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MacArthur’s Korean War Generals
Introduction

On Saturday evening, 24 June 1950, Major General William Dean attended a costume party thrown for his headquarters staff in Kokura, Japan. Dean commanded the Twenty-fourth Division, one of four divisions in Lieutenant General Walton Walker's Eighth United States Army garrisoning occupied Japan. Leading an infantry division, even a skeletonized one like the Twenty-fourth, was hard work, so Dean looked forward to a rare relaxing night out. Like so many army officers of his generation, Dean had seen a good bit of the world during his twenty-seven years in the service, including a fifteen-month stint in neighboring Korea. Dean had not understood Korea's culture particularly well, but he had picked up enough information there to inspire the garb he selected for the evening's festivities. Dean arrived wearing the attire of a traditional Korean gentleman, complete with a black stovepipe hat and a long robe. Despite his outfit, Korea was just about the furthest thing on Dean's mind that night. Although he had found his time in Korea both interesting and troublesome, Dean was not inclined to dwell much on the past. Instead, he focused on enjoying what turned out to be the last pleasant social gathering he would experience in a very long time. After attending church next morning, Dean swung by the post office on his way to division headquarters to see if there was a letter waiting for him from either of his two children. On his way there, the duty officer hailed him to tell him that a few hours earlier, communist North Korea had invaded noncommunist South Korea. As he processed the news, Dean never guessed that within two weeks he and the men of his division would be fighting for their lives in a country he had never expected to see again, or that within two months he would become the highest-ranking American prisoner of war in one of the most frustrating conflicts in American history.

Referring to the Korean War as America's forgotten conflict has become a hoary cliche, but there is still considerable truth to the assertion. Wedged chronologically between World War II and Vietnam, the Korean War possesses neither the virtuous triumphalism of the former nor the tragic pathos of the latter. Instead, it was a confusing, exasperating, and contradictory Cold War episode that is often relegated to the historical back burner. President Harry Truman justified American intervention as part of the Cold War struggle against international communism even though South Korea itself had little direct strategic, economic,
or political value to the United States. Most Americans supported defending South Korea, but there was considerable controversy during the war as to the best means to do so. This debate reflected widespread dissatisfaction with the limited nature of the conflict. Unlike World War II, waging the Korean War did not require the full mobilization of American resources but instead the careful calibration of means and ends that was hard to explain and understand, let alone implement. Although the United States achieved its primary goal of preserving South Korea’s independence, the North Koreans and their communist Chinese allies remained unbowed and defiant at the war’s end. Such incongruities and frustrations became increasingly pronounced as the war dragged on, leading to a steady decline in Truman’s popularity. By the time all sides reached a cease-fire agreement in July 1953, the United States had committed nearly 1.8 million men to Korea, of whom approximately 36,500 died and another 103,300 were wounded. Considering its high price and ambivalent conclusion, it was scarcely surprising that Secretary of State Dean Acheson famously said, "If the best minds in the world had set out to find us the worst possible location in the world to fight this damnable war, politically and militarily, the unanimous choice would have been Korea."2

The Korean War was just as exasperating for American army officers as it was for the general public. The army was woefully unprepared for the conflict, so its initial battlefield encounters with its North Korean counterpart were disastrous. Throughout the long, hot summer of 1950, the North Koreans drove the Eighth Army’s ill-equipped and understrength units southward in disorderly retreat. Weapons malfunctioned, radios failed to work, air and artillery support were uncertain, and the poorly trained and confused soldiers broke and ran under fire on numerous occasions. Fortunately, the troops managed to hold out along the Pusan Perimeter in Korea’s southeastern corner, and then the stunningly successful amphibious landing at Inchon in mid-September reversed the war’s tide. The Eighth Army’s subsequent invasion of North Korea, however, exposed it to a second calamity. When the Chinese intervened to aid their communist North Korean allies in October and November 1950, the Eighth Army repeated many of its previous mistakes. The Chinese inflicted heavy losses on American troops, who withdrew pell-mell back down the Korean peninsula in disarray. No sooner had the Eighth Army finally stopped the communist advance than Truman fired General Douglas MacArthur, the commander of American, South Korean, and United Nations forces in East Asia, because of their increasingly public disagreements over the best way to prosecute the war. In the ensuing public fallout, the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) denounced MacArthur’s ideas in congressional hearings. Whatever the merits of the controversy, the public airing of the army’s dirty laundry did little to enhance its reputation and prestige. At the end of the war, the United States ac-
cepted a negotiated ceasefire more or less along the prewar 38th Parallel boundary between the two Koreas, which prompted some to observe—inaccurately—that this was the first time the army failed to achieve complete victory over its opponent. To many army officers, this stalemated outcome seemed like a weak return on their collective investment.

