

No. 14

THE RECORD OF CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE BEFORE 1951 WITH RESPECT TO THE
KOREAN WAR

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It would seem reasonable to expect that Central Intelligence, between 1946 and 1950, would have (a) warned the government of the dangers implicit in the Korean situation; (b) immediately before 25 June 1950, warned of the approaching invasion, and (c) at some time between 25 June and 26 November 1950, prepared the government for Chinese Communist intervention.

Regarding the first point, the statement seems justifiable that if the repeated and clearly expressed warnings of Central Intelligence had been heeded by the United States government, the Korean war, at least in the form it has taken, could have been avoided. As to specific warning of the invasion, a distinction should be made between awareness that an invasion might occur, and a discovery that it would occur as of an exact or approximate date. Central Intelligence was aware from 1946 onward that North Korean forces might invade South Korea and frequently gave notice of the fact, mentioning possible dates. During the critical period, however, (the spring of 1950) Central Intelligence failed to warn the government of the approaching event. As to the Chinese Communists, Central Intelligence failed to perceive that they would intervene (although the possibility was noted): (a) after the war had begun; (b) after the United Nations had crossed the 38th parallel, and (c) after the intervention was actually in progress.

XVI/1

1. See Daily Summary February 1946-February 1950 and Weekly Summary of same period

XVI/2

1. Copies of these estimates may be found in Historical Files, Safe No. 2465.

- 2 -

A. The Pre-Invasion Estimates

Central Intelligence produced eight estimates on the subject of Korea between January 1947 and June 1950. A summary follows.¹

1. ORR 5/1. "The Situation in Korea." 3 January 1947

This estimate was written before the picture was at all clear. Its authors perceived that the Russians were building their own kind of state in North Korea, that the 38th parallel was becoming a permanent rather than a temporary boundary, and that the USSR might well have designs on the country as a whole. They recognized the existence of the North Korean Peoples' Army, but discounted General Hodge's reports of three to four hundred thousand North Korean troops. The report contained a certain amount of what may have been wishful thinking about weaknesses of the North Korean regime arising from wide-spread popular discontent.

2. SR-2. "Korea." March, 1947

The Situation Report on Korea was, of course, concerned for the most part with political, economic, and military details. It noted that the Soviets quite possibly intended to make Korea a satellite. The most likely development was considered to be a Soviet agreement to "unification" of the country in full confidence that the North Koreans would eventually take control of the central government through normal communist political maneuvering. The Situation Report emphasized the danger that the Soviets would withdraw and challenge the United States to do the same. It pointed out that if the United States were to withdraw, South Korea would be left in a very weak position. The Report inferred popular hatred of the North Korean regime from alleged innate Korean characteristics.

- 3 -

3. ORP-62. "Implementation of Soviet Objectives in Korea.
18 November 1947

This paper reasoned as follows:

- (a) The USSR was obviously intent on securing all of Korea as a satellite.
- (b) Unilateral Soviet withdrawal was probable because the Russians had a plausible means of circumventing their treaty obligations and could trust the North Korean regime to be loyal and to keep control in the absence of Soviet troops.
- (c) The strategy of Soviet withdrawal was to force the United States to withdraw.
- (d) "Since no effective counter-force can be established in South Korea without the investment of considerable effort over an extended period, U. S. withdrawal would have the effect of leaving South Korea incapable of offering any serious¹ resistance."

4. ORE 15-48. "The Current Situation in Korea." 18 March 1948

This report was largely concerned with the grim realities of Korean life, but (a) said that Syngman Rhee, if supported as president, would probably play into Soviet hands, (b) correctly predicted the manner of Soviet withdrawal, and (c) held that, upon withdrawal of American troops, South Korea would not have a chance against North Korea unless the United States spent a great deal of time and money on the South Korean economy and military force. The report also said that if an invasion came in the circumstances envisaged: "Rhee would probably look to the United States

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1. Quoted from the paper. NOTE: This paper predicted Soviet withdrawal before 31 March 1948, equating that date with the forthcoming United Nations elections. The Soviets actually withdrew in December 1948.

XVI/4

1. Quoted from the paper.

- 4 -

for support. The United States might then be faced with a choice of giving aid and comfort to a discredited, unpopular regime while risking the censure of world opinion, or of withdrawing its support in response to moral pressure and face the charge of breaking another promise in the Far East."

