
Roundtable Editor: Thomas Maddux


### Contents

- Introduction by Thomas Maddux, California State University, Northridge.......................... 2
- Review by Thomas W. Devine, California State University, Northridge............................ 6
- Review by Sung-Yoon Lee, The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University ..... 10
- Review by James I. Matray, California State University, Chico...................................... 16
- Review by Wilson D. Miscamble, C.S.C., University of Notre Dame............................. 22
- Author’s Response by Steven Casey, London School of Economics and Political Science..... 26

---

*Copyright © 2009 H-Net: Humanities and Social Sciences Online.*

H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for non-profit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author(s), web location, date of publication, H-Diplo, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For other uses, contact the H-Diplo editorial staff at h-diplo@h-net.msu.edu.
Recent assessments on the Korean War have focused on the origins of the conflict, especially with respect to the relationship of the Soviet Union, China, and North Korea to the decision to launch a conventional military attack on South Korea. Studies have also explored the overall nature of the war and Washington’s decision to cross the 38th parallel and attempt to unify Korea. Steven Casey has successfully shifted the focus from these topics to an examination of how President Harry S. Truman, his advisers, and the U.S. military in Korea attempted to mobilize and maintain public, Congressional, and allied support for the war through its different stages from its outbreak in June 1950, to the conflict with China, and through the prolonged stalemate and truce talks until July 1953.

Casey’s study explores far more than just the management of the news media’s coverage of the war, thoroughly evaluating the efforts to shape and restrict the coverage of the war by American war correspondents in Korea through the American military command in South Korea and General Douglas MacArthur’s headquarters in Tokyo during the different stages of the war. Washington’s various efforts to shape public opinion as well as Congressional responses to the conflict also receive careful analysis from Casey. Both approaches are also successfully integrated with the ebb and flow of the military conflict and the challenges that it posed for policymakers as they sought to maintain a successful diplomatic, military, and political strategy in dealing with the United Nations, Western allies, communist adversaries, and Republican critics in Congress.

The reviewers emphasize a number of significant strengths in Casey’s study not only concerning the Korean conflict but also the Truman administration’s handling of the war in relationship to its larger Cold War containment strategy, its struggles with the experience of a “limited war,” and its establishment of some legacies in this area. Casey tends to emphasize complexity in his evaluations of the different relationships and the calculations of Truman and his advisers. He responds thoughtfully to the questions and concerns of the reviewers.

1) The reviewers support Casey’s central thesis on the Truman administration’s approach to “selling” the war, although there are some areas of disagreement on its development and emphasis. Sung-Yoon Lee and Tom Devine emphasize Casey’s depictions of the Truman administration as initially cautious out of uncertainty about the intentions of the Soviet Union and out of a desire to keep public opinion from pushing for escalation. Truman, for example, resisted a presidential statement at the start of the war and advisers found it difficult to provide sufficient consultation with Congress to damper growing concerns about the South Korean and American retreat to the Pusan perimeter. This reticent approach opened the door for reports from the war correspondents who had rushed to Korea, and these reports intensified the uncertainties in the news media and for Republican critics in Congress who mounted charges that Truman was failing to provide successful leadership and escalated their anti-communist campaign. James Matray would have appreciated a clearer statement of Casey’s thesis from the start on how and why the administration had difficulties persuading the public and Congress to back its limited war
strategy. (1) Devine also notes that Casey devotes far more attention to press and Congressional views on the war, a point which Casey addresses at length in his response.

2) As the reviewers favorably point out, Casey demonstrates that the Truman administration and the U.S. military in Korea learned from their initial mistakes and improved their “selling” campaign. After the first year of the war and the stabilization of front lines near the 38th parallel, the military significantly improved its facilities for the media, its public information officers who handled relations with the media, and its management of censorship after December 1950, reviewing all stories sent from Korea for security violations. Devine notes the complexity of this relationship on both sides with MacArthur who opposed censorship “while making veiled threats against any reporter who took issue with his official (and often patentlly false) account of events” whereas the correspondents seemed more concerned with the quality of their facilities, and getting a “scoop” on their competitors. (3)

3) The Truman administration continued to struggle with its management of the public side of the war after the Chinese intervention in November 1950. After shifting its objectives from restoring the status quo to the unification of Korea, Washington found it difficult to explain publicly the reversal of its objective back to the original one of restoring the status quo. The administration, as Casey points out with the endorsement of Matray and other reviewers, remained on the defensive until a firestorm of public criticism erupted over Truman’s relief of MacArthur in April 1951. “Truman framed the key issues and his top advisors solidified majority opinion now in support of fighting on in Korea,” Matray notes, but with the beginning of armistice talks in July, Truman soon found himself in a stalemate over the prisoner of war issue when he decided to oppose a mandatory return of POWs to China and North Korea. Casey suggests that Truman found a way to use the POW issue to “instill a new moral purpose into the war effort,” (p. 289) but Matray suggests that Truman’s stance had more to do with scoring “a public relations victory over the Soviet Union in the Cold War” and influencing domestic opinion. (5)

4) Casey’s overall assessment of Truman is endorsed by the reviewers. As Devine concludes, “Casey’s assessment of Truman is relatively positive, though not uncritical.” Noting Truman’s reluctance to engage in extensive public relations activities, Devine approves the credit Casey gives to Truman for his successful resistance to escalation beyond Korea and for his political skills in dealing with his Republican adversaries. (2) Sung-Yoon Lee and Miscamble also approve Casey’s evaluation of Truman’s leadership with Miscamble agreeing that Truman tended to delay too long on providing guidance on issues to his subordinates. Pointing out Truman’s good fortune to have had outstanding advisers such as General George Marshall who stepped in as Secretary of Defense and General Matthew Ridgway who led the successful resistance to the Chinese intervention and regained the offensive back to the 38th parallel, Miscamble is especially pleased with Casey’s demonstration that Truman and his advisers enhanced the “main lines of containment in Europe and Asia” despite the challenges to this generated by Korea. (4) Matray notes more of Casey’s criticisms of Truman with emphasis on Truman’s caution and uncertainty rather than the more familiar decisiveness both at the start of the war and in response to the Chinese offensive: “his only offerings in this period were a written
statement, a press conference that spiraled out of control, and some unfortunate ranting to individual reporters, most of which showed him in a poor light.” (p. 142)

5) The reviewers agree that Casey persuasively advances several significant interpretations that emphasize the complexity of issues related to Korea and the general containment strategy. The Korean War gave a significant impetus to NSC-68 as an enhancement of the containment strategy and an ensuing military mobilization to secure Western Europe and provide the military means to back up an emerging global strategy. Devine and Miscamble point out that Casey persuasively demonstrates that the ebb and flow of the war both bolstered the administration’s campaign for military funding in Congress and at times challenged it and assisted opponents such as Republican leader Senator Robert Taft. Miscamble also praises Casey for resurrecting the internationalist Republican leaders, who ultimately during the MacArthur firing crisis and its aftermath, helped retain a bipartisan center against Taft Republicans and the nationalist anti-communists and affirmed this stance with support for Dwight Eisenhower versus Taft as the Republican presidential candidate in 1952. Matray notes that Casey effectively revises the prevailing consensus among historians that the MacArthur hearings in Congress rendered Truman a lame duck with the American public. Instead, Casey suggests that Truman exhibited skillful leadership and gained an upper hand with his critics if not a reversal of low public opinion polls: “By August, the administration had thus emerged from the hearings not in a mortally wounded condition but with an important degree of flexibility on the home front. Its chief opponents had been placed on the defensive. Its natural allies among southern Democrats and Republican internationalists had ultimately proved to be more supportive than at other moments in the recent past. And underpinning everything, administration officials had at last made a forceful case for their own policy.” (p. 262)

6) In his conclusion Casey considers the legacy of the Korean War which invites the reviewers to add their own reflections on the challenges of a limited war. Initially, Casey points to a "Korean syndrome" that indicated a desire to stay out of another Asian land war and which contributed to a reluctance to intervene militarily to rescue the French in Indochina or South Vietnam in the early 1960s. On the other hand, Korea could be viewed as a success for containment despite the perils of escalating to unification and as applicable in the memories of Lyndon Johnson and Dean Rusk in 1965, two veterans of the earlier Korean debates, who resisted moving beyond South Vietnam with U.S. troops but not the unleashing of U.S. air power on North Vietnam. “Korea provides no simple parallels for other generations,” Casey warns, but “a close assessment of this episode certainly illuminates some of the central dilemmas associated with waging a small, limited conflict in the midst of a broader struggle with an implacable enemy.” (365-366) Devine, for example, wonders if the depth of disillusionment with Truman by mid-1952 “matched the emotional intensity of the negative feelings toward George W. Bush.” (3-4) Matray also reflects on comparisons of Truman and Bush, noting Truman’s differences from Bush in that Truman obtained a UN endorsement, pushed economic mobilization, and did not pressure the opposing political party from the start to join a crusade.