Such concerns and regrets are overdrawn. In fact, although the army’s performance in Korea was often uneven in the war’s first chaotic year, it fought credibly enough to win the conflict in a strictly military sense. Considering the prewar constraints under which it operated, the Eighth Army deployed to Korea from Japan with astonishing speed. Indeed, the first American ground troops entered combat only ten days after the North Korean invasion. If they did not fight with much skill at first, their dogged rearguard actions slowed the North Korean advance and bought time for help to arrive. The Eighth Army’s stand in the Pusan Perimeter was mobile defense at its finest. Walker’s ability to fend off repeated North Korean attacks while simultaneously coordinating with the South Koreans, working out organizational and doctrinal kinks, and absorbing reinforcements of varying quality was impressive. The marines may have spearheaded the Inchon landing, but the army supplied the follow-up units that contributed to the liberation of the South Korean capital at Seoul. Moreover, in breaking out of the Pusan Perimeter, the Eighth Army practically destroyed its North Korean counterpart. Pyongyang, North Korea’s capital, fell a little more than a month after Inchon, bringing the Americans and South Koreans to the verge of victory. China’s intervention led to one of the most painful and humiliating defeats in American military history, but the army’s confused and panicky response was due in part to insufficient guidance from MacArthur and the Truman administration. Under Lieutenant General Matthew Ridgway’s fresh leadership, the Eighth Army recovered its élan in a remarkably short time, enabling it to arrest the Chinese onslaught south of the 38th Parallel. In the spring of 1951, the Chinese and North Koreans launched an all-out offensive designed to win the war. The Eighth Army not only repulsed the assault but also inflicted so many casualties as to render the enemy combat ineffective. The Eighth Army’s subsequent counterattack brought it above the 38th Parallel, and it probably could have continued its progression northward. At that point, though, Truman decided to negotiate an end to the war on the basis of a divided Korea because he did not believe that securing the entire peninsula was worth the casualties. It was therefore a political decision, not the immediate military situation, that stopped the Eighth Army. From then on, the Eighth Army suspended large-scale offensives and remained on the strategic defensive until the negotiators finished their work two long years later.

It is impossible to accurately evaluate the army’s performance in the first, decisive year in Korea without examining its high-ranking combat commanders.
there. After all, an army is no better than its leadership. It was the army’s field army, corps, and division commanders in Korea who implemented operational and tactical directives, administered their headquarters, coordinated with neighboring units, interacted with the rank and file, and selected their subordinates and staff. In that first year, the Eighth Army’s leadership ran the gamut from impressive to lackluster. Because all the Eighth Army’s high-ranking officers had been tested in the crucible of World War II combat only a few years earlier, this unevenness is surprising; those unable to fight effectively should have been weeded out back then. Although part of the reason for these leadership difficulties was the army’s woefully unprepared state at the war’s start, there was more to it than that. MacArthur’s habit of manipulating and playing his subordinates off each other for his own purposes certainly did not encourage selfless teamwork; in fact, it inhibited efforts to find the best men for the important positions. Of equal import, the army faced a leadership dilemma that had plagued all armed forces since time immemorial: those leaders who excel in peacetime do not always possess the necessary attributes to deliver victory on the battlefield in wartime. The Eighth Army’s prewar senior combat commanders often attained their positions for reasons other than combat prowess, such as bureaucratic politics, army personnel policy, administrative ability, personal connections, and seniority. These men, perfectly adequate in the serene prewar years, were sometimes found wanting leading large units under fire. Culling them and identifying more effective replacements became one of the army’s biggest personnel challenges in 1950–1951. In the end, the army succeeded in appointing men to its important combat posts mostly, though not always, on the basis of their perceived combat skills. This does not mean that they always lived up to their billing, but enough of them did to enable the Eighth Army to defeat the Chinese and North Koreans until the Truman administration called a halt to its active large-scale offensive operations in the summer of 1951.