

**The Mistaken History of the Korean War:
What We Got Wrong Then and Now
by Paul M. Edwards, McFarland, Jefferson,
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Meghna Pradhan*

For Koreans, the Korean War was undoubtedly a watershed moment, which cemented the bifurcation of Korean Peninsula that continues more than seventy years after the fact. It is impossible to segregate the Korean War from the history of United States. US had, after all, provided for around 5.7 million personnel in the UN initiative against North Korean ingression into South Korea.¹

It is important to understand that the importance of the Korean war to the US is not limited to the strength of its participation, or that it was one of the first ‘hotspots’ during the Cold War with USSR, but also because the war has been shaping US relations with China and the two Koreas even today.

Yet, the Korean War was reduced to a footnote in US history, with none of the recognition given to it as was given to the World Wars before it, or

* Ms Meghna Pradhan is a Research Analyst at the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (MP-IDSA), New Delhi, and a PhD scholar at the Department of East Asian Studies, University of Delhi, India.

the Vietnam War after. It is only in the past few decades that the Korean War has started garnering attention, indicated and inspired by several historic scholarship and memoirs written in the past few decades. While the literature has talked often about the events of the war, or attempted to explain them through the lens of the prevailing socio-political narratives, there have been few historical sources that talk about the human aspect of the wars, especially for those who lived it. Through his book *The Mistaken History of the Korean War: What We Got Wrong Then and Now*, Paul M. Edwards has sought to contribute to filling this void.

In particular, the author has tried to disabuse his reader of what he believes to be myths and distortions in the way the Korean War has been narrated, both to the people who lived in the US then as well as how history sees it now. Simultaneously, he raises concern about the apathetic way the war, as well as its veterans, have been treated by the US so far. To him, the archives of US on Korean War remain woefully incomplete, and refers to newly released archival material from China and Russia to fill in the gaps in American memory of Korean War. The book has also reinterpreted several aspects of cause, events and the ongoing 'conclusion' of war in consideration of the increasing amount of data becoming available.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the book is how the author has not kept military history or explanations of political rhetoric at the centre, but woven them around military psychiatry. He has given tremendous insights on Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) among Korean War veterans. He connects their PTSD not merely to losses in Korean War, or the stress of fighting in an unfamiliar land, but also to how it got perpetuated afterwards. He analyses the role played by various actors in making for the historic event and its veterans being, as another war veteran Alan Guy describes, 'forgotten war and forgotten people', which includes military leadership, government, media, common Americans, and even the soldiers themselves.

The book is not without its flaws. It reads like a history book, but one cannot be sure who the target audience is. While certain sections of the book imply that the text is for someone who has started to study dynamics of politics in East Asia during the time (for example, description of communism across USSR, China and North Korea), it also presumes that the reader will have knowledge regarding events that are mentioned, enough that they can then be categorically reinterpreted without background. Additionally, the book outlines the situation as it was when the war happened, so we need to be careful about our hindsight colouring the events as we read them. Paul mentions so himself when he talks about CIA inadequacy in reading Chinese

intentions, as 'we need to be careful not to read our post-facto knowledge into the situation' (p. 40).

There are also several spelling, grammar and factual errors in the book that reflect poor editorial work. For instance, in Chapter III, 'least' has been spelled as 'lease' (p. 33). The spelling of renowned historian Bruce Cumings has been different at several places; at one place, his name has been spelled 'Dr. Cummings' (p. 20) while at others, it has been spelled correctly (pp. 21, 29, 30, 108, 168, 178, 182). Other examples include mention of dissolution of Soviet Union in 1999 (which happened in 1991) and the victory of Communist Party in China has been quoted to be in 1948 (which happened in 1949).

A major factual error that comes not out of editing issues, but from within the narrative itself, is the author's claim regarding the waning importance of the Cold War. In Chapter IX, the author began the section on 'Only a Phase of the Cold War' claiming that 'the *Chicago Manual of Style* (8.74) determined that the Cold War was not an event of significant identity or consequence, and therefore should no longer be capitalised in academic papers'. However, further reading of the 17th edition of the Manual explicitly states that major historical events and programmes are conventionally capitalised, which includes the Cold War. The manual further states that in case the term is being used generically (indicating a sense of hostility without physical warfare), 'cold war' with small letters must be used.

