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Review Essay

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Perspectives on the Korean War

DONALD W. BOOSE, JR.

In retrospect, it is clear that the Korean War was a key history-shaping event of the 20th century. Beyond its obvious effects in Korea, the war resonated across the globe, recast the international structure of Northeast Asia, and impelled far-reaching changes in the American national security system. Although they were little recognized at the time, this war provided lessons on the organization and conduct of joint and multinational operations that still affect US military doctrine. The 50th anniversary of the conflict encouraged the publication of many new books. Three of these that focus on specific aspects of the war—the Chinese intervention, special operations, and US airpower strategy—are of particular value to *Parameters* readers. Two recent overviews of the war are also worth consideration.

In *The Dragon Strikes: China and the Korean War: June-December 1950*, Patrick C. Roe examines the Chinese intervention in the Korean War in October and November 1950. That intervention, which turned back an attempt by the United States and its allies to reunify Korea militarily and led to a stalemate and negotiated cease-fire, had far-reaching consequences. Roe, who was a Marine intelligence officer during the crucial battles, sets out to determine why the Chinese intervened when they did and why the US leadership so badly misjudged the Chinese intentions. He has used the most pertinent secondary literature, including recent work by China scholars, as well as archival and other sources, to produce a readable, thoughtful, and well-informed description of US and Chinese intelligence, strategy, planning, and operations during the crucial period. His focus is on what the Americans and Chinese knew, the decisions they made, and the military operations that resulted. He addresses tactical actions only when they are directly relevant to his story. Twelve maps provide just enough detail to allow the reader to follow the strategy, planning, and major force movements.

Roe concludes that the disaster was an American intelligence failure, the result of a grand deception by the Chinese who, after the first clash between United Nations Command (UNC) and Chinese forces in October 1950, had convinced the Americans that only a small number of Chinese were in Korea but a huge force was poised to cross the Yalu River from Manchuria. Based on this false assessment, General Douglas MacArthur opted to push on to the Yalu to secure the river crossing sites and present the Chinese with a *fait accompli* before the larger force could intervene. In fact, the Chinese had secretly deployed a 380,000-man army into Korea and had few forces left in Manchuria. Through their deception, they drew the American-led forces deep into North Korea in hopes of destroying them with an overwhelming attack.

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Roe argues that to carry out this deception, the Chinese spread misinformation through bogus prisoners of war, diplomatic contact, the media, and misleading radio traffic. The plan's success depended on good information about US perceptions and planning. Roe suspects that Guy Burgess and Kim Philby, two turncoat British agents, passed much of this information to the Chinese through the Russians. Roe compares US national and theater-level intelligence estimates of the size of the Chinese force in Korea with battlefield information that, in sharp contrast, suggested the presence of a far larger number. He concludes that US leaders must have had other reports—persuasive but false—and deduces that the Chinese, knowing the United States was reading their communications, intentionally transmitted false

information.

Whether or not one is persuaded by all of Roe's arguments (and he makes a very strong circumstantial case), *The Dragon Strikes* is a valuable, authoritative, and thought-provoking account of the strategic and operational aspects of the Chinese intervention that offers important lessons for senior military leaders in this "new" age of information warfare.

At the time the Chinese attacked, the 1st Marine Division, the US Army's 31st Regimental Combat Team (RCT 31), and supporting forces were deployed in northeast Korea at the Changjin Reservoir (the famous "Chosin" Reservoir, so called because of the Japanese name that appeared on US maps at the time). Beginning on 27 November 1950, elements of at least seven Chinese divisions attacked those units. Two battalions of RCT 31 were nearly destroyed east of the reservoir, but they delayed the Chinese long enough for the Marines to hold key terrain south of the reservoir and organize a fighting withdrawal that became one of the heroic episodes of US military history. Those who want more information on the "Chosin Campaign," can find it in the *Changjin Journal*, an internet magazine edited by retired Army Colonel George A. Rasula, a veteran of RCT 31. *Changjin Journal* provides historical articles, historiographic analyses, first-person accounts, photographic essays, and book reviews. It is largely but not exclusively focused on the Army units that fought at the Reservoir.

The kinds of intelligence-gathering and deception operations that took place during the Chinese intervention overlap with the category of warfare known as special operations. During the Korean War, the United Nations Command's special operations forces displayed great courage, daring, and inventiveness, but their efforts were rarely decisive and their effectiveness was undermined by poor coordination, bureaucratic in-fighting, and the lack of a clear strategic rationale for many of the operations. Michael E. Haas, who served in both Army and Air Force special operations forces, vividly describes the daring operations and the problems of organization and coordination in his book, *In the Devil's Shadow: U.N. Special Operations During the Korean War*. Haas covers Army, Air Force, Navy, and CIA special operations in four separate chapters. This approach leads to some repetition and chronological confusion, but overall *In the Devil's Shadow* is a readable account and is the most thorough single-volume description of Korean War special operations to date.