**Participants:**
**Steven Casey** is Senior Lecturer of International History at the London School of Economics. He received his D.Phil. from the University of Oxford in 1999, and is the author of *Cautious Crusade: Franklin D. Roosevelt, American Public Opinion, and the War against Nazi Germany* (2001), and co-editor of *Mental Maps in the Era of Two World Wars* (2008). His current research explores the relationship between the U.S. military and American war correspondents during the two world wars.

**Thomas Devine** is associate professor of history at California State University, Northridge. Devine received his Ph.D. from the University of North Carolina in 2000. His *The Last Year of the Thirties: Henry A. Wallace’s 1948 Presidential Campaign and the Demise of Popular Front Politics* is forthcoming from the University of North Carolina Press.


**James I. Matray** is professor of history at California State University, Chico. He has published more than forty articles and book chapters on U.S.-Korean relations during and after World War II. Author of *The Reluctant Crusade: American Foreign Policy in Korea, 1941-1950* and *Japan’s Emergence as a Global Power*, his most recent books are *Korea Divided: The 38th Parallel and the Demilitarized Zone* and *East Asia and the United States: An Encyclopedia of Relations Since 1784*. During 2003 and 2004, Matray was an international columnist for the *Donga Ilbo* in South Korea. For the past three years he served on the Board of Editors for *Diplomatic History*.

**Rev. Wilson D. (Bill) Miscamble**, C.S.C. is professor of history at the University of Notre Dame. His primary research interests are American foreign policy since World War II and the role of Catholics in 20th century U.S. foreign relations. His books include *George F. Kennan and the Making of American Foreign Policy, 1947-1950* which was published in 1992 by Princeton University Press, and *From Roosevelt to Truman: Potsdam, Hiroshima, and the Cold War* which was published by Cambridge University Press in 2007. Both books won the Truman Book Award.
In this carefully researched and insightful book, Steven Casey asks us to reconsider some things we thought we knew and to examine some important issues that have received relatively little attention from historians of the Korean conflict. He also lays out some fresh approaches for thinking and writing about limited wars, how they are “sold,” and how they must be fought, given the constraints their “limited” nature puts on policymakers. In the process Casey provides the best account to date of the relationship between domestic politics and the war in Korea. Perhaps most significantly, he demonstrates how events in Korea influenced the Truman administration as it sought to develop and implement a comprehensive strategy for Cold War rearmament and mobilization.

Students of the early Cold War have long been told that in order to rally public support for his “get tough” anticommunist policies President Truman had to “scare hell out of the country.” Indeed, the phrase seems to be almost ritualistically conjured in nearly every synthetic account of late 1940s U.S. diplomacy. The administration merely persisted in using this tactic when it made the case for intervention in Korea – or so the conventional wisdom has suggested. As Casey makes clear, however, in their initial attempt to “sell” the Korean War, Truman and other top officials were determined to avoid overheated rhetoric, largely because they feared such an approach would stampede public opinion toward untenable options such as a preventive war with the Soviet Union. Instead, the administration’s reaction to the outbreak of hostilities in Korea was decidedly – and intentionally – low-key. Truman soon paid for his prudence. The public, the media, and opportunistic Republican politicians read the subdued response as a failure of leadership. The administration was knocked back on its heels and struggled mightily over the next few months to regain control of what today’s political consultants would call “the narrative,” a task made all the more difficult by the poor military performance of United Nations forces in the early days of the war.

Casey also maintains that the connection between Korea and the implementation of the NSC-68 recommendations is not as clear-cut as some scholars have argued. Though the war undoubtedly undermined the position of those who sought to slash defense spending, it did not necessarily guarantee that the administration could implement a massive mobilization as a matter of course. Ironically, Truman, Marshall, and others fretted that positive reports from Korea threatened a “let down” in public vigilance that could in turn undermine support for Cold War preparedness. Moreover, the political sniping that Truman’s handling of the war had precipitated jeopardized the bi-partisan consensus upon

---

which mobilization depended. Casey’s account of how the administration delicately (if not always effectively) balanced its short-term military strategy in Korea with its long-term plans for advancing the American cause in the Cold War makes for gripping reading and demonstrates, in the author’s words, “that the task of leadership was far subtler than simply launching a scare campaign.” (359)

The “limited” nature of the Korean conflict made the administration’s challenge all the more vexing. Noting that the scholarship on limited war has focused “almost exclusively on what the public will accept rather than what the government can do,” (359) Casey corrects this imbalance by closely examining Truman’s conduct of the war alongside his unsteady attempts to “sell” it to the American public. In particular, the author takes into account the constraints under which the administration operated – refraining from establishing a propaganda agency or a national unity cabinet and, more broadly, having to make a compelling case that much was at stake in Korea yet not so much that the use of tactical nuclear weapons or a blockade of China was in order.

Casey’s account of the POW issue illustrates the frustrating complexities that the administration confronted in this multifaceted war. As the military stalemate dragged on through 1952 and hopes for a decisive victory faded, the administration presented its opposition to forced repatriation of enemy prisoners of war as a moral issue, hoping to galvanize public opinion behind an idealistic cause and thereby revive wilting morale. Yet in doing so, it risked prolonging an unpopular war by sabotaging the on-going negotiations, alienating European allies whose support was needed in the broader Cold War struggle, and provoking violence between anti-communist and communist prisoners in U.S.-run camps (not to mention drawing unwanted attention to the operation of the camps.) Indeed, every administration decision seemed to alienate some easily disgruntled constituency – ambitious reporters eager for access and a good story, a mercurial public that demanded decisive action and a quick victory at minimal cost in lives and treasure, nationalist Republicans who felt obliged to offer only “limited” support for this “limited” war, and, of course, the erratic figure of General MacArthur. In time, the administration hit its stride – particularly in its handling of media relations and in driving a wedge between internationalist Republicans and the Taft wing of the party – but not before its public approval ratings plunged into the low thirties. Arguably, Truman’s handling of the war and the domestic political situation that accompanied it was most effective at the very moment when his popularity had hit its low point. As Casey observes, however, the emergence of Republican Dwight Eisenhower and Democrat Adlai Stevenson as their respective parties’ presidential nominees may have made the President’s job easier by keeping Korea from becoming as polarizing an issue as it might have been during the 1952 campaign.

Casey’s assessment of Truman is relatively positive, though not uncritical. The President stumbled in his initial response to the war, erred in acceding to MacArthur’s march toward the Yalu (though in this he was hardly alone), and missed opportunities to assert presidential leadership. In part his failure to “sell” the war stemmed from a temperamental distaste for engaging in public relations stunts – not a bad thing in and of itself. Still, given the diplomatic and political challenges that he confronted, Truman held his own, resisting pressure from those who wished to bring the war to the Chinese more emphatically and
demonstrating considerable political skill in navigating around his fiercest Republican critics. The Truman that emerges from this account is not the inflexible, provincial, needlessly aggressive Cold War ideologue that has been portrayed elsewhere. Casey also praises Republicans Thomas Dewey and John Foster Dulles for their efforts in undermining criticism directed at the administration from the GOP’s right wing. On the other hand, he considers Robert Taft a misguided and, at times, intellectually inconsistent critic who ultimately painted himself into a corner by calling for the incompatible goals of a smaller defense budget and a more forthright stance against Communist expansion.

Casey’s treatment of government-media relations, one of the book’s major themes, also proves illuminating. Rejecting previous claim that the press simply did the bidding of the state in furthering the so-called “cold war consensus” (leaving aside whether reporters were inclined or compelled to do so), the author paints a far more complex, and perhaps troubling picture. His discussion of the debate over censorship, for example, demonstrates the inadvisability of making simplistic generalizations about “adversarial” or “symbiotic” relationships. MacArthur, who prided himself on (and insistently reminded everyone else of) his opposition to censorship, in fact hindered responsible coverage of the war by refusing to institute a consistent policy of censorship, all the while making veiled threats against any reporter who took issue with his official (and often patently false) account of events. More egregiously, MacArthur’s self-serving public statements, duly reported by the journalists who covered him, on occasion jeopardized the lives of his own troops and undermined the diplomatic agenda of his commander-in-chief. Casey’s detailed accounts of the ongoing quarrels and reconciliations between the press and military public relations officials likewise give food for thought. One gathers that many reporters seemed more concerned with the conditions in which they operated, their ability to get a “scoop” (or to prevent the competition from getting one), and having something – anything – to report than they were with the substance or the implications of what they were reporting. In short, there appears to have been a preoccupation with process rather than content. So long as the process ran smoothly and the flow of information was sustained, war coverage was relatively positive, if never enthusiastic. Casey does not state this link explicitly, but introduces enough evidence to suggest it. Indeed, he notes that the most unfavorable coverage occurred during those periods characterized by an “information vacuum.”

