

THE KOREAN WAR REMEMBERED

Donald Chisholm

Stueck, William. *Rethinking the Korean War: A New Diplomatic and Strategic History*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 2002. 285pp. \$29.95

Mills, Randy K., and Roxanne Mills. *Unexpected Journey: A Marine Corps Reserve Company in the Korean War*. Annapolis, Md.: U.S. Naval Institute Press, 2000. 271pp. \$32.95

Millett, Allan R. *Their War for Korea: American, Asian, and European Combatants and Civilians, 1945–53*. Washington, D.C.: Brassey's, 2002. 311pp. \$25.95

Taken together these three volumes indicate the variety of published works on the Korean War to appear during the past several years, coinciding with the fiftieth anniversary of that once-forgotten conflict.

Only one of these books, however, Stueck's *Rethinking the Korean War*, follows the format of a conventional academic disquisition. Stueck, a distinguished professor of history at the University of Georgia, published his similar but much longer *The Korean War: An International History* (Princeton University Press) in 1995; that edition relied heavily on primary sources made available in the wake of the Soviet Union's collapse and the slight but promising opening of China. He argued reasonably enough that, when viewed in the sweep of history and in the context of the new world order assembling itself from the ravages of World War II, the Korean War constituted a less bloody substitute for what might otherwise have been World War III. Well researched and largely persuasive, the book effectively and clearly demonstrates the vast complexity and uncertainties that characterize the international system, the strangeness of those internal decision-making processes of states that produce foreign policy decisions, the attendant opaqueness of motivations underlying the behaviors of states, and the often bizarre foundations of coalitions and alliances.

As an empirically grounded historical work it was marred, however, by two recurring indulgences that Stueck apparently could not resist: his evaluations of the morality of American motivations and behaviors, based, evidently, on the author's own unstated ethical code and related "counter-factuals"—those seductive but ultimately empty conjectures that

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frequently bemoan that if such and such had happened the world would be a better place.

Stueck's *Rethinking the Korean War* represents a distillation and updating of its predecessor, reflecting both the author's further reflection on the subject and additional information provided by recently declassified archival material from both sides of the Iron Curtain. In a very real sense, it constitutes the book that Stueck would have liked to have originally written. As its title suggests, it directs its attention to the broader canvas of international politics on which the conflict was played out. The book is most persuasive in its analysis of the disparate chain of events that began in various places across the planet and that came together to produce the Korean War: the ideological rigidity, stunning parochialism, insularity, and centuries-old geopolitical concerns of the Soviet and Chinese leaderships; the naiveté of the United States and its confusion about the extent of its global interests and new responsibilities; fear of a monolithic international communism; Kim Il Sung's unabashed drive to unite and dominate the recently divided country from the north and Syngman Rhee's equally intense push to do the same from the south—provided all the variables needed to cause the war. Stueck's narrative of China's decision to intervene actively in the war is especially well done. He concludes that while operationally and tactically brilliant, the success of the Inchon landing and MacArthur's subsequent efforts across the thirty-eighth parallel, by rapidly and dramatically reversing the tide of the war, so alarmed the Chinese that their direct involvement on the ground was virtually assured, consequently concluding one war and commencing another.¹

For this reader, the zenith of Stueck's efforts is in his analysis of why the conflict did not expand beyond the Korean Peninsula. He argues that the most important limiting factor was that both sides reassessed their political aims in light of changing military conditions on the ground and in the larger context of pressures from their respective allies. The Chinese and North Koreans consistently sought more active participation from the Soviets, particularly direct air support from their ground troops (the lack of which had proven their undoing in their autumn 1950 operations). Notwithstanding, the Soviets confined their air operations to a narrow area in the far north of Korea, affording them what more recently would become known as plausible deniability.

For its part, the United States was not anxious to see greater Soviet involvement, and in 1950, at least, America kept very quiet about its use of depth charges on unknown submarine contacts and the shooting down of a Soviet reconnaissance aircraft immediately prior to the Inchon operation. Chinese nationalists actively pursued a larger war, recognizing that this would afford them their only opportunity to retake mainland China. In the early stages of the war, the United States sent its Seventh Fleet into the Taiwan Strait, as much to keep

Chiang Kai-Shek in Taiwan as to deter the communists from mounting a cross-strait invasion. The Chinese nationalists also unsuccessfully tried to gain U.S. approval (General Douglas MacArthur at least entertained the idea) to place their own forces in the Korean ground war. Rhee saw this as his best chance to reunify Korea under his control.

Unfortunately, Stueck falls into the same pattern in this book as he did in his first—he succumbs to the temptation to engage in several what-ifs. Even so, Stueck has written a very good book that deserves to be carefully read, particularly for his lessons on the necessity to grasp the complexities of international relations at multiple levels of analysis in order to understand the origins and courses of important historical events.