In a brief introductory chapter, Haas notes that when the Korean War began, the military and the recently created Central Intelligence Agency conducted independent and largely uncoordinated special operations. This lack of coordination was made worse by General MacArthur's antipathy toward the CIA, which he tried unsuccessfully to keep out of his theater of war. These overlapping and contradictory efforts led to a bureaucratic clash that undermined the special operations effort.

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The Army, which saw itself as the logical organization to conduct and coordinate special operations, initially focused on short-term intelligence collection infiltrations, psychological operations, and a few commando-style raids. Its most extensive operation began in early 1951, when large bands of armed dissident North Koreans, most of them on the west coast of Korea, were found to be carrying out attacks against Chinese and North Korean forces. The Army made contact with these partisans and established a base of operations for them on islands off the west coast (already in use by the CIA, South Korean government, and the US Air Force for their own clandestine operations). Directed and supplied by the Americans and supported from time to time by ships of the British Royal Navy, these dissident North Koreans and a smaller group on the east coast conducted raids, collected intelligence, rescued downed aircrews, and carried out sabotage and assassination missions. The North Korean partisan force, which grew to some 22,000 by 1953, had considerable tactical success, but the cost was high and their actions were never coordinated with larger, conventional military operations. The Army also carried out a series of attempted penetrations by air, but these airborne missions were uniformly unsuccessful and almost invariably fatal to the agents who jumped behind North Korean lines (an official postwar analysis called the effort "futile and callous").

While the Army was conducting its campaign, the Air Force carried out its own operations to recover downed fliers and gather intelligence. The Air Force interpreted "intelligence operations" very broadly and roamed widely by land, air, and sea to conduct raids and bring back intelligence material, including parts of enemy jet fighters, for evaluation.

Navy special operations forces reconnoitered and prepared sites for amphibious landings and attacked coastal targets, using submarines and surface ships to land US Marine raiders, Navy Underwater Demolition Team swimmers, British Commandos, and CIA-controlled partisans. While all these operations were taking place, the CIA, receiving its guidance from the national level and operating on a regional basis in East Asia, recruited and trained North Korean refugees for insertion into the north to collect intelligence and conduct guerrilla warfare.

The Republic of Korea also carried out its own program of training and infiltration, so that by mid-1951 there was a “proliferation of UN reconnaissance agents, spies, partisans, saboteurs, frogmen, and airmen operating in North Korea.” Haas remarks that both the military and the CIA “were fighting their own separate wars in the enemy’s rear area, and doing so with a minimum of cooperation and coordination. . . . [A] bizarre collection of bureaucratic ‘bandit chiefs’ pursued their individual wars against the Communists’ rear area sanctuaries. It was the kind of internal disorder from which only the Communists were benefiting as the war progressed.”

In 1951, General Matthew B. Ridgway, who had succeeded General MacArthur as Commander-in-Chief, attempted to bring all this covert activity under the control of the Army in Korea. However, neither the CIA nor the Air Force was prepared to subordinate its activities, and although an organization was established to serve as a mechanism for coordination, it did not end the proliferation of special operations organizations. Haas argues that this problem and the failure to tie special operations to the larger war effort had fatal consequences. He concludes that in spite of the valor and sacrifice of US and British advisors and raiders and the thousands of Koreans they sent behind enemy lines, special operations had no discernible impact on the outcome of the war.

US special operations have come a long way since then. In the Persian Gulf and in Afghanistan, special operations efforts have generally been effectively orchestrated

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and well coordinated with conventional operations. Nonetheless, the lessons that Haas describes must not be forgotten. His cautionary story is of enduring relevance to senior military planners and strategic leaders.

The title of Conrad C. Crane’s *American Airpower Strategy in Korea 1950-1953* accurately describes the scope of his work. He does not attempt to deal with day-to-day air operations, but concentrates on “the strategic application of airpower . . . to force a stubborn enemy to agree to a political settlement meeting US war aims.” While Crane does not ignore the vital role that US Navy and Marine Corps, Australian, British, South African, and Republic of Korea air forces played, he focuses primarily on the US Air Force, since that was the only service with “a true doctrine and capacity for strategic airpower and controlled the way the aerial instrument of force was applied in Korea.”

Korea was the first war fought by the newly established US Air Force, whose leaders had prepared to fight a general war in which they would destroy the enemy’s warmaking potential through strategic bombing. Instead, the Air Force found itself fighting a limited war in which, after the Chinese intervention, the enemy’s warmaking potential was out of reach. It was a war in which close air support and interdiction often took precedence over strategic attack.