Casey’s book is a significant contribution to the literature on the Korean conflict and the relationship between politics and diplomacy during the early years of the Cold War. Most impressive is the author’s ability to place the war in a broader context. Those who teach courses that cover the Cold War and have found it difficult to incorporate Korea into their presentation will find this book invaluable in suggesting ways that this might be done. After reading Casey’s account, one has a clearer sense of how Truman’s conduct of the war and the partisan squabbling in the halls of Congress and on the nation’s editorial pages influenced (and didn’t influence) each other.

---

2 For an account that emphasizes close complicity between the media and the government in promoting the cold war consensus see John Fousek, *To Lead the Free World: American Nationalism and the Cultural Roots of the Cold War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).
Less clear, however, is how the public – and different segments of the public – responded to specific developments, how closely it was paying attention to the war, and to what extent it understood how the conflict was connected to the larger cold war struggle. Casey cites numerous polls and takes note of the administration’s concern about the volatility of public opinion, but for the most part, the voices of non-politicians and non-journalists are not heard. As a result, it is difficult to know whether the administration officials’ fears about public opinion – fears upon which they acted – were well grounded. Also, given how abysmal Truman’s numbers were by mid-1952, there was obviously deep and widespread disillusionment with the President, but one does not get a feel for this in the final pages of the narrative. I, for one, wondered if the public’s animus against Truman matched the emotional intensity of the negative feelings toward George W. Bush in the final months of his administration, and, if so, whether it was due primarily to Truman's handling of – or failure to “sell” – the Korean war. That aside, Casey has given us much to ponder as we assess how “limited” wars are both sold and fought within the broader context of ongoing international and ideological struggles.
I.

Since at least the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905, propaganda, or, in the case of freer societies, “managing military-media relations,” has remained an important preoccupation of all warring states. That war between Japan and Russia, almost entirely forgotten in the United States today—despite the role of the U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt in the peace negotiations in Portsmouth, New Hampshire—drew for the first time a substantial corps of international journalists, military observers, and writers. The two Great Wars of the first half of the twentieth century, in their horrific and international scope, were appropriately observed and recorded by many war reporters. The Korean War of 1950-1953, now also largely forgotten in the United States despite the U.S. having prosecuted the war as a major belligerent, came only five years after the end of World War II. Yet, the Korean “conflict” or “police action,” as the bona fide war was variously called, was, as General Douglas MacArthur would admit in the wake of China’s intervention in late 1950, “an entirely new war.”

Entirely new the Korean War was in that it was the first hot war in the age of atomic weapons, pitting the U.S. against the Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of China. Moscow’s first atomic test in September 1949 made it virtually incumbent upon the U.S. that it fight a limited war—limited in both weaponry and terrain. The Korean War was the first “police action” to be waged under the banner of the United Nations. The war thereby accorded legitimacy to the nascent international organization and lent credibility to the concept of collective security. For Americans, the war catapulted the U.S. out of its post-WWII propensity for demobilization and made the U.S. into the permanent forward-deployed garrison state that it remains today. At the same time, it was a war that needed to be waged and brought to an end within the confines of public opinion at home and the emerging long-term strategic considerations of the Cold War. In other words, the Truman administration faced, from the very first days of the war, several domestic constituencies and foreign entities that required sustained managing.

Steven Casey’s study addresses in great detail the Truman administration’s attempts to manage military-media relations on the battle front in Korea and public opinion at home in America. As a study on the complex relationships among the executive branch, congress, the media, and the public within a constitutional democracy, Dr. Casey’s Selling the Korean War is unparalleled in both detail and insight. It is a major addition to the literature—in any language—on the Korean War, and merits a careful read by all who share an interest in the subject.1

II.

If ever the former British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan’s pithy reply, when asked by a reporter what might push government off course, “Events, my dear boy, events,” rang true, it was in the U.S. Korea policy in June 1950. By the summer of 1949, having effectively abandoned South Korea as a strategic liability rather than an asset, the North Korean invasion across the thirty-eighth parallel on June 25, 1950 abruptly cast the Korean peninsula into an entirely different strategic and ideological realm. The communist invasion across an “internationally recognized boundary” required action. Penalty needed to be imposed on the brazen aggressors and a stern message sent to their communist sponsors. And the Truman administration’s initial response was to sell its military actions on both the domestic and international fronts primarily through media relations and the United Nations.

On the domestic front, selling the war involved various channels of communication, with “national security officials forging behind-the-scenes alliances with key media outlets in order to disseminate the government line” (p. 6). Although, as Casey observes, President Truman “had an instinctive distaste for publicity stunts and had little time for polls, surveys, and focus groups that were beginning to be used at that time and that drive so much of the content of today’s speeches” (p. 6), Truman was nonetheless mindful of the public’s aversion to a possible Third World War: “For the first time since the end of World War II, many Americans had become apprehensive about the chances of another global conflagration; more than half were convinced that it would erupt within the next five years.” (p. 15).

In the end, the lessons of appeasement in the 1930s and his instinctive belief that Communist aggression in Korea—quite possibly a prelude to a global campaign of armed expansion—must not go unpunished, prompted Truman to take military action. But concerns about opinion both at home and in the capitals of allies, as well as in Moscow and Beijing, pushed the administration to “wrap its Korean intervention in the cloak of legitimacy provided by UN endorsement….Officials also had to temper and tailor their rhetoric in significant ways so that it conformed to the whole ethos of an international collective security enterprise, rather than a unilateral U.S. Cold War intervention” (p. 8).

So, the first-ever “police action under the UN” (p. 28) brought 16 nations to defend South Korea and repel the North Korean invaders. Believing Korea to be “the Greece of the East” (p. 30), even as South Korea itself offered the U.S. “very little strategic significance,” Truman felt that force needed to be met with force. Beyond Dean Acheson’s “defense perimeter” speech at the National Press Club in January 1950, “the Joint Chiefs had long

---

Jian’s *China’s Road to the Korean War: The Making of the Sino-American Confrontation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994) offers an insightful Chinese perspective. Bruce Cumings’s classic, *The Origins of the Korean War: Liberation and the Emergence of Separate Regimes, 1945-1947* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981) offers rare insights and detailed research on events leading up to the war, as compromised as its ideologically wrought conclusions on causality have been found to be since the 1990s.
decided to abandon the peninsula to the enemy as part of an overall defensive posture in the Far East” (p. 30). Nonetheless, Acheson’s conspicuous non-mention of South Korea in that speech would become a target of attack by the Eisenhower campaign in late 1952 as a sign of appeasement and an East Asia policy gone wrong under the Democrats (p. 331).

Initially, Truman’s gut instinct to intervene drew widespread support. At the end of the first week of the North Korean invasion, “Gallup reported that 81 percent of the mass public supported Truman’s decision to aid South Korea, while the White House press office hastened to inform reporters that letters to the president were running ten to one in favor of sending U.S. support to Korea” (pp. 35-36). The New York Times also lent its support, declaring that the U.S. had now “learned the lesson that appeasement does not serve peace” (p. 39).

Yet, the reporting from the battlefield in the initial weeks of the U.S. intervention did not give rise to optimism. Keyes Beech of the Chicago Daily News—along with Burton Crane of the New York Times, Frank Gibney of Time, and Marguerite Higgins of the New York Herald Tribune—were among the first handful of American journalists to arrive on the scene in late June just a couple of days after the outbreak of the invasion. The destruction Beech saw in South Korea was less than inspiring: “I have a feeling that I have just witnessed the beginning of World War III” (p. 43).

The Battle of Chonan between July 8 and 11 saw the death of 130 soldiers of the 34th Regiment of the 24th Infantry Division of the U.S. Army, including the commander of the regiment, Colonel Robert Martin (Each year, on July 8, Chonan City holds a memorial service in honor of the fallen U.S. soldiers. A new monument was unveiled at the 2008 service). To Homer Bigart of the New York Herald Tribune—and probably other observers on the scene—the rapid fall of Chonan in the first weeks of the war was “a galling humiliation” (p. 53).

The slow reaction by General Douglas MacArthur, the head of the UN Command based in Tokyo, in the initial phase of the war, did not go unnoticed. Casey tells us that Carl W. McCardle of the Philadelphia Evening Bulletin believed “that the complacency in Tokyo during that first week had been appallingly reminiscent of Pearl Harbor” (p. 56). Military censorship was also pervasive during this time. Pictures of mangled bodies of U.S. soldiers and “mental patients,” or of “the blind, the deaf and dumb, and amputees” were all restricted. As Casey writes, “the visual images the American public was about to receive would offer a heavily doctored and sterilized view of the war, one far removed from that depicted in war correspondents’ written reports from the front” (p. 62).