5. ORR 44-48. "Prospects for Survival of the Republic of Korea."
28 October 1948.

This paper was written after the Rhee government had been proclaimed as the Republic of Korea and had been accorded recognition by the United States and some of its friends. Since there was a rival government in Pyongyang, recognized by certain other countries, it was important which of the two the United Nations would designate as the official government for the peninsula. All participating in ORR 44-48 believed that recognition of South Korea would be forthcoming except Navy which, in its "dissent" outlined a series of moves, believed to be planned by the USSR, which would cause the United Nations to shelve the matter.

Recognition by the United Nations, which followed a few days after the publication of the paper, gave the Republic of Korea the international status it needed but did not provide for its defense. This problem, the estimate said, could be solved only if the United States (a) continued to furnish abundant material aid for an indefinite time; (b) maintained a large "military mission" in Korea, and (c) trained the South Korean army over a long enough period, while providing it with all necessary equipment including heavy artillery, tanks, and an air force. The chances for survival of the Republic of Korea would then be "fair."

- 5 -

6. ORE 32-48. Communist Capabilities in South Korea. 21 February 1949

This paper was concerned only with the strength of the Communist movement within South Korea. It described the South Korean Communist Party as large and with an even greater number of sympathizers; to be partly armed, and to have an effective organization. It was not considered to be strong enough, however, to gain control of South Korea unless it received active assistance from the outside.

The paper developed the theory that if the USSR were to use the South Korean Communist Party, it would be as an excuse for intervention. According to the plan suggested by the estimate, the South Korean Communists would attempt to overthrow the Rhee Government by armed insurrection; then, at the appropriate moment, would call upon North Korea for aid in "keeping order."

7. ORE 3-49. "Consequences of US Troop Withdrawal from Korea in Spring 1949." 28 February 1949

This report says plainly that if the US were to withdraw (a) the North Koreans would invade; (b) the Republic of Korea would collapse, and (c) as a result, unless the United States stepped in to save the situation, the United States would diminish its prestige and weaken its security position in the Far East and in the rest of the world. On the other hand, maintenance of even a small occupation force would probably act as a sufficient deterrent to invasion. The paper also said that, although in time it might be possible to build a South Korean force sufficient to hold the North Koreans, such a force did not then exist and could not be

-6-

built up without long effort. Analysis was clear on the point that, although Korea is not of true strategic value from the point of view of the United States, it could not, nevertheless, be safely written off to the Communists because of the consequences noted above.

The Army dissented on this estimate to the effect that, as written it exaggerated the consequences of withdrawal.

8. ORE 18-50. "Current Capabilities of the North Korean Regime."
19 June 1950

The fact that this paper was published six days before the invasion of South Korea occurred, might lead to an inference that it was timed with foreknowledge of the event. Actually, the publication date is fortuitous. This report was initiated in consequence of a request from the director of State Department intelligence dated 24 February, 1950, which was not based on an anticipated invasion but on grounds that intelligence on the North Korean area was inadequate and should be reviewed. During the ensuing four months, the project underwent delays normal to papers not considered urgent, and happened to be produced in mid-June.

The main purpose of the paper was to sum up North Korean political, economic, and military strengths and weaknesses. It concluded that the North Koreans were strong enough to take Seoul within about a week but that, thereafter, the South Korean force would consolidate and would hold the North Koreans somewhere to the south. The outcome would then depend on the extent of aid furnished to North Korea and to South Korea from abroad.

- 7 -

B. Warning of the 1950 Invasion

1. Estimates

The publication dates of the above estimates show a gap of sixteen months between the last two. The principal reason is probably to be found in the date of American withdrawal from Korea---29 June 1949. "Consequences of US Troop Withdrawal from Korea, Spring, 1949," published in February, amounted to a warning against withdrawal, subscribed to by all parties except the Army. It can be deduced that, once the official decision to withdraw had been made, Central Intelligence saw no value in further estimates on Korea unless new developments should call for one. The next estimate, as has already been pointed out, originated in an effort to inventory intelligence on the subject of North Korea.