Crane describes how the previous experience and attitudes of the Far East Commanders (successively, Douglas MacArthur, Matthew B. Ridgway, and Mark W. Clark) and the senior Air Force commanders shaped their views on airpower. He notes that the US military services had just emerged from bitter roles and missions disputes that continued to aggravate interservice relations. He shows how these doctrinal disputes, technological developments, problems of manning and maintaining the fighting spirit of the force, and other issues affected the strategic application of airpower in Korea.

In spite of coordination issues and doctrinal disputes, the Air Force, Navy, and Marines used airpower effectively during the early desperate months of delay and defense to support UNC ground forces and to disrupt the long North Korean supply lines. In the advance north, airpower continued to support the ground effort. After the Chinese intervention, it frequently meant the difference between survival and death or capture for beleaguered UNC forces. But strategic airpower was not able to stop the North Korean invasion nor isolate the battlefield during the Chinese attacks. During the two-year-long stalemate that accompanied the Armistice negotiations, airpower was the major military instrument available to put pressure on the Chinese and North Koreans. But since the communist forces drew their

support from areas off-limits to strategic bombing, the Air Force “had to develop another way to employ airpower to influence enemy decisionmakers, and its campaigns of aerial interdiction and ‘air pressure’ through destruction were attempts to solve that problem.”

By the end of the war, US and allied airpower had leveled North Korean cities, destroyed hydroelectric plants, and knocked out irrigation dams, flooding and disrupting rail and road lines. When the Chinese and North Koreans finally accepted terms for an Armistice in 1953, it seems likely that the air campaign, UNC concessions at the negotiating table, the death of Soviet leader Josef Stalin, and nuclear threats all contributed to the outcome. The Air Force believed, however, that in spite of being hampered by operational restrictions and inadequate resources, its operations had been the decisive factor. The other services were not convinced.

In any event, the hard-won lessons about the use of airpower were soon overshadowed by the Eisenhower-era military “New Look” that emphasized strategic nuclear

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deterrence as the key to US security. In Vietnam, many of the problems encountered in the Korean War arose again. The 1980s finally saw the development of joint doctrine and procedures for the effective coordination of air operations, and the Korean War had been the proving ground for many of those doctrinal concepts. Today, the effective application of airpower remains a crucial element of US strategy and of joint and multinational operations. Crane’s concise, comprehensive analysis of American airpower strategy in Korea is particularly relevant to deliberations on that issue.

Stanley Sandler’s stated goal in writing *The Korean War: No Victors, No Vanquished* was to produce “a single-volume, concise history of the Korean War of modest length.” He addresses the international and theater-specific setting of the war; the major military operations; and the effects of the war on US Cold War strategy, domestic politics, and military policies and structure, including the racial integration of the American armed services. Sandler, who previously edited an encyclopedia of the Korean War, has made use of the most significant published sources available at the time he wrote. The book reads smoothly, and the reader will find much that is both useful and, since Sandler expresses strong opinions, thought-provoking. However, the book contains a substantial number of typographical errors as well as more significant errors of terminology and substance that are troubling in a book by a person with Sandler’s credentials and ambitions. While none of these problems should cause serious students of the war to reject the book, it cannot be recommended to a casual reader who does not already have a good foundation on the subject.

Better suited as a quick introduction to the war is Carter Malkasian’s *Essential Histories: The Korean War 1950-1953*, a slim volume that covers much the same ground as Sandler’s book, but with a much broader brush. Malkasian’s focus is on military operations, but he also provides an introductory chronology and overview of the background and causes of the war. Two chapters drawn from published personal histories provide portraits of an American Marine officer and a Korean civilian. Malkasian also briefly sketches the interrelationship between the war and US domestic politics, the American Cold War military buildup and alliance formation, and the Chinese and North Korean economies. He concludes with an assessment of the impact of the war on the major belligerent powers, the international system, and the conduct of warfare. Many black and white photographs and colorful maps help the reader follow the major events of the war. A brief bibliography identifies the sources Malkasian used in writing the book. No book of 95 pages can deal with a subject as complex as the Korean War without oversimplification and compression; nonetheless, Malkasian provides a useful overview that can be read in an evening or two.

The United States continues to station major forces in Korea, which remains a hot spot where those forces could find themselves at war. For this reason, and because the Korean War provides so many lessons directly relevant to the conduct of joint and coalition warfare today, strategic leaders can ill afford to lose sight of those desperate days 50 years in the past. The Sandler and Malkasian overviews have something to offer to the student of the Korean War. The Roe, Haas, and Crane books are essential reading.

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