Unexpected Journey is at opposite ends of the earth when compared to Stueck. Following the adventures and travails of the members of C Company, the 16th Infantry Battalion corps reserve unit from Evansville, Indiana, from its mobilization through combat, as part of the 1st Marine Division in late September 1950 to its return to the United States in 1951, the book is clearly a labor of love. Rather than a history of operations, the authors provide a collective memoir of the war from the vantage point of reserve Marine riflemen, based on interviews, letters, diaries, and personal recollections. In so doing, they complement well those earlier memoirs of Marines who served in the war.²

The story of how a drastically drawn-down Marine Corps managed hurriedly to scrape together, first a provisional brigade with air group, then a reinforced 1st Division with air wing, to hurl into the fight in Korea is by now well known. It withdrew troops from the 2d Division, leaving only a skeleton crew, pulled in personnel from miscellaneous duties, stopped retirements, called up the reserves, and folded in a battalion landing team afloat in the Mediterranean. The effort proved decisive for holding the Pusan perimeter, the Inchon and Wonsan landings, and the fighting withdrawal from Chosin. It also ensured that a Marine Corps much buffeted in the post–World War II defense unification fights would no longer have to worry about its survival.

This account shows that beneath the positive reports to the public from senior Marine officers, all was not copacetic.³ Despite the high percentage of reservists—especially noncommissioned officers and company-grade commissioned officers—with at least some World War II experience, a significant number had little or no training at all. The protagonists were mostly among those who were in high school or recent graduates who had joined the reserves for all the usual reasons.

Company C did not go to Korea as a unit but rather as a cadre to fill in existing units. Its first battle was the operation to take Seoul. Some of its members remained there as late as December 1951, after participating in the spring

counteroffensive and the static hilltop war in central Korea that followed. Their words reveal how quickly they had matured into Marine infantrymen, recognizing the sublime value of hot water in the front lines, their initial disdain for their opponents that changed into grudging respect, and understanding the “law of averages” and “no more volunteering.”

Overall, this is a worthwhile read. *Unexpected Journey* balances the overly sanguine official Marine reports and reconstructions by senior officers of the mobilization and deployment process. It shows clearly how even in democracies the interests of individuals are inevitably subordinated to national needs, the danger of counting paper units as effective combat forces, and the historical tension between regular service members and the reserves. However, mostly this book illustrates the extraordinary capacity of the individual American to rise to the occasion.

Their War for Korea presents a puzzle. The author, Allan Millett, is a distinguished professor at Ohio State University who is well known in military history circles and has contributed significantly to the published research on the Korean War. He writes that his aim for the book is to “find the meaning of the Korean War through the experience of individuals and small groups of people caught within the third bloodiest conflict of the twentieth century.” However, it reads like nothing so much as a visit to the bits and pieces of interview notes reposing in the author’s research archives. Having gleaned the substance from those notes for previous works, the author apparently believed that what remained would make a good read.

Alas. Although Millett attempts to give structure to his “war stories” by grouping them into “The Koreans,” “The Allies,” and “The Americans,” the author offers no rationale for the collection, and this reader, at least, could discern no pattern and no criteria for inclusion, other than that the stories constitute the universe of people with whom the author had occasion to speak over the years about the war—even though some stories are obviously assembled only from documents and secondary sources. Thus one finds a retired Australian army major general cheek by jowl with several Belgian officers and the People’s Republic of China’s Renmin Zhiyuanjun. Apparently, those on land experienced the war but those at sea hardly at all. If a book promises to provide a close-up and personal view of war, then unexpurgated oral histories rather than casual third-person narratives are much to be preferred.⁴

To his credit, Millett provides an introductory overview of the war that provides even the uninitiated reader with historical context for what follows, and an appendix offers a categorized list of selected reading. However, the value of what is published here will most likely accrue only to those well versed in the war’s history and who have a rich context into which to place the stories.

NOTES

1. For more information on the Chinese decision to enter the war and the role of the Soviet Union, see Russell Spurr, *Enter the Dragon: China's Undeclared War against the U.S. in Korea, 1950–1951* (New York: Newmarket, 1988); Sergei N. Goncharov, John W. Lewis, and Xue Litai, *Uncertain Partners: Stalin, Mao, and the Korean War* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford Univ. Press, 1993); and Patrick C. Roe, *The Dragon Strikes, China and the Korean War: June–December 1950* (Novato, Calif.: Presidio, 2000).
2. See Joseph R. Owen, *Colder than Hell: A Marine Rifle Company at Chosin Reservoir* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1996); and James Brady, *The Coldest War: A Memoir of Korea* (New York: Orion Books, 1990).
3. See “Lemuel C. Shepherd Oral History, 27 July to 4 August 1966” (Washington, D.C.: Marine Corps Historical Center); Victor H. Krulak, *First to Fight: An Inside View of the U.S. Marine Corps* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1984); Lynn Montross and Nicholas A. Canzona, *U.S. Marine Operations in Korea, 1950–1953*, based on research by K. Jack Bauer, *The Inchon-Seoul Operation*, vol. 2 (Washington, D.C.: Historical Branch, G-3, Headquarters, U.S. Marine Corps, 1955); and Robert Debs Heinl, Jr., *Victory at High Tide: The Inchon-Seoul Campaign* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1968).
4. Published oral histories of the Korean War include Donald Knox, *The Korean War: An Oral History—Pusan to Chosin* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1985); and Rudy Tomedi, *No Bugles, No Drums: An Oral History of the Korean War* (New York: John Wiley, 1993). Historical archives of the several services contain substantial unpublished oral histories from officers both senior and junior.