It might be said, in other words, that Central Intelligence lost interest in Korea after troop withdrawal. From the Central Intelligence point of view, it should have been obvious to anyone who had read the estimates, that all the consequences enumerated in them were eligible to begin as soon as troop withdrawal had been accomplished. The tenor of most of the estimates, indeed, had been that invasion would follow immediately, and this fact alone may have had a part in causing Central Intelligence to relax when month after month passed without unusual incident after June 29th. In the absence of formal estimates between 18 February 1949 and 19 June 1950, warnings regarding an invasion became the primary responsibility of the current intelligence publications.

- 8 -

2. Current Intelligence

A study of the Central Intelligence Daily Summary for four months before the invasion reveals that during the period, Korea is not even mentioned. A similar study of the Weekly Summary and the Monthly Review shows that, although Korea was the subject of an article from time to time, these articles did not touch on the subject of invasion. For example, in the Weekly Summary of 31 March, 1950, an article was carried which is largely devoted, by implication, to criticism of Syngman Rhee for attempting to control the internal Communist threat by methods that circumvented civil liberties, while concentrating on the external Communist threat by building up a military establishment at the expense of pressing economic and political problems. Unless there is contrary evidence in documents not examined, it must be concluded that Central Intelligence gave no warning immediately before the invasion. This seems also to have been true of all other intelligence agencies in Washington.

Without a more extensive survey than was attempted in connection with this paper, it would not be possible to state all of the principal reasons why this was so. Some of them however, might be summarized as follows:

(a) Field collection had been reasonably satisfactory, if not too well organized. American agents had some well placed sources and generally could get most of what Washington wanted. But, between Korea and the intelligence analysts in Washington, there seems to have been a network of red tape which impeded delivery of reports. On 25 June, for

- 9 -

example, the most recent report on the desks of Central Intelligence analysts was fifteen days old. Important material was sometimes as much as four months in transit.

(b) The Korean "desk" in Central Intelligence like those in the other intelligence agencies was understaffed. All Korean affairs were handled by two junior analysts who had to work simultaneously on basic, current, and estimate intelligence plus evaluation of field reports and "inter-branch" publications. There was no one, in other words, who had the opportunity to concentrate on any one aspect of the Korean scene.

(c) Most important, however, seems to have been a simple matter of "crying wolf." From his earliest days in Korea, General Hodge had been accustomed frequently to announce that a North Korean invasion might be coming soon. After Hodge was relieved, similar reports kept coming in. Many of these came from alleged individuals who claimed to have attended alleged high-level Communist meetings at which decisions to mount an invasion were supposed to have been made. These reports were suspect for a number of reasons, and after a period of time, they began to be discounted almost automatically. Troop movements went on interminably north of the 38th parallel for five years. North Korean border guards were forever skirmishing with South Korean border guards. Regular North Korean troops---when the time came---were moved to the border gradually. Washington did not get word of the more important moves. Army intelligence accepted only three divisions in

XVI/10

1. Above information orally in March 1952 from [redacted] who was one of the two analysts on Korea in Central Intelligence at the time of the invasion. Some of it is also contained in various hasty investigations undertaken soon after the Korean war had begun.

STAT

- 10 -

North Korea at a time when there were probably nearer fifteen. Typical of the whole story is the fact that the only agent in the field who predicted the invasion correctly for June, had predicted the same invasion regularly for December, January, February, March, April, and May.

(d) In retrospect, there were certain indications that ought to have been caught. For example, in the months before the invasion, North Korea was engaged in a violent propaganda campaign in favor of Korean unification. Central Intelligence noted this and wrote comments on it concerning its effect on South Korean opinion. This propaganda, however, laid emphasis on August 15 as the time for unification to be achieved. If the analysts had consulted the Soviet Master Plan for Korea, which had been compromised in 1946 and was available, they would have found that August 15 was the date for which "unification" was planned following military action in June.