On the other hand, in the aftermath of the stunningly successful Inchon landing and the subsequent two-pronged attack in mid-September, sugarcoating the news no longer became necessary. In fact, a new and “happy kind of crisis” emerged; that is, how to bring the successful “police action” to a satisfactory close (p. 97). Even earlier, on August 17, U.S. ambassador to the UN Warren Austin intimated that the Korean peninsula should be made one under a free and democratic Seoul government: “Shall only a part of the country be assured freedom? I think not....Korea’s prospects would be dark if any action of the UN
were to condemn it to exist indefinitely as 'half slave and half free,' or even one-third slave and two thirds free” (p. 98).

Truman followed up with his own endorsement on September 1: "We believe the Koreans have a right to be free, independent, and united—as they want to be. The U.S. president went on to declaim, “Under the direction of the UN, we, with others, will do our part to help them enjoy that right” (p. 98). What ensued proved costly for the U.S. In the midst of the euphoria in the wake of the dramatic reversal of fortune on the battleground and the desire to clean up the Korean question once and for all, and in spite of China’s warnings in early October that it would enter the war if U.S. troops crossed the thirty-eighth parallel, the U.S., in concert with South Korean and other UN forces, pressed ahead up north across the thirty-eighth parallel and through Pyongyang.

Ambassador Austin stated to the UN General Assembly in early October: “The aggressor’s forces should not be permitted to have refuge behind an imaginary line” (emphasis added). And on October 7, the General Assembly approved a resolution authorizing “the establishment of a unified, independent and democratic government in the sovereign state of Korea.” On the point of a possible confrontation with China, MacArthur was not alone in presuming that Beijing, preoccupied with more pressing concerns like economic reconstruction, was only bluffing. According to Casey, Acheson remarked privately on October 4 that “the only proper course to take was a firm and courageous one and...we should not be duly frightened at what was probably a Chinese communist bluff” (p. 100).

By January 1951, in the wake of the retake of Seoul by the combined Communist forces, the American public’s support for the war had grown weaker. As Casey points out, according to Gallup, “66 percent of Americans now wanted the United States to ‘pull out’ of Korea altogether.” Furthermore, “73 percent of Americans now thought the United States should stop at the thirty-eighth parallel, if the Chinese also stopped fighting; in any settlement, 43 percent would approve of a division of Korea, while only 36 percent would be opposed” (p. 229). In a clearer sign of the public’s disillusionment with the war, between March and July 1951, support for a truce that would leave Korea divided at the thirty-eighth parallel increased from 43 to 51 percent (p. 263).

In fact, by March 19, 1951, the UN—or, more pointedly, the United States—was ready to discuss “conditions of settlement in Korea” (p. 230). MacArthur called this shift in policy “one of the most disgraceful plots in U.S. history,” even going as far as to issue a statement to the press that he was ready to discuss with the enemy commander a ceasefire “only under circumstances that would be tantamount to a Chinese surrender” (p. 231).

After the sacking of MacArthur in April 1951 and the stalemate that ensued on the Korean peninsula that summer, the American public’s support for the war grew progressively weaker while its calls for minimizing further losses and signing a ceasefire gained momentum. By June 1952, the second anniversary of the outbreak of the war, 54 percent of Americans “thought an armistice based on the division of Korea would be a success for the United States,” a marked increase from 30 percent a year earlier (p. 292). By the spring of 1953, 69 percent would approve such a plan (p. 355).
During the two years of drawn-out negotiations, the Truman administration tried to cope with the torturous position it found itself in over the prisoners of war issue and the principle of “non-forcible repatriation” by infusing “a new moral purpose into the war effort” (289). Article 118 of the Geneva Convention called for the immediate repatriation of all prisoners upon the cessation of hostilities. But the majority of some 140,000 Communist prisoners held in the South did not want to return home. The result was the Truman administration took a stand against involuntary repatriation that might entail persecution, torture, and even execution at home, against charges that it was more concerned with the wellbeing of enemy prisoners than the fate of U.S. soldiers held captive in the enemy camp.

A breakthrough came only after Stalin’s death on March 5, 1953, when both Moscow and Beijing took a softer stance on the issue (p. 344). The armistice was finally signed in July, after some tense twists and turns engineered by the South Korean President Syngman Rhee. In his desire to carry the war into northern territory again and as an attempt to undermine the truce talks, Rhee unilaterally released some 27,000 Communist soldiers in mid-June. The result was renewed fighting and some 3,000 UN casualties until the shooting came to an end in late July.

Casey endorses the Truman administration’s decision to take military action “at the behest of the UN,” for the UN “gave the Korean War the veneer of legality and legitimacy” (p. 367). That is certainly a lesson that resonates even today. At the same time, the UN endorsement was made possible only by the Soviet Union’s abstention. Although this goes beyond the scope of Casey’s study and probably even the realm of legitimate historical inquiry, the U.S. in all probability would have taken military action—unilaterally or in some early form of “coalition of the willing”—in defense of South Korea even in the face of a Soviet veto. Under this counterfactual scenario, the effect of Washington’s media management—with all other major events in the war being equal—probably would not have veered too far off the course that Casey describes in such great detail. For, in the end, it was domestic, rather than world, public opinion that drove the U.S. policy in Korea. And, in that context, Casey’s Selling the Korean War is a compelling lesson in history, told with vigor and eloquence.

III.

As a self-styled unbiased reviewer, I feel obliged to point out some of the shortcomings of the book. But those that exist in any meaningful way at all seem few and far between. I did find a couple of typographical errors, including “MacArthur flew to Tokyo [emphasis added] to witness the unfolding military situation firsthand” (p. 28). But such errors are obviously not the fault of the author. Elsewhere, on points of style, phrases like “to be sure” and “drum up support for” made too frequent an appearance. But weighed against the sheer force of the argument streaming mellifluously throughout the book, these are but petty points. Casey’s prose is unaffected and highly readable, his research is meticulous and far-reaching, and the story he tells is at once fascinating and compelling.
Admittedly, the book’s many merits may not universally resonate with readers uninformed of the basic contours of the Korean War. Casey’s narrative, which unfolds naturally from the very first paragraph to the very last, never digresses from its title. Such a highly focused narrative may be a weakness, but I tend to view it as one of many strengths of the book. The title on the dust jacket of my review copy omits “in the United States”; hence, I at first expected at least some discussion of psychological warfare, including propaganda leaflets, practiced by both sides during the war. But the substance discussed and the perspectives assumed throughout the book assiduously remain matters and standpoints of American interest. In the end, I must admit a lingering desire for some commentary on how Washington’s foes like Beijing and Moscow, or allies like London and Paris, managed media relations of their own.

Although the narrative does follow a chronological order—starting with the outbreak of the war on June 25, 1950, and ending with the signing of the armistice on July 27, 1953—it does at times presume the reader to be well aware of key events in the war, both their import and controversy. For instance, the stupendous odds of failure of the Inchon landing in September 1950 and how that operation dramatically changed the fortunes on the battleground is not addressed in detail, perhaps because it is already a well known story. The date of the signing of the armistice goes without mention, as does also President Eisenhower’s reluctant agreement to give South Korean President Syngman Rhee a mutual defense pact in his haste to bring the war to a close. But, once again, the highly focused, gripping portrayal of the dynamics among the various American political organs throughout the three year-long war over 367 pages (adorned with only very few photographs) renders any omission of detail virtually insignificant. The book is a major work, and Dr, Casey is to be lauded for his achievement.
Public opinion no longer receives much attention as an important factor that scholars examine in explaining the conduct and course of American foreign relations. Fortunately, Steven Casey departs from this pattern in writing Selling the Korean War: Propaganda, Politics, and Public Opinion in the United States, 1950-1953. Oddly, the author notes in his introduction, “there have been few efforts to explore the specific impact the Korean War had on [the U.S. government’s] efforts to construct the Cold War consensus at home” (p. 4). This careful study not only fills this notable gap in the literature on the Korean War, it also makes a valuable addition to the short list of books dealing with the conflict’s impact on domestic affairs inside the United States. Although Casey’s main purpose is to explain “the government’s efforts to sell the war at home” (p. 5), he achieves much more in persuasively challenging conventional wisdom about well-known key events and advancing perceptive new interpretations of old issues.

