the bombing of communist China and the use of Nationalist Chinese forces from Taiwan against the communist forces. President Harry Truman refused, and the disagreement between the two leaders spilled over into the press. In April 1951, Truman fired MacArthur and replaced him with General Matthew Ridgway, who complied with Truman's desire for a “limited war,” a concept he explained in an address to the nation on April 11, 1951. MacArthur returned to the United States as a hero, and parades were held in his honor. In an address to Congress on April 19, 1951, he gave his famous farewell line “Old soldiers never die, they just fade away.” The speech also was a pivotal moment in the cold war because of the linking of the loss of the war to communism in Asia and to what MacArthur referred to as the inevitable “fall of Europe.” In 1954, President Dwight Eisenhower articulated this position as the “domino theory,” informing America’s foreign policy.

The Korean War affected the United States in several ways: it accelerated integration of its armed forces, led to the defeat of the Democratic Party in the 1952 presidential election, increased American participation in multilateral defense treaties, and solidified the cold war. Internationally, it was the first war involving the UN and represented the first use of collective security. In addition, it was significant in the designation of a demilitarized zone and the introduction of jet fighters into warfare.
In popular culture, the Korean War was the backdrop for the antiwar movie *M*A*S*H* (1970), about the 4077th Mobile Army Surgical Hospital in Uijeongbu, South Korea, based upon the novel by Richard Hooker (a pen name for Dr. H. Richard Hornberger and writer W. C. Heinz), *MASH: A Novel about Three Army Doctors* (1968), and later the long-running television series by the same name (1972-1983). The finale of the show in 1983 set a record at the time as the most watched television episode in media history.

The Korean War Veterans Memorial was dedicated in Potomac Park in the nation's capital, south of the National Mall, in 1995, thirteen years after completion of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, also near the National Mall. The Korean War Memorial is shaped into a triangle with figures representing a patrol squad. An inscription on a plaque prompts thought about the purpose of the war: “Our nation honors her sons and daughters who answered the call to defend a country they never knew and a people they never met.” Other notable memorials to Korean War veterans have been erected in Boston, Atlantic City, Bangor (Maine), Texarkana (Texas), and Wilsonville (Oregon).


*Photograph captioned “With her brother on her back a war weary Korean girl tiredly trudges by a stalled M-26 tank, at Haegju, Korea, 6/9/1951.” General Records, Department of the Navy, U.S. National Archives and Records Administration.*

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General Douglas MacArthur (seated), commander-in-chief of the United Nations Command and the U.S. Army Forces in the Far East, observes with Brigadier General Courtney Whitney (left), government section, Far East Command, and Major General Edward Almond (at right, pointing), commanding general, X Corps in Korea, the shelling of Inchon from the USS Mount McKinley, September 15, 1950. U.S. Army official Korean War image archive, National Archives and Records Administration.

Syngman Rhee (left), president of the Republic of Korea (ROK), presents the ROK Order of Military Merit (Taiguk) to Rear Admiral Ralph A. Ofstie, U.S. Navy, Commander Task Force 77, in ceremonies at the presidential residence in Pusan, Korea. In the center is the ROK chief of naval operations, Vice Admiral Sohn Won Il. Official U.S. Navy photograph dated May 13, 1952. National Archives.

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Publicity photo of some cast members from the television show M*A*S*H in 1975: Alan Alda (as Captain Benjamin Franklin “Hawkeye” Pierce), Mike Farrell (as Captain B. J. Hunnicut), and Harry Morgan (as Colonel Sherman T. Potter). CBS Television.
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