

2010

Selling the Korean War: Propaganda, Politics, and Public Opinion, 1950–1953

Michael Pearlman

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

Recommended Citation

Pearlman, Michael (2010) "Selling the Korean War: Propaganda, Politics, and Public Opinion, 1950–1953," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 63 : No. 3 , Article 20.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol63/iss3/20>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu.

Finally, this book is helpful for connecting the dots after the fact, for reconsidering how such adversaries think and plan. For example, McCarthy points to statements made three weeks prior to the actual attack of the USS *Cole* in October 2000 by Sheikh Omar's son, and also to the writings of Nidal Ayyad, one of those convicted in 1995 of the first attack on the World Trade Center: "We promise you that next time it will be very precise and the World Trade Center will continue to be one [of] our targets."

ROGER W. BARNETT, PROFESSOR EMERITUS
Naval War College



Casey, Steven. *Selling the Korean War: Propaganda, Politics, and Public Opinion, 1950–1953*. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2008. 476pp. \$55

The far left and the far right have something in common, especially when their enemies hold the White House. They each tend to think that the president can get away with anything, because he controls the media and the media controls the public, especially when it comes to issues of war. Professor Steven Casey of the London School of Economics actually *knows* something about this topic, usually the realm of strong opinions based on strong prejudice. In 2000 Casey wrote perhaps the most perceptive study ever published on presidential policy and public opinion during World War II. His *Cautious Crusade: Franklin D. Roosevelt, American Public Opinion, and the War against Nazi Germany* (2001) demonstrated that FDR late in the war could not lead the public to change its opinion that the Nazi Party, not the German people, was

the primary culprit of German aggression. The president did not make this distinction, but the country focused blame on Hitler and his inner circle, whom the Allies would remove from power. They would not sanction the plan of Secretary of the Treasury Henry Morgenthau to dismantle German industry or to smash the German nation into a bunch of separate principalities. Why punish the people for the sins of their deposed government?

Casey takes on President Harry S. Truman under different, later circumstances. Truman wanted to "de-escalate," so to speak, public opinion lest it lead to World War III versus China and the Soviet Union. The president, in this effort, refused to call the Korean conflict a "war," as opposed to "a police action," his fateful phrase first uttered at a press conference on 29 June 1950. This signal to the American people did not work out as the White House planned, as Korea quickly turned out to be a war by everyone's definition—except that of executive branch officials, who inadvertently freed the administration's opponents from pressure to mute their criticism, which is what the minority usually does during a war lest it flirt with disloyalty. "The administration's subdued public posture," says Casey, "often afforded the Republican opposition the perfect *opportunity* to take the offensive." Indeed, the public seemed mystified about government policy, as one State Department official pointed out: "Those who approved our resistance [to the communist invasion] in Korea now find the present situation completely confusing and baffling."

A student of the Korean War can now understand why the administration had such difficulty containing Douglas

MacArthur before firing him on 11 April 1951. Could the White House come up with a line to rival the general's riveting message: "There is no substitute for victory"? Perhaps, but it could not deliver one, since its credibility was largely shot by mid-1951, when Truman registered 23 percent public approval, the lowest in the history of the Gallup Poll. In a battle of sound bites, General Omar Bradley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, had to rescue administration policy by testifying that MacArthur's proposal to attack China "was the wrong war, at the wrong place, against the wrong enemy."

One hears that Casey's next book will be about the U.S. Army and correspondents in World Wars I and II. This reader would have preferred that he pushed on into the next war—doing presidents, policy, the media, and public opinion during Vietnam. For those of us particularly interested in those topics, Casey would thus produce a trilogy on wartime policy worthy of the three volumes on military operations produced by Douglas Southall Freeman (*Lee's Lieutenants*, on the U.S. Civil War) and Rick Atkinson (*The Liberation Trilogy* on the U.S. Army in the European theater in World War II). Yes, Steven Casey is that good.

MICHAEL PEARLMAN
Lawrence, Kansas



Hendrix, Henry J. *Theodore Roosevelt's Naval Diplomacy: The U.S. Navy and the Birth of the American Century*. Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 2009. 288pp. \$34.95

Commander Henry J. Hendrix has written a neat monograph based on his

doctoral work. He makes two related arguments: first, that one cannot understand the diplomatic style of President Theodore Roosevelt without first understanding his attitude toward the efficacy and use of naval power; and second, that the existing literature has not adequately integrated naval and military historical methods of analysis with existing diplomatic historical approaches. Consequently, previous interpretations of Roosevelt's foreign policy decisions, as they relate to incidents that involved the use of naval power, are incomplete, precisely because they do not fuse the diplomatic and political with the naval—especially the perspective reflected by the navalist attitudes of Theodore Roosevelt.

As for structure, the book begins with the now-common device of the narrative vignette—in this case the "sailing of the Great White Fleet," as a means of establishing the ambience of the moment of the great president and his great fleet. With the reader now interested in "the rest of the story," Hendrix proceeds in a workmanlike and professional manner, establishing in the first chapter the basis for the beginning of the "beautiful relationship" between TR and the object of his affection and desire, the U.S. Navy. Included here is the story of Roosevelt's famous action as Assistant Secretary of the Navy regarding the deployment of Admiral George Dewey's Far East Squadron to Manila Bay. This episode may be regarded as typical of Roosevelt's activist attitudes and actions regarding the Navy.

The remaining chapters focus topically. The closing chapter on the Great White Fleet is the only one that deals directly with the linkage of the U.S. Navy to an "American Century." The odd man out