Casey rightly notes in his introduction that explaining how the U.S. government attempted to sell the Korean War is important because the conflict marked “a watershed moment in American history” that “sparked the emergence of the national security state to oversee a militarized version of containment” (p. 5). He then identifies the six main venues where the Truman administration waged its propaganda campaign to build support for the war—presidential speeches, the Defense Department’s Office of Public Information, the State Department’s Office of Public Affairs, the United Nations, General Douglas MacArthur’s office in Tokyo, and U.S. Eighth Army headquarters in Korea. His second focus is “on the interaction between the administration and the key mediating institutions in the American polity” (p. 9)—the U.S. Congress and the press. Prior historians have seen either consensus or conflict between these actors, but the author contends that “both perspectives obscure . . . the enormous complexity in the relationship between two institutions that were far from monoliths” (p.13).

My main criticism of this account is that the introduction analytically stops there without a direct statement of Casey’s central thesis. The author does emphasize that the Korean War was complex and unpopular, making it very difficult to sell, but does not explain at the outset exactly how and why. Coming closest to a thesis statement is the assertion much later (p. 122) that the struggle to sell a limited war was what created “many of the problems that had plagued the administration. . . . Because [President Harry S.] Truman and his advisers were so keen to stop the fighting spilling out of the Korean peninsula, they had faced obvious constraints on what they could say and do. Not wanting to provoke the Soviets or inflame domestic opinion they had abdicated leadership at key moments and, when they had spoken out, had invariably shied away from ratcheting up the rhetoric. Viewing Korea as a short-term emergency, they had also been reluctant to make basic changes in the mechanics of opinion persuasion.”

With respect to research, Casey gives new meaning to the word exhaustive. He has examined documents not only at the Truman and Eisenhower presidential libraries, but at numerous private manuscript collections across the United States. His endnotes include
references to records at the National Archives and the Library of Congress, as well as the Public Record Office in Britain. Naturally, Casey relies on information in a wide array of newspapers and other print media, but he also addresses the impact of the war’s coverage on television and in movie theaters. Nor does the author miss any of the firsthand accounts or critical secondary sources focusing on the Korean War. Of special value are sixteen photographs, mostly of newsmen in Korea, but of major U.S. civilian and military leaders as well. Casey also reproduces a political campaign and a mobilization poster, while including an excellent map of Korea and a chart displaying the number of censored articles monthly from November 1951 to March 1953.

Casey is a very talented writer. Especially impressive is his ability to present the history of the Korean War with a description of the events on the battlefield, as well as in Tokyo, Washington, and at the United Nations, largely without distracting attention from his main focus on the U.S. government’s efforts to influence politicians and the public. He also makes outstanding use of quotations from journalists, politicians, administration officials, military leaders, and private citizens to enlighten and entertain. Casey’s clever use of metaphors strengthens his prose. He writes, for example, that “the war in Korea had clearly changed the prevailing political weather, churning up storms that threatened to submerge any moderate daring enough to oppose Joe [McCarthy]” (p. 79). Later, he remarks that “by the summer of 1951 the weak glue holding the GOP together had lost its adhesiveness” (p. 364). But some readers may dislike his frequent use of clichés, such as “Republicans had a number of cards up their sleeves” (p. 184).

Divided into three parts, Casey begins his book with “The War against North Korea, June-November 1950” containing four chapters. Focusing first on events in Washington, he documents how the Truman administration purposely withheld information about events on the battlefield and its policy deliberations. Combined with the president’s “low-key, laid-back public posture” (p. 34) to avoid igniting public hysteria, this conceded control over the public debate to the Republicans and reporters who gathered news from other sources. In Korea, the “massive influx of journalists” (p. 45) left the U.S. military unable to meet their basic needs or provide “mandatory surveillance of reporters’ copy” (p. 46). The administration backed Republican demands for censorship, but MacArthur refused, despite his displeasure with eyewitness reports of disastrous defeats that contradicted optimistic daily briefings in Tokyo. Meanwhile, Casey explains, Truman was resisting rising pressure in Congress for full-scale mobilization, believing that this would magnify the crisis. Exploiting the new medium of television, the administration promoted calm in August with weekly broadcasts reporting on the defense of Pusan. The Inchon Landing ironically generated fears of public complacency, sparking the issuance of statements urging vigilance and organized efforts to build support for continued mobilization.

A second section, comprised of five chapters covering “The War against China, November 1950-July 1951,” describes the U.S. government’s failed efforts to unite the media, the public, and the Republicans in support for fighting this “entirely new war.” Once again, Casey argues, silence was the culprit. The Truman administration now openly assigned blame to the Soviet Union, but refused to make public the policy it had privately adopted of “a ‘dogged determination’ to hang on to Korea without expanding the war” (p. 135). For
correspondents in Korea, “life at the front had been hellish,” but “everything soon got far worse” (p. 145). Moreover, “deep-seated animosity” sparked “military-media mudslinging” (p. 149) when MacArthur blamed “biased, even traitorous reporting” with undermining troop morale, a charge that Casey labels as “deeply unfair” (p. 150). Significantly, journalists welcomed Washington’s decision on 22 December to impose censorship—ignoring the general’s resistance—because this would end security breaches and control competition, although they soon criticized as harsh new limits and punishments for violations. Casey credits Lieutenant General Matthew B. Ridgway with working to repair media-military relations. Conditions improved steadily after February 1951 as the new U.S. Eighth Army commander scored battlefield victories and enacted “a series of changes that would place Korean PR activities on a firmer footing” (p. 166).

According to Casey, Chinese military intervention finally forced Truman to exert leadership, and take “bold new actions . . . markedly different from the administration’s low-key rhetoric and studiously subdued mobilization actions of the summer” (p. 176). But he delayed a serious effort to sell the war until after the United Nations condemned the People’s Republic of China (PRC) for aggression in Korea, resulting, the author laments, in Truman not making public his “eloquent” (p. 210) letter to MacArthur in January explaining his strategy and goals in Korea. Through a “shrewd marshaling of forces” (p. 198), the administration won the “Great Debate” with isolationist Republicans, saving its Cold War strategy. Nevertheless, polls showed that two-thirds of Americans wanted to leave Korea, motivating the administration to launch a public information campaign after belatedly settling on “an agreed-on policy to sell” (p. 207). Administration officials promoted this message in movies and letters, but sent mixed signals to the print media “that partly undid the recent efforts to harmonize this fraught relationship” (p. 228). This new effort peaked after the recall of MacArthur, as Truman framed the key issues and his top advisors solidified majority opinion now in support of fighting on in Korea.

Part III discusses with greater haste “The Stalemate War, July 1951-July 1953” in three chapters. Despite being “a very tricky sell” (p. 295), Casey reports, public support for the limited war in Korea by the summer of 1952 was stronger than ever. While U.S. armistice negotiators limited the information newsmen received, the U.S. military gained control over what Americans learned about the conflict. Responding to earlier mistakes, Ridgway acted to meet the needs of a decreasing number of journalists, improving living conditions and the ability to transmit stories. However, Casey identifies as “perhaps the crucial change . . . that it was now easier to control exactly where correspondents went” (p. 308). While censors steered reporters away from atrocious conditions at the United Nations’ prisoner of war (POW) camps, they grotesquely organized coverage of the brutal suppression of the Koje-do uprising. Not only did all branches of the U.S. military recruit and train Public Information Officers, but army correspondents came to dominate reporting on the war, establishing a pattern of publishing mostly human interest stories. Nevertheless, Casey shows how President Dwight D. Eisenhower repeated Truman’s mistakes of maintaining an information vacuum and placing limits on the on the press. Although “determined to pay close attention to selling his policies” (p. 340), “Eisenhower would have endless problems turning these basic preferences into a popular package” (p. 341) because he was slow to define how he would wage the war and for what aims.
Harry S. Truman’s performance as a wartime president is among the important issues receiving reexamination and reinterpretation in this study. Far from acting with decisiveness in his immediate response to the North Korean attack, Truman, as Casey emphasizes, was cautious and uncertain. This served “to highlight one basic fact that would continue to plague the administration: in the absence of clear presidential leadership, speculation and confusion would abound, and journalists and political opponents would have the opportunity to put their own particular spin on events” (p. 25).

Breaking from the pack, Casey questions Truman’s choice of General George C. Marshall to replace Louis A. Johnson as secretary of defense in September 1950, implying that a wiser and more courageous choice would have been an internationalist Republican. Similarly, rather than praising Truman for restraint after China’s massive military intervention late in November, Casey sees a continuing pattern of uninformed decision-making and impulsive behavior. “His only offerings in this period,” he stresses, “were a written statement, a press conference that spiraled out of control, and some unfortunate ranting to individual reporters, most of which showed him in a poor light” (p. 142).