Certain narrative inconsistencies must be noted as well. For instance, regarding Korean War being a 'ploy' (p. 33), while the author has dedicated an entire section on how some assumed that a war in Korea was a distraction from Europe, he has been very vague while explaining how this assumption evolved. This is especially confusing as the author mentions transfer of resources to Europe happening in congruence with the war in Korea, but quotes the year of said transfer as 1948, two years before the war even happened.

Edwards has held the US government's role under significant scrutiny, but misses out on certain criticisms that could have made the understanding of the key issues he mentions clearer. For example, he mentions the Truman Government's decision to focus on the war in Europe as a major issue behind the poor supplies to soldiers in Korea, and made a small reference to the economic turbulence that became the background for the poor war efforts as 'production at home was being interrupted by strikes and walkouts' (p. 158) without explaining why. What interconnects the two arguments is that the American economy was going through inflation in its post-World War II

years, which led to the government trying to control wages. As the American government privatised their military industries and imposed wage limits, the Korean War became an unfortunate victim to dwarfed supplies.

Another issue with the text can be found in the contradictions it presents. Two examples come to mind. In Chapter IX titled 'Brainwashed, Yes, but Who?', Edwards has gone to great lengths to define that it was not just American forces that fought the war. He says, 'But it wasn't just ROKA; many others fought and died side-by-side with American forces' (p. 143), further stating that while slow to act, over forty nations had contributed to the war efforts. The action was taken under the aegis of United Nations, and many countries provided forces. Yet, he turns around quickly by saying that, 'It was the first war fought under the flag of United Nations, but it was not a war fought by United Nations' (p. 144). While he does explain that the war was fought as an American War despite participation from two dozen nations, he does not explain how the role of UN in the Korean War can be minimised.

The second instance is in Chapter VII titled 'The Shock of No Gun Ri'. The event is obviously important, underscored further given its titular mention. Yet, Edwards has only briefly mentioned it in the first paragraph of the chapter, with no mention afterwards. Interestingly, Edwards' approach to the devastation is almost apologist in favour of military. *No Gun Ri* has been often called an intelligence failure on part of America, which would have gone well with the author's assertion that American intelligence (CIA, for instance) was woefully under equipped to deal with the war. While the chapter on killing of soldiers due to insufficient information has vilified the poor governance, on the outcry against civilians, author opines 'Pray tell, what did they think war was, that they would be so astounded by the war crimes it generated' (p. 85), showing a blasé, almost apathetic view towards the atrocities towards civilians. This creates a contradiction within text, where one life is worthy of outcry, while another mere collateral damage.

These issues, however, do not take away the importance of Edwards' book in dealing with several historical inconsistencies that seem to haunt the discussions around Korean War even today. He drives the point that even as the US media has never covered the deaths that happen on this border extensively (as it did during World Wars, for instance), the DMZ 'is a dangerous place where Americans, and Koreans North and South, continue to die on regular basis' (pp. 146–147). He further believes that the crisis has 'further deepened', with a pessimistic view that the anticipated talks between North and South Korea have become 'little other than ritual where reason,

cooperation and compromise have long since been ruled out of order'. While one may argue that there has been a slight easing in relations since the book was published, a hawkish view such as Edwards' is an appropriate cautionary word to take the improvement in relations with a grain of salt.

More importantly, we need to ponder the question the author has posited to us through this book. Is defining a war as one beholden to merely political narratives? Is it the attainment of a particular goal, its cost, or is it a mix of both, that makes a war 'worth it'. The answer can differ for a politician, a military leader, a civilian, or a veteran, when they decide these parameters. In case of the Korean War, however, the veteran seems to have been silenced, the civilian conditioned to apathy, and the others to redefining their convenience. The book is an attempt to ensure that this particular fog over the history of Korean War does not remain by presenting a unique perspective to answer why the war, the people it was waged upon, and the soldiers that fought for the espoused ideals of freedom and glory, met only a bitter conclusion.

NOTE

1. 'Korean War Veterans', U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, available at <https://benefits.va.gov/PERSONA/veteran-korea.asp>.

