

# 'What is our goal in Korea? I don't know'

by Mary McCourt Burdman

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## The Korean War

by Max Hastings

Michael Joseph, London, 1987

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Every condition for the disaster in Vietnam, and the U.S. strategic withdrawal from Asia, as *Daily Telegraph* editor Max Hastings documents in this book, was created in the "forgotten war" of the 20th century, the Korean War—which began just five years after the military and moral triumph of the World War II victory. Hastings proclaims that he wants to counter the neglect of the Korean War in current history writing, and especially the neglect of the role that British forces played there. He is not one of those who regards the Korean War with "bitter distaste," he says, but states in his foreword that he remains "convinced of the rightness of the American commitment to Korea in June 1950."

Here is the issue. The "American commitment" that Hastings supports was strictly limited. It was just to preserve South Korea against the vicious attack by Kim Il Sung, the winning of the relative freedom for the population of South Korea, of ensuring they now have "incomparably more fulfilling lives" than those who must live under Kim Il Sung's tyranny.

*The Korean War* is well written, and many passages which recount the tragedies of the war, including the U.S. Marines' retreat from the Chosin Reservoir, the rout of the U.N. forces by the Chinese invasion in the winter of 1950-51, the prison camps, the destruction of the Korean population, are so vivid that they are painful to read. But such tragedies, terrible as they were, were on a small scale compared to the strategic shift that took the United States and its allies from the victory of World War II to the depravation of Vietnam and the current abandoning of most of the globe to the Soviet war machine.

Most telling is Hastings's treatment of Gen. Douglas MacArthur. After the reluctant acknowledgement of MacArthur's military genius even liberals have to make, Hastings spends pages attacking MacArthur as obsolete and a threat to

the Yalta order. The dangerous conflict between MacArthur and the Washington bureaucracy, he writes, "was essentially a simple one. MacArthur did not believe in the concept of limited war. He acknowledged the Thomist doctrine of just wars."

## Limited war and the Yalta order

America's European allies, especially the British, and increasingly the Truman administration, wanted only limited war. This was critical, because, of course, the troops were in Korea only under the authority of the United Nations. There were two issues the British used to limit the war: the economic collapse that made it almost impossible for them to muster even the limited force they sent to Korea, and the controversy over tactical atomic weapons which MacArthur and other U.S. military leaders thought could be used to threaten China and force it out of the war. "If MacArthur had had his way," Hastings writes, "the cost to the moral credibility of the United States around the world would almost certainly have been historically disastrous."

"Middle America" also did not like limited war, Hastings complains. Truman's problem was that he could not "explain to his own people the realities of the new world in which they lived, where immense military power could not always be translated into effective foreign influence. . . . Americans were learning to come to terms with a world of constant crises, of problems chronically resistant to solutions."

Here are Hastings's true colors. A note on his background helps clarify the matter. Hastings, known among some of London's journalists as "Bomber Hastings," was made editor of Britain's *Daily Telegraph*, in 1986, part of the transformation from a traditional British conservative paper, to a liberal one, with a small "l." One marker is the consistent, irrational hostility of this paper's attacks on U.S. political figure Lyndon LaRouche. *The Telegraph* was bought up in February 1986 by Conrad Black of the Canadian Argus Corporation. Argus is a known intelligence operation, linked to senior Anglo-American intelligence and Western-Soviet Trust figure Arthur Ross, patron of such organizations as the Institute for East-West Security Studies. Black himself is a member of the Trilateral Commission and Bilderberg Society. Hastings was then installed as editor.

Hastings praises what he calls the Truman administration's "finest minds" for realizing the change in the world. Yet these "fine minds," he documents, presided over the massive cost-cutting demobilization and destruction of the U.S. military, that left the victors of 1945 almost helpless before the North Korean onslaught in 1950. It was one such "fine mind," Secretary of State Dean Acheson, whose "careless," as Hastings says, exclusion of South Korea from the perimeter of U.S. vital interests in the Far East practically invited Kim Il Sung to war.

One of the most interesting things in the book is how well Hastings documents the role of both the British postwar La-

bour government, and the British military, in undercutting a war-winning policy in Korea. The view of the British Chiefs of Staff, he writes, is that there is "no question of using the atomic bomb in Korea. . . . [There] we want, with the minimum loss of life and expense on either side, to restore the *status quo* and the integrity of South Korea."

The result was that Gen. Matthew Ridgway took command, to carry out the U.N. forces policies to a T. "The United Nations' objectives from the spring of 1951 to the end in 1953 were plainly limited," Hastings writes. "At an acceptable cost in casualties to Eighth Army, Ridgway's forces sought to kill sufficient communists and defend sufficient real estate to secure peace." It was Ridgway whose method of stemming the Chinese onslaught in February 1951 is chilling, when one thinks of Robert McNamara's "bodycounts": Ridgway initiated Operation KILLER, with the public intention of killing communists—not defeating them. But MacArthur thought, according to his close associate Courtney Whitney, "that Red Chinese aggression in Asia could not be stopped by killing Chinese, no matter how many, in Korea, so long as her power to make war remained inviolate."

Limited war policy led to the day, April 22, 1951, when U.S. Gen. James Van Fleet, asked what was the goal in Korea, said, "I don't know." Ironically, Hastings has to acknowledge that, through a series of bloody holding actions, the U.N. troops broke the attack of the Chinese army in Korea, so primitively equipped it could not fight a sustained campaign. In May 1951, he writes, "had the political will existed, the communist front now lay open. The morale of the Chinese armies in Korea was shattered." Instead, came the negotiations, giving the communist forces four vital months to dig in, exactly along the line where they remain dug in today.

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