Casey also advances a perceptive reassessment of U.S. actions at the United Nations to condemn the PRC for aggression in Korea. Secretary of State Dean Acheson claimed in his memoirs, he notes, that American public anger over the Truman administration’s acceptance of one final overture to Beijing for a cease-fire before a vote on a condemnation resolution passed quickly. Casey disagrees with other historians who have supported this judgment, insisting that the decision had serious negative ramifications. “As well as confusing the moral case for the war,” he contends, “the machinations in the UN prevented the administration from going public with any great force and frequency” (p. 214). Another reason for silence was abandonment of reunification as a war aim in favor of fighting to restore the prewar status quo. Casey insightfully explains how this decision created a “more prosaic” problem: “the difficulty of saying anything at all about objectives, which only added to the overall dearth of information coming from official sources on the whole subject of Korea” (p. 226).

By contrast, the Truman administration was quite vocal during the first weeks of the war in refuting comments from some newsmen, congressmen, and even MacArthur that Korea was a civil conflict. Journalists quickly fell into line, presenting the war to the American people as a fight against World Communism. This helps explain “the media’s basic lack of interest in a country America was ostensibly fighting to defend” (p. 350), as reporters devoted scant attention to atrocities, unless committed against U.S. soldiers. Furthermore, Casey records how American journalists often were “willing accomplices” (p. 351) of the U.S. government in shielding the image of the Republic of Korea (ROK), rarely reporting examples of incompetence, repression, and corruption under President Syngman Rhee. Acknowledging its fears of being ostracized for spouting the Communist line, Casey criticizes the media for not reporting coverage of ROK Army operations “to eradicate a well-organized and extensive guerrilla movement” in South Korea (p. 351). Popular myopia about Korea that the media promoted likely encouraged the belief later that “a limited war in Vietnam . . . promised to be relatively painless at home” (p. 366).
More provocative is Casey’s explanation for how the Truman administration found a rationale for selling the stalemated Korean War to the American people. He makes the important point that although success on the battlefield had made General MacArthur an isolated figure by March 1951, his public statements calling for victory made it difficult for the president to remain silent on identifying war aims. Contradicting a consensus among historians, Casey argues that the MacArthur Hearings gave the Truman administration “an important boost” (p. 258), diminishing the general’s stature and making Republicans look like dangerous warmongers among the American people. As moderate Republicans, notably Massachusetts Senator Leverett Saltonstall, worked to rebuild a bipartisan foreign policy, Truman finally displayed leadership in selling the American people on the necessity to fight for a ceasefire in a divided Korea. Soon after the start of the armistice negotiations, Casey argues, the president decided to oppose forcible return of Communist POWs to the PRC and North Korea to energize the war effort at home. Truman adopted the principle of voluntary repatriation to transform the Korean War “into a moral crusade for human rights” (p. 286).

Casey, however, presents no conclusive evidence that Truman’s main motive for focusing “on the ideological appeal of democracy” in promoting his policy on the POW issue was “to instill a new moral purpose into the war effort” (p. 289). More convincing is evidence that the president sought to score a public relations victory over the Soviet Union in the Cold War. Nor does the author provide a compelling reason to believe that voluntary repatriation “had little to do with domestic politics” (p. 284). Overall, Casey’s coverage of the truce talks is abbreviated and analytically superficial. For example, it simply is inaccurate to report that “the negotiating teams haggled for more than two years over the demarcation line, over ways of enforcing an armistice, and ultimately over the fate of the prisoners of war” (p. 268). Absent the deadlock over the POWs, there would have been a settlement after only eight months of negotiations.

Casey astutely describes the Korean War as “a cautionary tale,” warning that it “ought to act as a stark and brutal reminder of the severe political costs associated with taking the nation into a ‘limited’ war” (p. 367). Indeed, I could not help but think about comparative patterns with the current and ongoing U.S. conflict in Iraq. For example, Casey notes how endorsement from the United Nations gave U.S. intervention in Korea a “veneer of legality and legitimacy” and therefore placed Truman in a stronger position than “his successors who have tried to fight costly guerrilla conflicts in which the pretext is unclear, widespread international support is lacking, and the chances of any sort of meaningful victory are slim” (p. 367). Apparently, President George W. Bush missed this historical lesson. Also in contrast to Truman, he made no effort to push economic mobilization. Given strong public support for tax increases after June 1950 to finance higher defense spending for the conflict in Korea and other fights in the Cold War, how can one explain the Bush administration's firm insistence on tax cuts and public support for this fiscal irresponsibility since bombing of Baghdad began in March 2003?

Another contrast relates to how two presidents dealt with the opposition party in Congress. According to Casey, Republicans could limit their support for Truman’s war effort because Korea was a limited conflict. “Had the government, from the start of war,” he
speculates, “engaged in a forceful leadership drive, depicting the issues in black-and-white terms, as an all-out struggle between good and evil—had it done, in fact, what historians have often claimed it did—then this would have greatly reduced the Republican Party’s freedom to maneuver” (p. 361). President George W. Bush clearly followed this strategy with respect to Iraq, compelling many leading Democrats to mute their concerns and criticisms about the war until well after his reelection in 2004.

Casey’s study is thorough and insightful, but his conclusion disappoints. “For long periods,” he writes in summarizing a main theme in this account, “the government had faced enormous problems in trying to spark and sustain support for this distant and messy war” (p. 358). Stressing the importance of focusing “on what the government can do,” not “what the public will accept” (p. 359), Casey then identifies three reasons why this task was so difficult. First, he repeats the old argument that Americans resist fighting for anything less than complete victory. Second, two administrations advanced a cautious propaganda message. Third, the task was too complex. Prior historians, the author argues perceptively, have ignored the fact that “mobilization often distracted domestic attention away from efforts to define what Korea was all about, or that the war initially sparked a new wave of partisanship that threatened to undermine the task of constructing domestic support for a longer-term preparedness program” (p. 358). But selling the Korean War would not have been a complex task if the U.S. government had not been obsessed with achieving its long-held goal of reuniting Korea. Truman made his decision to cross the 38th parallel once battle lines stabilized in Korea, rather than late September as Casey contends, because, like another president a half century later, he wanted to declare “Mission Accomplished.” The complexities that limited what the administration could do to sell Korea emerged only after Truman made it a “strange war” (p. 365) of choice after foolishly ignoring what Americans would accept.
In a review of the literature on the Korean conflict published in 1995 Rosemary Foot noted that there was “still room for a fuller analysis of the relationship between domestic politics and the war in Korea.”¹ In *Selling the Korean War* Steven Casey capably fills the lacuna, which Foot so astutely identified. This book reveals a good deal about the Truman administration’s efforts to manage the media’s coverage of the war in Korea and to sustain congressional and popular support for the American role in it. Even more significantly, this well-written and thoughtfully argued study sheds substantial light on the formulation and implementation of broad American foreign policy during the period from June 1950 until the early months of the Eisenhower presidency. Casey clarifies well how the Truman administration pressed ahead with forging the main elements of its containment strategy despite being bogged down in an ugly conflict on the Korean peninsula. In the process it fended off alternate national security strategies and cemented a bipartisan coalition in support of its broad approach. *Selling the Korean War* warrants reading not only by specialists on the Korean War but also by those interested in the crucial foreign policy debates which occurred during the final third of Truman’s presidency. It should be read in conjunction with the relevant sections of Robert Beisner’s terrific biography of Dean Acheson, a key participant in those debates.²

The significance of the Korean War for American foreign policy has long been noted.³ It drove the United States and China even further apart while helping bring the United States and Japan much closer together. The impact of the Korean conflict resounded far beyond Asia, however. It influenced decisively the implementation of the recommendations of National Security Council document 68, which called for a greatly enhanced conception of American national security and a major military build-up. Steven Casey’s careful investigations flesh out our understanding of how this occurred. It was not a simple matter. Indeed with some classic understatement Casey asserts that “the relationship between the situation in Korea and the issue of [defense] mobilization was complex and tangled.” (p. 68) Providing an insightful grasp of this complexity and the difficulties faced by the Truman administration in navigating its way forward is a major contribution of this important book.

Initially the fighting in Korea came to the rescue of the advocates of NSC-68. The early military setbacks in June and July of 1950 raised serious questions about the quality of the American armed forces and served to discredit and marginalize Defense Secretary Louis Johnson who had opposed NSC-68. It allowed Acheson to make his persuasive case for a huge increase in defense spending and to advocate for a greatly enhanced American

---


military presence in Western Europe. Yet, after the Chinese military intervention in Korea, the disastrous U.S. defeats, followed by a bloody stalemate in the fighting, major debates emerged on two issues: “Whether or not the United States should continue this grim struggle in Korea and how to wage the broader Cold War with the Soviets.” (p. 172) Ultimately the Truman administration prevailed on both matters, but Casey makes clear it gained no easy victory in either one.