More serious was the failure of the analysts to perceive the implications of reports, received well ahead of the event, that the border area for twenty-five miles behind the 38th parallel had been cleared of civilians several weeks before the invasion date.¹

C. WARNING OF CHINESE COMMUNIST INTERVENTION

1. Estimates

On 21 July 1950, in response to a request from the National Security Council, Central Intelligence made plans to produce an estimate to be called "Situation to be Anticipated as UN Forces Reach the

- 11 -

38th Parallel in Korea." No paper with this title was published, although a memorandum for the Director seems to have gone forward on 16 August with the title "Implications of a Military Advance in Korea beyond the 38th Parallel." The theory was debated in Central Intelligence at the time that crossing of the 38th parallel by forces of the United Nations would probably mean intervention by Communist China.

The Air Force on 31 August 1950 and the State Department on 12 September requested an estimate concerning the probability of Chinese Communist intervention in Korea. On 18 September, the Director of Central Intelligence declined these requests, chiefly on grounds that "Intelligence Memorandum No. 324" had already been written and that "ORE 55-50" was about to be written on the same subject.

Intelligence Memorandum No. 324 "Probability of Direct Chinese Communist Intervention in Korea" is dated 8 September 1950 and concludes that: "In view of the momentous repercussions from such an overt action, however, it appears more probable that Chinese Communist participation in the Korean conflict will be more indirect, although significant, and will be limited to integrating into the North Korean forces, 'Manchurian volunteers', perhaps including air units as well as ground troops." From a vantage point of three years, the conclusion is ambiguous. The supporting arguments, however, are such as to indicate that a contemporary reader could not have been prepared, on the basis of the memorandum, for the scale of Chinese "aid" actually forthcoming. This memorandum was not formally coordinated with the intelligence Agencies.

-12-

"ORE 55-50" was never written. The subject was treated, however, in an estimate numbered "ORE 50-50," "Critical Situations in the Far East." This paper originated in a request from the White House to the Director. It was prepared by a joint ad hoc committee, with Central Intelligence in the chair, and was delivered on October 12 (less than a month before full-scale Chinese Communist intervention was recognized) in the form of a Memorandum for the President. The Agencies concurred in it. With respect to the "Threat of Full Chinese Communist Intervention in Korea" it concludes:

"While full-scale Chinese Communist intervention in Korea must be regarded as a continuing possibility, a consideration of all known factors leads to the conclusion that, barring a Soviet decision for global war, such action is not probable in 1950. During this period, intervention will probably be confined to continued covert assistance to the North Koreans."

2. Current Intelligence

Considering that the above was the official concerted judgment of American intelligence, the failures in current reporting may seem less surprising than they might appear otherwise.

Up to the last minute, when Chinese troops were in Korea in force, the Daily Summary was still denying the fact. For instance, on 30 October, 1950, about two weeks before Chinese "volunteers" were officially conceded by the Peiping Government to be in Korea, and were about to begin their successful southward attack, the Daily Summary discounted

-13-

what proved to be an accurate report based on prisoner interrogation, on grounds that "ordinarily the privates in the Chinese army do not possess the detailed OB information which these POW's passed on the U. S. Field Interrogators."

Two reasons for this failure seem to have been reliance on a broad general assumption on the one hand, and reliance on the specialized knowledge of an analyst on the other. The assumption (See ORE 58-50 above) was that because the USSR did not desire war at the time, and because (it was thought) Communist China could not make the decision to participate without the consent of Soviet Russia; and finally because (it was apparently taken for granted) the commitment of Chinese troops would mean general war, it was predicted that the Chinese Communists would not interfere in force. Meanwhile, individual analysts were committed to a sort of self-imposed position which did not admit of Chinese intervention. They may have been loath to change their position even in the face of mounting evidence to the contrary. Because they were assumed to be experts, however, great reliance was naturally placed in their judgment.

These and other factors may have blinded Central Intelligence. Even at a time when the bodies of Chinese soldiers were being found in large numbers in Korea, the weekly Summary was suggesting that Communist strategy might be to retire from the field, salvaging as much as possible, and hoping for peaceful unification at some future date under Communist auspices.¹

13/1

1. As is readily apparent, the above analysis of intelligence failures regarding Korea is incomplete. Aside from the publications noted, it is based in part upon surveys that were attempted soon after the intelligence failures had been perceived, and in part on interviews with individuals concerned with Korean intelligence at the time.

It is recommended that a thoroughgoing study of the subject be made at some time in the near future. This study should not be confined to Central Intelligence but should include an investigation of the part played by the rest of the intelligence establishments as well.