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# Refighting the Last War: Command and Crisis in Korea 1950-1953

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Giap, who had the major hand in directing the battle. Second, the French came closer to victory than they imagined; had U.S. airpower been used, it might have been the critical event that forced the badly mauled and demoralized Viet Minh to break off the siege. As it was, Chinese intervention was an important, perhaps critical, factor in keeping the Viet Minh in the fight despite horrendous losses. Last, it was the Chinese who emerged the real victors of Dien Bien Phu. Ho Chi Minh had sought a unified Vietnam under the control of the Viet Minh, but in May 1954 the Chinese forced him to agree to a partition at the Geneva Conference, thus achieving their war aim of clearing the French from Tonkin.

Given the contingent nature of the battle, some of the "lessons" of Dien Bien Phu that Simpson believes were ignored by the U.S. at its own peril in Vietnam were hastily drawn. Without a doubt, the French underestimated the Viet Minh. However, what they encountered at Dien Bien Phu was far from "non-conventional units . . . a guerrilla enemy"—few guerrilla armies are armed with Katyusha multitube rocket launchers! While Simpson extols the "flexibility of a guerrilla foe," there are many examples, including Vietnamese, of insurgencies demonstrating a desperate lack of flexibility, an excessive faith in the revolutionary potential of "the people," and a lemming-like eagerness to rush to some Maoist "third phase." No doubt Simpson is correct to point out that airpower offers a talisman in which many are ready to place too much trust. Yet the lack of it constituted a debilitating French weakness at Dien

Bien Phu, as it did for the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) in 1975. Also, perhaps the author is too ready to see the ARVN's ultimate defeat as foreordained by its origins as a French colonial force, when the greater problem was the inability of the government of South Vietnam to establish its legitimacy in the eyes of its own people.

Finally, the lack of a bibliography and footnotes is especially unfortunate, inasmuch as Simpson has salted his text with extensive quotations from top secret documents, both American and French.

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James, D. Clayton. *Refighting the Last War: Command and Crisis in Korea 1950-1953*. New York: The Free Press, 1992. 282pp. \$24.95

This is a first-rate history of U.S. decision making during the Korean War, by D. Clayton James with Anne Sharp Wells, his primary research assistant. James is a military historian and instructor at the Virginia Military Institute. He has written, among other works, a three-volume history of General Douglas MacArthur's career, *The Years of MacArthur*.

In the years following World War II, it was important to President Harry S. Truman that his domestic reforms not be hampered by the military burdens imposed by the new global threat of communist expansion. His alternative to military spending was to supply security and economic aid to postwar Europe. While he focused on the Fair Deal at home, the signs of trouble in

Asia went unheeded. So when war suddenly broke out in Korea on 25 June 1950, it came as a complete surprise to both civilian and military leaders. The United States was totally unprepared for war against even a third-rate military power.

James states that it was Secretary of State Dean Acheson who was the most fervent proponent of committing American forces to the Korean front and that it was he who instigated the UN Security Council resolution on 27 June calling upon member states to contribute men and materiel to the defense of South Korea. Moreover, James states that Truman bypassed Congress because of the persistent advice of Acheson, "whose influence on Truman was so strong that none of the military leaders challenged the secretary of state's main ideas, not even on military matters." Nor did they challenge MacArthur's insubordination. Omar Bradley, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, put it this way: "Once more we adhered to the custom of yielding to the recommendation of the man on the scene."

In Tokyo, many of MacArthur's staff thought of Truman as a "second rate liberal," whereas in Washington many saw MacArthur as a vain and politically ambitious man who was willing to trigger a third world war to fulfill his dreams. General Matthew B. Ridgway replaced MacArthur as supreme commander of UN forces, Korea, on 11 April 1951. Although James writes that it is unlikely that Ridgway or his successor, General Mark Clark, could have survived the turbulent battles that went on between Washington and MacArthur at the beginning of the war, it is

clear that Ridgway, unlike MacArthur, understood the importance of civilian control over military action.

General J. Lawton Collins, who was Army Chief of Staff during the war, was asked by this reviewer why he did not do anything about MacArthur's method of deploying troops in North Korea. "What could I do?" he replied. "I was only Chief of Staff." But Collins did admit that the biggest mistake of his military career was his failure to pressure the Secretary of Defense, George Marshall, to take action against MacArthur. It is important to note that even after the Korean War, "the senior military colleges offered virtually nothing about the lessons of the Korean conflict and the confusion of military and national strategic objectives to prepare the upcoming senior leaders of America's forces in the Vietnam War."

James skillfully provides a bird's-eye view of what happened in Washington, Tokyo, and Korea. One observes Truman, Acheson, Marshall, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff as they deal with their field commanders.

I highly recommend this book to anyone interested in national security. It is rich with information and insight, particularly that we suffered greatly in Korea because of Marshall's belief that the theater commander must be king. Marshall's thinking has now been incorporated into the Goldwater-Nichols legislation, whereby the commanders in chief have vastly increased their power at the expense of the service chiefs. The situation we faced with

MacArthur in Korea may once again confront us.

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McGibbon, Ian. *New Zealand and the Korean War, Vol. I: Politics and Diplomacy*. Auckland: Oxford Univ. Press, 1992 (in association with the Historical Branch, Dept. of Internal Affairs). 468pp. \$US 59

In relative terms, New Zealand's contribution to the United Nations Command during the Korean War was minor. Wellington's contribution consisted of two frigates, a field artillery regiment, and a transport company. However, New Zealand's quick response to the UN's call for help underscored Wellington's strong support for the United Nations and the emerging Western alliance. Moreover, the government's decision to provide a military contingent has had a far-reaching influence.

This work, by New Zealand's pre-eminent military historian, is the long-awaited first volume of the official history of New Zealand in the Korean War. Like its Australian counterpart, written by Professor Robert O'Neill, McGibbon's work collects all political and diplomatic matters in one volume; a second volume will address military operations. As an official history, the work has had the benefit of heretofore unavailable diplomatic files and official documents. This point is of particular import to students of New Zealand's postwar diplomacy and strategy, because this work is the first that comprehensively employs official sources

dealing with what emerged as New Zealand's postwar security policy.

In addition to providing an interesting perspective—from the standpoint of a small power—of the preliminaries, conduct, and “termination” of the Korean War, this work also surveys the political home front. This reviewer was particularly interested in the treatment of the antiwar efforts of the not inconsequential peace movement and the activities of the New Zealand Communist Party. Those wishing to understand better how the Fourth Labour government, led by David Lange, could in 1985 essentially walk away from the Anzus alliance and its intimate defense relationship with the United States would do well to read this work. While New Zealanders are often referred to as the “Prussians of the Pacific,” McGibbon reminds us that there have long been strong pacifist feelings in the country.

Indeed, one of the lessons of this interesting study is the influence New Zealand diplomats were able to exert at the highest levels of United Nations and allied policy making, despite the small size of their country and of its military contribution. Given the decline of British imperial power and growing disagreements within the Commonwealth, New Zealand officials saw that they must respond militarily to the Korean conflict so that they might continue to “win the peace” for which the nation had fought so hard in World War II. Contrast this approach to foreign policy with the 1986 statement by a leading member of the Fourth Labour government that under Labour's new foreign policy there would be “no more Koreans.” The speaker,