The nationalist wing of the Republican Party led by Senator Robert Taft worried that “extensive and expensive overseas commitments would corrupt the whole nature of the American polity” and turn it into a “garrison state.” (p.183) Taft and his allies like former president Herbert Hoover and the combative Senator Kenneth Wherry forcefully opposed the American commitment to Western Europe’s defense through NATO. At the very time that it fended off this strong nationalist/neo-isolationist challenge the Truman administration also had to keep a firm control on the limits of the Korean conflict and to prevent its enlargement as advocated by General Douglas MacArthur. Furthermore, it had to resist the tempting calls of those on the home-front who used the deteriorating military situation in Korea as the occasion to call for “preventive war” so as to take advantage of American superiority in atomic weapons. In the end the Truman administration won this “great debate,” helped by the support of some savvy Democratic congressional leaders like Senators Tom Connally and Richard Russell and by the public backing of internationalist Republicans like Thomas Dewey and Harold Stassen who refused to join the circling sharks after Acheson’s blood.

The support of the internationalist Republicans for the broad course pursued by Truman and Acheson ultimately proved crucial. It guaranteed that “Uncle Sam” would turn in the postwar period from being “a good sprinter” into a true “marathon runner”--to use James Reston’s colorful March 1951 descriptions quoted by Casey –ready to sustain long-term commitments across administrations of both political colors. (p. 199) Casey acknowledges that the “savage attacks” launched against the Truman administration by Senator Joseph McCarthy and other right-wing Republicans made the period of the Korean War one of bitter partisanship. Nonetheless, he argues persuasively that the internationalist Republicans proved more “significant” in the long run by first muting the attacks on Truman, even after he fired MacArthur, and, then by providing the base for Eisenhower’s presidential campaign out of concern for “what Taft and his allies stood for.” (pp. 363-364) The bipartisan support orchestrated by Senator Arthur Vandenberg for Truman’s great initiatives in 1947-1949 is well known, but Casey rightly prods his reader to appreciate the efforts of those like Dewey, Stassen, John Foster Dulles and Senator Leverett Saltonstall who refused to allow their party to be dominated either by Taft’s nationalists or by the ‘Asia Firsters’ of Senator William Knowland and Douglas MacArthur. The broad bipartisan center which supported the containment strategy in its various iterations over the ensuing four decades was firmly cemented during the difficult years of the Korean struggle. Yet, it is well to remember that it might have worked out quite differently had Robert Taft won the Republican nomination in 1952 and captured the White House.

Taft would have had a real chance for victory had he gained the nomination because popular support for Truman’s Democratic administration was low through much of the
1950-1952 period. Neither Truman nor his team effectively mastered the art of maintaining public support for the Korean War effort. Except for those occasions such as after the Inchon landing and the crossing of the 38th parallel when a dramatic victory seemed likely, public and media support for the war was limited and tepid. Ironically, however, for part of the war the administration’s effort to manage opinion focused as much on preventing popular hysteria and potential over-reactions as on garnering support. Once the administration reaffirmed its commitment to a limited conflict after the Chinese intervention, its public relations endeavors were always rather restrained and this despite the gloom and demoralization produced by the military disasters of December 1950 and early 1951. It should be accounted some accomplishment that the Truman administration kept the Korean conflict in proper perspective and didn’t allow it to dominate its larger Cold War strategy, but Casey’s account makes clear that Truman and his aides might have ‘sold’ this war much more effectively to the American people.

Casey’s portrayal of Harry Truman is decidedly mixed but rings true. He concludes that Truman often “failed to play an important part in the early stages of planning on a particular issue, [and was] unwilling to step in and give guidance as his subordinates battled or agonized over their course.” (p. 190) Ultimately, however, Truman held courageously both to the broad containment strategy which Acheson and his other advisers devised and to maintaining the ‘limited’ nature of the Korean conflict. The president was fortunate to have General George Marshall succeed Louis Johnson and General Matthew Ridgway replace first General Walton Walker and then Douglas MacArthur. A strong secretary of defense and a capable commanding general helped the administration hold up in the midst of the successive crises from the Chinese intervention to the MacArthur dismissal. Ridgway even proved much more effective in handling the media in the war theater than his predecessors. Truman also proved deeply loyal to his much-maligned secretary of state who repaid his support with admirable policy making, especially towards Europe and Japan during these years. It seems that a deeply unpopular secretary of state can still be an effective one.

While completing my review of Selling the Korean War I also read the recent H-Diplo roundtable on Hal Brands’ From Berlin to Baghdad: America’s Search for Purpose in the Post-Cold War World (2008).4 In the book Brands apparently argues that based on the experience of the Cold War “the most reliable method of creating domestic political consensus on foreign policy is to provide an attractive and intellectually facile conception of the U.S. role in international affairs.” (Brands, p. 337) In his author’s response Brands goes even further and suggests that Americans are “suckers for simplicity” who want to hear “a good story about the world and [their] part in it.” This sounds persuasive at first hearing and yet Steven Casey reveals that the Truman administration failed to produce an effective “bumper sticker” explanation of its foreign policy during the Korean War even while it still continued its effort to set the main lines of containment in Europe and Asia. His work helps one appreciate that “containment” was less a slogan to “sell” policy and more the culmination of a set of policies developed from 1947 onwards that gave real meaning to the strategy.

Casey concludes his analysis with the suggestion that Korea should serve as a “cautionary tale” for American policy makers. “Even in the relatively favorable environment of the early 1950s,” Casey observes that “both the Truman and Eisenhower administrations often floundered and foundered when faced with the fraught task of selling a costly, protracted, messy war.” (p. 367) He is assuredly right. And yet perhaps he balks in this final assessment by declining to answer whether the American effort, even with all its problems and difficulties, was worth it. One is left wondering whether he would agree with William Stueck’s powerful judgment that the Korean “conflict may be seen as a turning point in which, unlike the 1930s, the political system of the United States and Western Europe rose to the challenge of authoritarianism in a manner that averted the global bloodbath of the previous decade and positioned the West advantageously in the ongoing Cold War.”

That question lingered for me on my completion of this fine book.

---

I would like to begin by thanking both Tom Maddux for organizing this roundtable and Professors Devine, Lee, Matray, and Miscamble for their comprehensive and engaging reviews of my book. I am naturally thankful for the reviewers’ many kind and positive comments. Having spent so much time in so many archives, I am pleased that they all praise the book's exhaustive research. I am also delighted that they agree that it advances new and important perspectives on such a pivotal moment in American foreign relations. But for the sake of brevity, I want to concentrate on those areas where the reviewers thought that the argument could have been more developed.

Before I do, I’d like to elaborate on a significant point made by three of the reviewers: the parallels between Truman and Bush. Although this project was conceived in the summer of 2000, while Bush was still battling Gore on the campaign trail, the unfolding “war on terror” naturally cast a long shadow over my research and writing. Often, the parallels seemed striking: an inarticulate president trying to develop a plausible public-relations strategy, whose instinctive loyalty to key subordinates sometimes seemed more of a political liability than an asset; an opposition party grappling with the thorny matter of opposing a war without appearing disloyal; and an increasingly war-weary public confused as the nature of the conflict changed, unsure of whether the goals were worth the cost, and ultimately willing to make its discontent felt by voting the incumbent party out of the White House.

Yet Bush, for all his own efforts to compare himself to “give ‘em hell Harry,” was no Truman. Indeed, I agree with Lee and Matray that, overall, Truman’s use of the UN placed him in a far stronger position than Bush to sell his war, even though specific UN debates often created enormous domestic discord. In crucial respects, moreover, Truman was far more cautious than Bush, not only shying away from preventive war but also ensuring that his administration’s rhetoric did nothing to encourage the minority who wanted to use Korea to escalate the Cold War. And he was much more willing to confront uncomfortable truths, too. In fact, unlike Bush—not to mention Lyndon Johnson during the Vietnam War—Truman was upfront with the country about the costs of both the specific fighting and the broader mobilization, as well as the need to fund all of this through tax hikes. As Devine, Matray, and Miscamble point out, Selling the Korean War is by no means an uncritical paean to Truman. During the crises of June and November-December 1950, he initially failed to lead. At other times, he lacked a clear sense of the complexity of key issues. But throughout the war, Truman displayed vital qualities of character that translated into important leadership strengths.

Did these strengths make Truman more popular than Bush, or at least less unpopular? Devine’s one caveat in an otherwise positive review is that I might have gone further in exploring how various sections of the public reacted to the Korean War, especially the degree of their animus toward Truman in 1952 and whether this matched the negativity directed toward Bush by 2008. I think we essentially agree that although Truman’s polling numbers were abysmal during 1951 and 1952, this negative attitude never quite reached
“the emotional intensity” of anti-Bush sentiment between 2006 and 2008. As chapters 10 and 12 of Selling the Korean War point out, public support for the Korean War remained surprisingly robust into 1952. Even in May and June, in the wake of the Koje-do riots and the steel seizure, support for the war was much higher than it had been eighteen months before. Such surprising results were partly a testament to the growing success of the Truman administration’s propaganda campaign. As Miscamble points out, I also emphasize the importance of the bipartisan center holding fast behind Truman’s basic foreign-policy priorities. Particularly vital here was the emergence of Eisenhower as the Republican nominee in 1952, for this meant that Korea, and Truman’s way of waging war there, remained much more muted as a campaign issue than it would have done had Taft become the GOP candidate.

But Devine’s comment also points to a deeper methodological issue: assessing the impact of propaganda. Selling the Korean War’s first focus is on the how and why. My starting point was to recreate the domestic environment that officials saw between 1950 and 1953. Truman and his advisers frequently claimed that public opinion didn’t matter. The president’s own private remarks are littered with his views that polls were inaccurate, that protest mail should be thrown onto the fire, and that leaders should do what was right rather than what was popular. But Truman and his senior advisers still had some very clear ideas about this domestic audience. Based on their reading of the recent past, they thought that the public opinion was susceptible to violent mood swings, that it was prone to quick shifts from engagement to withdrawal, and that the task of leadership was to smooth these peaks and troughs. They were also acutely aware of the hierarchies within Congress, they knew which media organs mattered, they were sensitive to the views of key groups like the labor unions, and they were keen to exploit the potentialities of television and Hollywood. As Matray emphasizes, Selling the Korean War reconstructs the story of the administration’s relationships with all these opinion makers.

Nonetheless, what is conspicuously missing from the official files is the sort of detailed assessment of the broader popular mood that Devine mentions. Truman and his top advisers simply didn’t consult opinion polls all that often. Their relative neglect of these sources is a stark and significant difference from the practice of the Roosevelt White House during World War II. As my earlier book on World War II stresses, FDR was an opinion-poll aficionado, who commissioned and avidly read a whole range of material on a regular basis, and who thus had an acute sense of the shifting sands of domestic attitudes and was often able to tailor his policies and PR accordingly. Truman’s own rejection of polling data, although sometimes lauded by historians, meant that he generally lacked a strong sense of the intensity and complexity of broader domestic opinion beyond the halls of Congress or the stories in the daily press. And this lack was one of his main handicaps when it came to leading during a controversial war.

While certain sections of Selling the Korean War strive to fill this gap and explore the impact of propaganda, for the most part its focus is on how the administration conceived

---

and then tried to lead opinion. As Lee points out, this is very much an American story. Lee expresses “a lingering desire for some commentary” on how Washington’s enemies and allies managed media relations. Originally I did intend to integrate this broader perspective by demonstrating the extent to which foreign governments and media organizations were able to shape the U.S. news agenda. In the current age of media interdependence, when an Al Qaeda video tape can make international news, such an approach seemed essential. But even earlier American wars demonstrate how closely the U.S. government has been intertwined with foreign propaganda activities. Indeed, my current research project on the interaction between the U.S. military and American war correspondents during World War I delves deeply into this comparative territory, for in this conflict the American Expeditionary Force was fighting with coalition partners, and the British and French made sustained efforts to ensure that the Americans didn’t depart too radically from the media strategies that they had already developed.

During the Korean War, however, I found very little evidence that foreign actors impacted on the U.S. debate. In the battlefield theatre, American officers dominated the UNC’s media relations. In a fairly average month, there were roughly 220 correspondents accredited to the UNC, about a third of whom were non-Americans. Many of these reporters were by no means happy with their treatment by the U.S. military, but their periodic complaints rarely made much of a splash inside the United States (see pp. 311-12). Nor were the propaganda activities of the communist powers widely reported, including the (in)famous communist allegations that the United States had employed germ warfare in Korea. According to one survey, even in July 1952, after the administration had publicly repudiated these charges, only 64 percent of Americans had even heard of them, which was a far lower level of public awareness than all other major issues.

Lee’s call for me to broaden the scope contrasts sharply with Matray’s complaint that I pass too quickly over the American story of last two years of the war, with the added defect that some of my arguments are not sufficiently supported. I don’t disagree with Matray’s observation that the POW issue was central between the end of 1951 and the summer of 1953. In fact, I devote almost two-thirds of the relevant chapter to this subject. Matray claims that I don’t provide “compelling evidence” to support my claim that the decision to opt for voluntary repatriation “had little to do with domestic politics.” But I make this statement in relation to Truman’s thinking in October 1951. It comes after five pages (pp. 279-84) in which I demonstrate that the public debate in Congress, the media, and mass opinion during the second half of 1951 was focused first and foremost on getting U.S. prisoners back home; at this stage, few Americans were interested in the fate of communist POWs in the UN camps.

During 1952, voluntary repatriation did become an increasingly important issue inside the United States, but largely because the Truman administration decided to make it one. I don’t deny that Truman and his advisers also thought they could use voluntary repatriation

---

2 In March 1952, a fairly normal month, twenty were Japanese, eighteen British, eleven South Korean, ten Nationalist Chinese, three Philippine, and one each from a range of other countries.

3 See Sargeant to Public Affairs, August 5, 1952, PA Asst SecState, Memos, box 1, RG 59, NARA.
to score an international propaganda victory over the communists. But the administration clearly had one eye firmly fixed on the domestic mood as well. During March and April, the White House, and State Department produced numerous PR planning documents, many of which specifically discussed the importance of taking their case to the American public. As I point out on pp. 286-89, these documents reveal that officials had two calculations in mind when going public in May 1952: the defensive goal of immunizing themselves from the charge that they were recklessly waging war for just one reason (hence their emphasis on the package proposal), and the positive aim of trying to find a new rallying point for the war (hence Truman’s public statement that “forced repatriation would be unthinkable” and “repugnant to the fundamental moral and humanitarian principles which underlie our action in Korea.”)

Matray’s other substantive criticism relates to the vexed question of Truman’s decision to cross the 38th parallel in the late summer and fall of 1950. Again, we don’t disagree on perhaps the most fundamental point. As Selling the Korean War makes clear at various stages, the decision to expand American objectives by going north clearly “cast a long shadow over sustaining support for the war,” greatly complicating the government’s propaganda efforts after November 1950 (see, for instance, p. 122, and pp. 226-28). Where we differ is on the military and political context at the time the decision was made. Matray, for instance, stresses the government’s obsession with achieving this long-held goal; I place more emphasis on the immediate opportunities created by Inchon. Matray claims that Truman’s foolish decision ignored “what Americans would accept,” I depict a very different domestic mood during August and September 1950. Indeed, at this specific moment, the administration’s problem was not so much that the American public wouldn’t accept pushing north: on the contrary, most surveys and polls demonstrated growing support for crossing the 38th parallel, and MacArthur and the Republicans were clearly primed to make a major political issue out of any effort by Truman and Acheson to display restraint. The government’s problem, rather, was how the Soviets and the Chinese would respond. During these months, senior officials gradually convinced themselves that Moscow or Beijing would do nothing. This was their major miscalculation, for it was China’s intervention, and the “entirely new war” that ensued, that lay at the heart of Truman’s domestic troubles in the coming months and years.

As Miscamble asks, was it all worth it? Contemporaries and recent historians have, of course, reached sharply different conclusions. While the former became increasingly disgruntled with the war, the latter have started to identify more positive results. Bush’s efforts to portray himself as a modern-day Truman stem partly from this disjunction: a sense that history will vindicate what contemporaries vilified. But again, the two presidents and their two wars were very different. Truman’s initial decision to intervene was overdetermined. Given the apparently brazen nature of the North Korean attack, the ease with which the UN could be led, and the initial rallying of domestic opinion, the

---

4 See, for instance, Phillips, Memo for FE, March 11, 1952, Decimal File 795.00, box 4278, RG 59, NARA. Sargeant to Acheson, “Proposal that a Statement be Issued by the President in Conjunction with the Presentation of the Revised Position by General Ridgway,” March 14, 1952; Boughton to Fierst, April 30, 1952; both in PA Asst SecState, Subject File, box 5, RG 59, NARA.
president’s choice in June 1950 was relatively straightforward. Although the war’s escalation was then a major setback, which generated increasing domestic discord, I agree with Stueck that the Truman administration still used the 1951-52 period to achieve a number of enduring foreign-policy achievements. And perhaps in the medium term, even the public’s increasingly negative view of Korea proved a boon, in the sense that a Korean War syndrome, although weak, did make subsequent presidents think twice about employing military force. It was only when Johnson decided to ignore his own previous qualms about sending American troops into another Asian ground war that America’s tragedy in Vietnam started to unfold.

I would like to end by thanking the participants again for their stimulating insights. It is in the nature of such responses that they focus on the areas of disagreement. In light of the reviewers’ positive overall assessments of Selling the Korean War, I hope they will take my comments in the spirit that they are intended: as the opening of a dialogue rather than an overly defensive riposte.